



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

THE FIRST CHRISTMAS SONG

SERMON BY REV. DOUG PRATT ■ DECEMBER 10, 2017

Luke 1:39-55

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

⁴⁶And 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,
just as he promised our ancestors.”

Sounds of the Season

It's one of the first signals to us that the holiday season is approaching. Some day in November you're walking through a store or public area, thinking about your shopping list or what you have to do, when suddenly it strikes you: the “muzak” playing over the speaker system is Christmas music. It's that time again.

Christmas songs—so familiar, repeated year after year, the words and melodies burrowing deep into our memories—have become an essential part of our modern holiday season. No one knows how many songs have acquired the aura of being Christmas songs. In the hymn book lodged in the racks of our church pews, there are no fewer than 97 different hymns that are categorized as Advent, Christmas or Epiphany. At this time of year we sing many of them in our worship services. Hundreds of other Christmas songs of all kinds are found on albums and electronic playlists. Radio stations start to play their “all Christmas, all the time” tunes by early December.

Poetry and Music

It's always been part of human nature to capture the events and the emotions most meaningful to us in poetry, and then to put those poems to musical tunes.

How does every major sporting event in our country begin? With the singing of our national anthem, as we hear again what Francis Scott Key wrote about what he witnessed at the Battle of Fort McHenry in Baltimore Harbor in 1814. His poem was paired with a popular British tune and became known as “The Star Spangled Banner.”

Twenty years ago Princess Diana died in a car crash in Paris, and Elton John and a co-author re-wrote his 1973 song “Candle in the Wind” to be a tribute to her, retitled “Goodbye England’s Rose.” It became the number one song in Great Britain that year, and still brings tears to many who loved their beautiful but troubled princess.

In the Old Testament, the great poet-king David wrote psalms that reflected on his milestone experiences in life, and these were put to music and sung in the temple worship in Jerusalem. The lyrics of other songs celebrating great milestones of Jewish history are also found in the Old Testament, including the Song of Miriam in Exodus and the Song of Deborah in Judges. Unfortunately, we don’t have any sheet music or recordings of the music, only the lyrics.

Matching poems to songs helps us to remember the words, and the right tune can add to the power and impact of the words. And, surprisingly, we find four Christmas songs embedded in the account of the coming of Christ. Luke, the author of the third Gospel, must have been a music lover. And it is likely that these songs in the pages of scripture were the inspiration for singing in the first centuries of the church (though again, we don’t know what the tunes might have been). The four songs recorded in Luke chapters 1 and 2 are: Mary’s song (our text for today), Zechariah’s song (later in chapter 1, about the birth of his son John the Baptist), the song of the angels (when they appeared to the shepherds in chapter 2 to announce the Savior’s birth) and, finally, Simeon’s song (later in chapter 2, when the baby Jesus was dedicated in the temple in Jerusalem).

Mary’s Song

Let focus on the first of them, known as “Mary’s Song.” It is also called by its Latin name, “The Magnificat,” because of the opening words: “My soul glorifies (or *magnifies*) the Lord.” Here’s the background. The angel has appeared to this middle-class teenage girl while she is in her hometown of Nazareth in the northern part of Israel. She is given the stunning and unexpected news that she has just become pregnant by a supernatural miracle, and that she is the

woman chosen by God to bring the Messiah into the world. Her response of faith and surrender to His will—though it was certainly the last thing she ever would have planned or intended—stands as one of the most heroic choices of all time: risking public shame and rejection, having to take on the responsibilities of parenthood prematurely, and then ultimately having the sorrow of witnessing her Son’s brutal execution. Mary is also given the additional news bulletin that her relative Elizabeth (who lives 100 miles away and is much older than Mary) is likewise undergoing a divinely-orchestrated pregnancy. So Mary travels to visit Elizabeth, and Elizabeth immediately confirms that what the angel told Mary was no dream or hallucination but fact: The child inside Mary’s womb is, indeed, the promised King and Lord of all.

We come to verse 46: “And Mary said, ‘My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.’” There follows, for the next eight verses, an extended song, written in beautiful meter and rhythm, resonant of the great psalms of the Old Testament. This naturally causes us to wonder: *What really happened?* It seems unlikely or far-fetched to think that Mary would just burst out into song, the lyrics and music coming to her as she opened her mouth.

Many of us are fans of the great Hollywood musicals. Although the song-and-dance numbers are beloved and memorable, they all strain credulity quite a bit. When Julie Andrews bursts into song about the hills being alive with the sound of music while a symphony orchestra plays in the background, or Judy Garland rhapsodizes about her Kansas home somewhere over the rainbow, or Gene Kelly starts singing and dancing on lampposts in the middle of a cloudburst, we know that those things don’t really happen like that. Even in the near-Oscar winning film “La La Land” (2016)—a throwback to the old-time musicals—we knew that Ryan Gosling and Emma Stone wouldn’t just burst into spontaneous song in real life. The songs are obviously carefully written and orchestrated, recorded in sound studios, choreographed and artfully filmed.

