



"Mary's Song of Praise"
Sermon Series: "The Canticles of Christmas"
Luke 1:39-55
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Luke 1:39-55

(New International Version 1984, ©1984)

Mary Visits Elizabeth

³⁹ At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, ⁴⁰ where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. ⁴² In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! ⁴³ But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴ As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!"

Mary's Song

⁴⁶ And Mary said:

"My soul glorifies the Lord
⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
⁴⁸ for he has been mindful
of the humble state of his servant.
From now on all generations will call me blessed,
⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me—
holy is his name.
⁵⁰ His mercy extends to those who fear him,
from generation to generation.
⁵¹ He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.
⁵² He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.
⁵³ He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty.
⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,
remembering to be merciful
⁵⁵ to Abraham and his descendants forever,
even as he said to our fathers."

Introduction.

In Luke's gospel the events that have preceded this incident have been the prophecy concerning the birth of John the Baptist and the visitation of Mary by the angel Gabriel, who told her she would give birth to the Son of God. Mary responded in faith to the angel's words and said, "May it be to me as you have said."

Our passage this morning opens with Mary traveling to a town in the hill country of Judea to see her cousin Elizabeth. You will recall from our sermon last week that Elizabeth's husband Zechariah had a



hard time believing he and his wife would have a child in their old age, and the result of his unbelief was he couldn't speak for 9 months.

When Mary entered their home, the text tells us John the Baptist began his prophetic ministry in the womb of his mother and leaped at the sound of Mary's voice. Elizabeth interpreted the movement as the prophet's joyful recognition of Mary as the woman who would give birth to Israel's Messiah, and she praised God, as well as her young cousin who believed that what the Lord had said to her would come true.

In response, Mary sang a canticle of Christmas. Long before Taylor Swift, Maria Carey, or Lady Gaga ever thought about recording a Christmas album, Mary sang her song of praise. This song is commonly known as the Magnificat, and the name is derived from the first word of the Latin translation of the passage. The Latin word *magificat* literally means "enlarge," and in this context it means to magnify or glorify God. Our combined choirs and orchestra will be singing John Rutter's setting of *The Magnificat* next Sunday here at both of the latter services. You don't want to miss it.

The song is saturated with Old Testament (OT) concepts and phrases, reflecting as many as 12 different OT passages. Mary obviously had a deep knowledge of the Word of God, even as a young girl, and she brought that knowledge to bear in the song she sang. This canticle of Christmas can be divided into 4 stanzas, and in the course of our time together this morning, let's look at each of them briefly. They are: 1) God makes a choice; 2) God scatters the proud; 3) God lifts the humble; and 4) God keeps His promises.

I. God Makes A Choice.

"My soul glorifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for He has been mindful of the humble estate of His servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me - holy is His name" (Lk. 1:46-49). From the depths of a grateful heart, Mary offered her song of praise. She glorified God who alone is sovereign.

In the opening stanza of the song, Mary gives deeper meaning to words she borrowed from Hannah's prayer in the OT (1 Sam. 2:1-10), and she anticipates what God will do in the world through the son He has promised her. Her song announced that God's saving work had not begun with the great or the powerful, but rather it began with her, and Mary saw that choice as having eternal significance for all who like herself waited in expectation for a Savior.

The Lord chose Mary, an unmarried teenage girl, pledged to a carpenter from the backwater town of Nazareth in Galilee, to become the mother of the Son of God. In that choice, the Lord would confound those who thought themselves wise (Jn. 7:42-52), and He would make foolish what had been seen as the wisdom of the ages. In this choice, the Lord identified with the poor and the powerless, the despised and the rejected, the hungry and the oppressed, the unwanted and the outcast. As the apostle Paul put it, *"God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things - and the things that are not - to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before Him" (1 Cor. 1:27-29).*

When we acknowledge the sovereignty of God in our lives, it causes us to look at things in a whole new light. No longer do we see ourselves as a victim. Rather, we see God working all things together for our good. No longer do we believe it's just up to us to make a life or a living. Rather, we see the provision of the Lord and His abundant blessing as the key to the good things that come our way. And no longer do we worry as much, because we trust that God is big enough and good enough to watch over our family and friends, provide for them, and protect them better than our worry ever could.



