

Mary's Song
Luke 1:46-56
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Now that's a fun way to start a sermon, when you get to have that as an introduction. Amen? Thank you so much for your ministry to us, the hard work, the weeks of preparation—thank you so much for that offering of praise and leading us. It is an appropriate introduction for us, because this morning's sermon is about another song. Let it be instructive for us that our God is a God of song and music. It's very interesting that the greatest messages of the incarnation were first turned into song. A couple weeks ago we looked at Zechariah's song, and the promise of the birth of John the Baptist.

And now we have another song, from Mary. It is called the Magnificat; it's Latin for "magnify." Because that is precisely what Mary does; she seeks to magnify the name of the Lord. And in doing so, you'll see in your outline this morning that she magnifies the work of God in these ways. There are many ways they could be described, but I've chosen these as we walk through this passage together this morning—that she seeks to magnify the Lord in his goodness, that the Lord is mighty, and that the Lord is faithful. This is another song, much like Zachariah's, that has, if you will, three distinct movements, all of them held together by one common theme. That common theme is praising God for what He has done and who He is.

Here we see in verses forty-six to forty-nine the first movement: that the Lord is good. As she describes his goodness in these few short verses, what she does is first, she weaves together in a very interweaving fashion the two aspects of God's goodness that she's looking at. She's looking at first God's goodness as it is seen from a global perspective, but also she weaves that together with seeing God's goodness in her personal life. So she sees God at work both globally and personally. Look at what she says globally, when she says, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." Then she puts in verse forty-eight this second part—"For behold, all generations will call me blessed." The reason why they would call her blessed is because of the One she carries. And the One that she carries she knows—she already knows the name that will be given to this child is the name Jesus, as we looked at last week, and he will save his people from their sins. She recognizes that what she carries within her is an expression of God's goodness just not for her personally but for the entire world. God's work and goodness is seen not just on an individual basis but on a global basis. But she weaves that together with the personal.

And when she does so, she does it in this way. She seeks to sing out his name, and when she does, she's singing out the promises of God. She's singing out these promises of God because these promises, and the gift of being pregnant with this child, is coming to her in circumstances that would seem to bring out a different kind of song. Not a song of praise, but perhaps a song of lament. Look at the nature of Israel; Israel is under oppression of the roman rule. She is now a woman yet to be married, but has found herself to be pregnant. As we looked at last week, this would mean for her great potential shame. And yet, she is able to say, beyond all of the potential things that could be said about her circumstances, she's able to say personally, "Look at what God is doing."

What she's showing us is that her singing is by faith and not by sight. She's believing on the promises—promises that are very old. Promises that have not yet come to fruition. She can't see them, but she seeks to sing about them. And when she sings about them, what we're able to see now as we look back generations later—we are able to say Mary is indeed blessed. Look at what he's done in her and through her, but also, look what he did in her life. She was in a humble state, but the Lord met her there. He was good to her, as he has been good to the globe. God is good to all generations.

Why is *this* important? It's important because we're called to live by faith and not by sight. Especially in an age of high-definition television. Google glass. Cameras everywhere. But isn't it interesting in a day of such high-definition ability, now we've been able to see the greatest high definition of a rocket just taking off a few weeks ago and then landing? We're now able to know what it looks like to see an astronaut coming back through the atmosphere, what he would see or she would see, and then landing in the ocean? Such great clarity, amazing beauty, and yet man in all of his ability to create high-definition television can send these great pictures and great video all the way up into space and bring it back in Technicolor beauty—and yet we still have oceans off our coasts that we cannot send the best of our cameras into to see what's on the bottom.

So what have our government and scientists had to give themselves to? 3D sound, being able to use sound to map the bottoms of the deepest edges of the oceans right off of our coasts. You cannot see with any camera, and yet sound can pierce the darkness. And when it goes down there, they're able to receive back a 3D image that maps the floor of the ocean. There they've been able to discover long-past shipwrecks and able to rescue the bones of loved ones they thought who past. Stories that had yet been told now are being told because, not by sight, but by sound.