And that's why it seems likely to me that Mary didn't burst into spontaneous song on Elizabeth's doorstep. There are a few more logical possibilities. For example, it's possible that, during her trip south, Mary had time to organize her thoughts and write down in a poetic form the great truths she was experiencing. Or perhaps Mary spoke her ideas to Elizabeth in a natural way and later wrote them down and formatted them in their current form.

It could also be that part or all of what is now known as "Mary's Song" was a popular worship song of the Jews of her time, and Mary embraced those words as reflecting her own feelings. This option corresponds with a story I heard from a pastor friend. A woman in his church's choir, who was their best soprano soloist, got the news the day of choir rehearsal, that the lump on her breast was cancerous and needed surgery. Having had a few hours to digest this sobering information, and drawing on her faith in the Lord, she asked her choir director at the start of the rehearsal if she could share some news. And then she sang these words to a familiar hymn: "When peace like a river attendeth my way, when sorrows like sea billows roll, whatever my lot Thou has taught me to say 'It is well, it is well with my soul.'" That beloved hymn became for her the musical testimony of her faith that God would be with her through the trials she faced. And maybe that's what happened with Mary: a song she knew and loved became her way to praise God and bear testimony to her faith.

Truths from Mary's Song

However this poem/song was composed in words or put to music, let's focus on what matters most: the content or message. There are three lessons for us in what Mary realized about God.

God is "mindful" of us, no matter who we are or our place in life. To be "mindful" means that He knows us personally, that He cares about us individually. Mary had no money or status or prominence; in the eyes of the secular world of her time she was a "nobody" ... but not to the Lord. He chose her not because she was worthy, but

just because He loved her. Though Mary had a unique job to do, every one of us has our own calling and purpose. The choice to obey the Lord and submit ourselves to His will comes to all of us, repeatedly, through our lifetime.

God sometimes intervenes in human events to bring about His purpose. We do not know, nor can we predict, when God will act. We lay before Him our needs and our prayers. The faithful people of God had been praying for centuries for the Lord to fulfill His promise and send a Savior to our lost world. And when the time was right, God intervened. You and I today pray for Him to act: to heal a person, to change a situation, to guide us and to have mercy on us and our nation. We can't manipulate or control God. He is Holy and Sovereign and All-Powerful. We take our concerns to Him and we wait to see what He will do.

God's work in us is both intensely personal or individual and yet also corporate. He is not just my personal Lord and yours; we are part of a community of believers, and His intent is to unite us not just to Himself but to one another in a church. Mary knew that she wasn't just an isolated person, but was part of the people of God stretching back in time before her to Abraham and beyond her to the church of subsequent generations. We are all connected by faith. You and I today stand in the great stream of history, claiming Abraham and Mary and countless other faithful men and women as our spiritual ancestors.

That is the message of Mary's: "The Magnificat." It was the first true Christmas song. There have followed in its path so many thousands of others. We enjoy and are blessed by many of them more than 2,000 years later.

True Christmas Songs

Let me close with a Christian perspective on the holiday music filling our ears and our airwaves this month. Since the middle of the 20th century, more and more secular songs have been produced as

substitutes for the strongly Christian and biblically based Christmas carols of past generations in Europe and America. Songwriters like Irving Berlin (a Jewish immigrant from Russia who wrote “White Christmas”) and other non-Christian composers have introduced many songs into our popular culture that have absolutely nothing to do with the birth of the Savior in Bethlehem.

Some of them are childish secular “mythology” songs (about red-nosed reindeer and dancing snowmen and Santa Claus coming to town and other immature fantasies); but most of them are “sentiment” songs about moods and emotions and memories from very non-spiritual and secular holiday times. Musical dreaming about snowfall and family reunions, or lamenting that we have the “blues” at a time when others are merry, have become part of our December soundscape. Though the tunes may be memorable, and even pleasing, they are spiritually empty. And just as significantly, they have no anchoring in anything factual or real—they are pure emotion.

In contrast, every one of the true Christmas carols we sing in this season is grounded solidly in the historic facts of what really happened in a small town in the Middle East twenty centuries ago. Our songs are based on scripture, and the scriptural account is based on what really happened in space and time. And what we sing about is not just mood-inducing or wistful imagining and longing. It is reality itself. Jesus Christ, the eternal God Himself, really became a human being and was born into this world. He was the greatest man who ever lived. He did for us what no one else could ever do. And He lives and reigns forever as our Savior and King. Our Christmas songs are not nostalgia and sentiment. They are a celebration of what Christ has done for us, and how secure and blessed we are in Him, now and forever. ■