Believing God is sovereign in this world changes your whole perspective in life. It did for Mary, and it can for you. So Mary sang her canticle of Christmas, thanking God for His sovereign choice.

II. God Scatters The Proud.

"His mercy extends to those who fear Him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with His arm; He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts" (1:50,51). Mary was confident that what God had done for her, He would do for anyone who loves and honors Him. Mary spoke of God's faithfulness which extends from generation to generation.

God is full of mercy and abounding in steadfast love to those who are humble of heart, but to those who are proud, who exalt themselves and show no concern for God, He eventually puts them down by His mighty arm. Mary affirmed that the Lord had scattered those who in their arrogance determined to make a name for themselves without regard for God.

It has always been that way. Napoleon was a prideful man, and he is credited with once saying, "God is always on the side of the heavier battalions." But a few years later, after he lost great battles in Russia and at Waterloo, Napoleon was sent into exile, and the once proud man then observed, "Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne and myself have founded empires. Upon force we founded them, and [now] they are gone. Jesus Christ alone has founded His empire upon love, and at this hour millions... would die for Him whom they have never seen."¹ God scatters the proud.

The church Lorie and I served in Dallas years ago was a great church, but sadly it went through an ugly and costly split 20 years ago. As I look back on those difficult days, there were a lot of reasons that church experienced conflict, but I am convinced that part of the reason for their problems was God's judgment on the spiritual pride of that congregation – pride of past accomplishment, pride of influence, and pride of affluence.

If God were to take a hard look at our church today, would He judge us for our pride and our affluence? Jesus told the apostle John to write a letter to the church in Laodicea in Revelation 3, and part of the criticism the Lord leveled against that church had to do with its pride and affluence. *"You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked" (Rev. 3:17).* They thought they were something when in actuality they were not, and they boasted of their financial wealth but didn't realize they were spiritually poor. In what ways are we like them today? Mary's song reminds us that God scatters the proud, but He also lifts the humble.

III. God Lifts The Humble.

"He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty" (1:52,53). What God had done for Mary, she anticipates He will do for everyone who is humble of the world. The proud may succeed for a time, but in the end it will be the humble who will be lifted up.

Eric Liddel was a famous track star in Scotland in the 1920s, and the movie "Chariots of Fire" made his decision not to run the first heat of the Olympic 100 meter race famous. He was favored to win, but because the opening heat was held on a Sunday, he decided not to run, and he forfeited his chance to win the gold medal. Later in that same Olympics, however, he went on to win the 400 meter race, a race in which he was not originally scheduled to compete.

Many years later he wrote, "Circumstances may appear to wreck our lives and God's plans, but God is not helpless among the ruins. Our broken lives are not lost or useless. God's love is still working. He



comes in and takes the calamity and uses it victoriously, working out his wonderful plan of love.”ⁱⁱ Eric Liddel knew from personal experience that of which he wrote. God lifts the humble.

At the Headliners bible study last Tuesday, we studied this passage, and one of the things we noted was the way Mary regarded herself as blessed, which is a rather remarkable statement. Put yourself in her shoes. She was a young teenager, she was poor, she was pregnant out of wedlock, and she was the ridicule of gossip and rumor in a small town. Most of us in that situation would have said, “I am cursed!” not “I am blessed.” We would see all the downsides, all the challenges and hurdles, all the ways it was going to ruin our life. Yet it was Mary’s confidence that God was in this, that He lifts the humble, which enabled Mary to see with eyes of faith and view her situation in such a way that she could see she was in fact blessed and not cursed.

Phillips Brooks, the author of the Christmas carol *O Little Town of Bethlehem*, failed miserably as a teacher when he began his professional career before entering the ministry. That failure helped to keep him humble later on in his life when he became an Episcopal priest, and then was appointed a bishop, and after he gained great notoriety for composing *O Little Town of Bethlehem*. God lifts the humble.

IV. God Keeps His Promises.

“He has helped His servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as He said to our fathers” (1:54,55). Mary’s song of praise concludes with a confidence in the promises of God. It is as if she says, “Amen.” “So be it.” “Make it so.” The prayer is complete.