Allow me to use that as a metaphor. Mary can't see it yet, but she begins to sing of it. And what returns for us is an image of God in his goodness, globally and personally. But what does that mean for her, and what does that mean for you and me? What's the message that comes back from her singing? It's this. One writer, Kenneth Tanner, says this:

God does not stand outside our sufferings — cancer, torture, neglect, loneliness, anxiety, depression, abuse, pains of all sorts — but agonizes alongside his holy servant Job and with all who suffer, not only by his own human trials and temptations in the flesh, but by genuinely entering our hardships with us whenever we are afflicted. How can gratitude for this gift be confined to a day or a season? Every moment — all our breaths — ought to resound with praise for this radical identification of God with us.

How can Mary say he has looked on the humble estate of his servant? It is because she carries God in her, and God sent his son as a gift, Emmanuel, as a gift of his goodness. His gift is not an abstract theory or idea; it is that God has walked in our midst, in our shoes, in our lives—and promises to be with us because of his resurrection all our days. We trust in him not by sight, but by faith. And that faith is going to scream out against our circumstances, because our circumstances are what we see and what we feel and what we experience—and yet these promises, the fact that God is good despite the circumstances, was the truth for Mary. It was the truth that held out for us. Why do we come back to these verses every year? It's because we need them. We need the testimony of what God did in Mary, just because we need that testimony for us because we, too, grow weak and ask, "Is God really with me? Can God really be with me?" The whole story of the incarnation is that, yes and amen, God is good.

But more than that God is good, God is mighty. In verses fifty to fifty-three we learn of the mighty nature of who God is. We notice in verse forty-nine when she says, "For he who is mighty has done great things for me and holy is his name." She begins to crack open the door that she's getting ready to talk about some mighty things. And when she says, "He has done mighty things for me," she comes out of that personal testimony of what God has done for her, and she says, "holy is his name." Here she's not referring to God's moral character, while certainly that is in view; she's talking about the uniqueness of who God is. That he is holy, that he is sovereign, that he is above all things and glorious to behold. In God's uniqueness, in God's power, look what he has done in his mighty power: one, his mercy is from those who fear him from generation to generation.

And then what she does is she begins a comparison. And when she looks at these comparisons, what we see about God's mighty nature is this: the Lord reverses earthly logic. Notice what she says: "He has shown strength with his arm." Meaning, he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

“He has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate. He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.” What she employs here is so prevalent throughout the songs in the Old Testament—the psalmist here, Mary, says through these comparisons running parallel to each other that when God demonstrates his mighty power, he confounds and reverses earthly logic. And earthly logic says, “No, it is the strong who will conquer the weak. It is those who are successful, it is those who have gifts, those who have been blessed with all these material things—they are the ones who win.” Who does the world run to? The world does not run to the poor to find out the five best things you can learn best year. Who do they turn to? They turn to the most successful CEOs; they turn to the most successful ideas and the people who promulgate them. And they’re generally always at the top end of the power cultural ideal elite.

Rather, here what is noticed is that she says, “When God demonstrates his mighty power, he reverses all of that.” Compared to God’s mighty power, the strong and the successful—the wise by worldly standards—are indeed not the ones who win. For if we depend on our own wisdom, our own definitions of success, we will be the ones who grow hungry. But here she says that when the Lord demonstrate his mighty power, what does he do? He exalts those who are poor and humble. Though the rich may have plenty to eat, they will never be satisfied; rather, he will fill the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty. Notice both—he doesn’t remove their wealth; rather, he turns them over to their wealth, but they will be left empty. God uses his mighty power to reverse the logic of the world. In God’s greatest act, as Madeleine L’Engle would call it, “the glorious impossible,” God would do the most impossible thing but the most beautiful thing—he would bring the Son of the Living God to be victorious over sin and death, to be born of a virgin woman not yet married, to be raised in a relatively working-class family. Can anything good come out of Nazareth? This is God’s mighty power.

But more than that, she declares that not only does God reverse the logic of the world, but he also defeats enemies. Verse fifty-two: “He has brought down the mighty from their thrones.” Now here, one reading of it is that she could certainly be talking about the fact that Israel is still under Roman rule—that God will reestablish Israel. But the hymn itself, the song, doesn’t seem to elicit and overly nationalistic or political bent. It’s there, but that’s not the thrust. He has brought down the mighty from their thrones. Could it be that what’s really being talked about here is that God promises to defeat his enemies? Whatever they might be, that this child will do just that in his mighty power. Isn’t it interesting, the mighty powers which the Lord would come to overthrow are not kings or queens or political regimes; rather, he would come to defeat sin and death. The army aligned against God himself, Satan and all of his tacticians that seek to tempt and draw away—Jesus came to defeat him, and defeat death that is the product of sin.

This is important for us to be able to sing that hymn, “What Child Is This?” What we’ve sung, is it just a mild Christmas hymn? On one level it could be seen as kind of quaint and sweet. Greensleeves, the theme, doesn’t help us much; it was originally a love song, and now these Christian words, this poem, has been set to Greensleeves. What’s interesting, however, is this; do not be lulled into thinking by those sweet tunes that it is a quaint or sentimental act. What is being declared in that hymn is nothing short of a King who has victory over his enemies. What child is this? This child would bring reverberations throughout the world to scare even Herod, which we will look at next week.

But the writer of that hymn first wrote a poem. The writer of the hymn, his name was William Chatterton Dix, was the son of a surgeon who was himself a poet, loved poetry. So William would grow up as one who loved poetry. He first wrote a poem that was called “A Manger Story.” It was that poem that was first published in England and then would also be popular here in the United States. It was shortly thereafter turned into the hymn which we now sing as “What Child Is This?”

But the story of the poem’s origins is important for us, because it is coming as an expression from a man who had gone through weeks, even months, of being bound to his house because of deep, deep sickness and illness. Going through that serious illness and being confined to his bed, he underwent a

profound spiritual crisis. He began to read some Christian literature that was given to him. He began to fiddle about and figure out how to pray. What was a pastime and a love for poetry began to be an act of worship, and so he wrote "A Manger Story." And so as a result of going through that deep conflict and suffering and illness, he came out. And what did he begin to express? He began to express that what child is this? This is the child who has defeated all my sin. This is the child who's gotten victory over Satan and all of his armies. Why? Because in the original poem that is not preserved for us in this exact language, in the hymn he writes these words:

Now a new power has come on the earth,
A match for the armies of hell.
A child is born who shall conquer the foe,
And all the spirits of wickedness quell.
For Mary's Son is the mighty one
Whom the prophets of God foretell.

He is mighty. But not only is the Lord mighty; He is faithful. In these final two verses as she sings of the Lord's faithfulness, she goes way back down in the alley, as the blues man once said. Way back down in history. She goes all the way back to Abraham. She says: "He has helped his servant Israel in remembrance of his mercy as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever." Over the last couple weeks I've mentioned how when mercy is mentioned in these early parts of the gospels, what's being talked about there is not the definition of mercy that we so often use, that mercy is not receiving what we deserve. While certainly the use of the word mercy encompasses that meaning, it also has a far deeper and longer history. That history comes to us from the Old Testament with the Hebrew word *hesed*, which means "loving-kindness." And so when Mary is singing here as Jewish woman, and she's saying, "He has helped Israel in remembrance of his mercy"—"he has remembered his loving-kindness and has helped his servant Israel. He has spoken to our fathers." And she goes all the way back to when God made a promise to Abraham. That promise to Abraham, though he was old in years, was that I will bring you a son, and through you will come descendants that will outnumber the stars in the sky. That was God's loving-kindness, God's covenant, God's faithfulness.

And then he demonstrated that faithfulness to Abraham, as Abraham of course would have his son Isaac. As you know of the story in the early parts of Genesis, that indeed God would call Abraham to sacrifice his son. And Abraham, we knew, believed not because he had anything in and of himself but because he believed that God was true to his word, that God was mighty, that if indeed he was called to sacrifice his son Isaac, that God would bring him back from the dead. Because he knew that God was a God of power and resurrection. But God would stay the hand of Abraham, and from that son Isaac we can trace the lineage all the way to Mary and her Son she carries in her womb, the Son of the living God. And God would not stay the hand; God would show his faithfulness to redeem his people through the sacrifice of his Son on the cross for sin. So this is what she's referring to; she's talking about God's covenant faithfulness.