Her confidence was in the fact that God was true to His promises to Abraham and his descendants, and she sensed that those promises would now find their ultimate fulfillment in the birth of her child. The confidence Mary knew is available to anyone who like Abraham responds in faithfulness to God, to those who are willing to follow the Lord wherever He calls us to go. His promises are sure, and His Word is worthy of our trust. What He says, He will do.

Bruce Mork was a member of my former church, and a few years ago he stopped by my office to share something with me. The previous year he had been out of work, and it took quite a while for him to find his next job. It was an agonizing time, and any of you who have been unemployed know just how difficult it can be on you and your family emotionally, mentally, relationally, financially, and even spiritually. Eventually, God came through for Bruce, and now he’s got a great job.

However, during that season he was out of work, he got pretty discouraged, and he wondered what God was up to. He wondered if God had forgotten him or if the Lord was just too busy running the world to provide what his family needed. A friend gave him a paperweight during that difficult time that meant a great deal to him, and he shared it with me. The paperweight reads, “The man who walks with God always gets to his destination.” That gift was such an encouragement, and it serves as a great reminder to all of us that God will provide what we need in due time. We’ve got to trust Him and hang on to our faith and believe that God keeps His promises.

Conclusion/Application.

Martin Luther once said that the greatest miracle was not that Mary conceived, but rather that she believed.ⁱⁱⁱ Her prayer of obedient submission anticipated the prayer her Son would later pray in the Garden of Gethsemane when He said, “Not my will, but Thine be done.” C.S. Lewis has written, “The whole [of God’s plan] narrows and narrows, until at last it comes down to a little point, small as the point of a spear – a Jewish girl at her prayers.”^{iv} The fate of the world rested on the response of a rural teenager. And the result of all this was a young woman willing to do God’s will and writing a song of praise.



As we close this morning, let me ask you a couple of questions. First, how are you cultivating humility in your heart this Christmas, and how will you learn humility and express it to others? Where does God need to deal with your pride today?

And second, are you still able to praise God this Christmas, even in the midst of difficult circumstances? Think about Mary. She wrote her song of praise when she was pregnant out of wedlock, when her fiancée was planning to divorce her quietly, and when she was surely the subject of gossip and speculation in her hometown. Yet she still praised God. I think that is the true test of the gospel in a person's life – the ability to praise the Lord, even when life is difficult and uncertain.

On December 10th several years ago, I called my mother on the phone. The reason I called was that it was on December 10, 1975, I found my father dead in the den of our home after he suffered a massive heart attack. He was only 55-years-old. Until she died a few years ago, I used to call my mother every year on December 10th, and we would remember my dad together.

For 29 years my mother was a widow. For 29 years Christmas was forever changed for her. I'll never forget meeting her, along with my two brothers, at the Atlanta airport when she flew home the next day after my father died. Tears rolled down her cheeks, and she cried, "What are we going to do? What are we going to do?"

Over the last 29 years of her life, I'll tell you what my mother did. She trusted in the Lord to see her through, and He was faithful. Though it wasn't easy for her, through it all she praised God and thanked Him for His many blessings in spite of the difficulties to the very end of her days. She made it her aim to spread a little happiness, and she tried to look at the bright side of things and sing her own song of praise no matter how tough life got for her.

Mary wrote her song of praise in the midst of a very difficult situation. Can you do the same today? Can you find the words to sing regardless of the problems that beset you? By God's grace you can. By God's grace this Christmas you can.

I would like to put a challenge before you this morning. I would like to challenge you to take some time this afternoon or in the coming week to spend a few moments writing your own canticle of Christmas, even as Mary did long ago. Think about God's blessings in your life. Think of how you can magnify the Lord this Advent. Commit it to paper, and perhaps share it with your family. What will be your canticle of Christmas to God this year? Amen.

ⁱQuoted by Hamilton, *Who Goes There?* p. 138, cited in *Lecton Aid*, December 1994, p. 32.

ⁱⁱEric Liddell, *Disciplines of the Christian Life*, cited in *Christianity Today*, August 15, 1994, p.40

ⁱⁱⁱCited by Timothy George, "Why Believe In The Virgin Birth," *Christianity Today*, p. 19, Dec. 12, 1994.

^{iv}Cited by Philip Yancey, "Cosmic Combat," *Christianity Today*, p. 22, Dec. 12, 1994.