But more than that, she's talking about—look at what God's loving-kindness is. You see, his loving-kindness is the kind of faithfulness that you and I need. We need someone who is faithful and loving to us through the thick and the thin, and from the time that the promise was given until now Mary is carrying Jesus in her womb, there's a lot of history. Over the last couple of weeks, I've just finished up reading personally the Second Book of Chronicles. I'm not going to go there, but if you've never read the Book of Chronicles, do yourself a favor. If you ever want to see just how merciful, just how gracious God is, read a book like Second Chronicles. Because the sad thing is you come away saying, "Look at how merciful God is!" But you can't help but come away and see how frustrating humanity is. You would have a great king—he would follow the Lord, rebuild the temple, do away with false gods—and then a moment later, he would make an agreement with an enemy king. Or the next king on the throne would be a son, and that son would be horrible and completely reject God and lead the people in the exact opposite direction of

worshipping the one true God. And yet, God says over and over and over again that I will remember my covenant. I will retain for me a remnant.

God's loving-kindness through the thick and thin of our sin is precisely what we need, because we live in a day where covenants and promises are easily made, but even more easily broken. Think about it. In our day, we champion the idea of being authentic. Being authentic means I'm being who I am, and if I have authenticity as a high priority in being who I am, then that means I'm also going to put my emotions as an expression of my authenticity. So therefore if I'm in a covenant, if I'm in a promise or relationship or agreement, that somehow goes against my feelings, then I'm not being authentic. I'm just being who I am and I need to back out of this covenant, back out of this promise, because staying in it's not being true to myself. You see?

Why do we need Christmas? We need Christmas not just for the twenty-fifth of December—we need it every day of our lives, because it's an expression that God is faithful to his covenant when we are not. In fact, he shows us what true authenticity is. True authenticity is being able to say, "Take this cup from me," Jesus would say. So Jesus, if I may say it, humanly speaking, is expressing an emotion. "I long to be with the Father. Take this cup of suffering from me." And yet Jesus would also say, "Your will be done." True authenticity is obedience in the face of circumstances that seem to bring about the opposite of desired effects. Authenticity is being able to say in the face of emotions that scream out, "This doesn't feel good," and yet authenticity says, "I will go against my feelings because I know that this is the pathway that leads to life."

We can't know true authenticity, what it means to be truly human and truly faithful, until we are able to receive just how faithful God really is. Just how loving-kind He is. Because that is precisely what is expressed for us in the table we are about to celebrate—that God, in his faithfulness, sent his Son who would then give a meal to his disciples whose emotions were saying, "Don't let this happen, Lord!" Yet Jesus said, "I must go to this place, and you can't go with me." Because the Lord would go for us. He is faithful for us in our place to the point of death, for our being able to receive salvation. That is how good, that is how mighty, that is how faithful our God is. This is what Mary was singing of. And we are invited to sing along with her. So as we celebrate this supper this morning, may God enable us to sing along with Mary, that the Lord is good because He saves. The Lord is mighty because He has defeated our enemies. The Lord is faithful despite all my faithlessness. That is a gift that I need. That is a gift we all need. May the Lord enable us to sing. Let's pray.

Now, Father, by your Holy Spirit working with your Word, I pray you would go down deep into our hearts and enable us to sing along with Mary. There are some here this morning, Lord, who do not sing this song, and I'm glad that they are here. I pray that the song that they would hear is a song of your grace and mercy through Jesus Christ our Lord. And that they would hear that as a song of invitation to know you forever. Lord, for those who've lost their voice, who've forgotten how to sing though they know you—Lord, I pray that Mary's song would reverberate in their hearts to reignite their ability to sing and enliven their vocal chords. And Lord, I pray for those who are singing. Make our voice all the more strong, to make known to the world that you are the Lord. In Jesus' name. Amen.