

## ***Mary's Song***

*a sermon delivered October 31, 2021 by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno  
based on Luke 1:39-55,*

Mary's story begins in silence. In fact, it begins in lingering silence. The angel, Gabriel, comes to the teenage girl, Mary. He tells her things she is too young and too mortal to understand. Then he leaves her alone, by herself.

And as was her habit, Mary "ponders this thing in her heart." Silence again. A silence that leads down a path to something we will celebrate in December as "Silent Night."

But, long before that night, Mary sings. It happens at her cousin, Elizabeth's house. Mary has this cousin who is not like a cousin, really. She's more like an aunt than a cousin.

Maybe you had an Elizabeth in your life, Anyway, Mary may well have been shipped off to Elizabeth's to hide the shame of her own family, we don't know.

But even with the generational split between Mary and Elizabeth, or maybe because of it, Elizabeth greets Mary, not with shame but with her own joy. She too is pregnant, and, like Mary, she is pregnant at the wrong time.

Elizabeth is a bit too old for motherhood; Mary, a bit too young. Regardless, we have something as old as history going on here – women who are there for one another when they need one another most. And so, out of that solidarity, Mary sings.

Mary's song is one of the Bible's most uplifting things:

*My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for God has regarded the low estate of God's handmaiden ... God has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, God has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree; God has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich God has sent away, empty-handed.*

Quite a song, and so in keeping with what is at the heart of Jesus' message about wealth and power. So, is a targeted tax on billionaires to rebuild America a Christian thing to do? It's at the heart of the gospel.

Mary can't help but wonder why she was chosen, a peasant girl, poor, young, vulnerable, weak. If God was choosing someone to give birth to someone born to stand up to an empire you would think God might have chosen a woman living in a royal palace. That's what happens in the Hebrew Testament story of Esther, who happens to be a queen.

However the choice of Mary -- young, poor, and vulnerable, communicates something important about the very heart of God. Mary defines for us how God works in the world in unexpected ways, through the lives of the most humble, unlikely people.

God, this young woman is saying, cares deeply and passionately about all people and how they live. God cares a lot about people who, in this world of plenty, are hungry.

That being a given, it is a mistake, I think, to glamorize the poor or demonize the rich. Jesus didn't do it.

You know, it was Jesus, not Karl Marx, who said, "How hard it will be for the wealthy to enter the kingdom of heaven." But Jesus also had wealthy friends—Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus.

He was no single-issue social reformer. He did take the side of the underdog, and he went out of his way to be with the poor and outcast. But what he wanted and wants from every man and woman is a personal spiritual revolution, a reordering of values and commitments, regardless of how much money they have or don't have.

We are, all of us, dependent on one another. But in this libertarian era not everyone knows this. Many are doing their best to ignore this. That's why so many are dying needlessly of Covid-19, why the world is dragging its collective feet in addressing climate catastrophe.

But you know, in the Bible the poor know they are poor. In the Bible, the poor know how dependent they are on others, how ultimately vulnerable they —and we—all, in fact, are.

In the Bible the poor seem to understand that the only things of real value in this life are the gifts we all share. Not what we earn or have become, but what we are given. Jesus saw that the poor are uniquely positioned to understand that everything, even our next breath of healthy air, is a gift.

They know that what matters most is beauty, friendship, people who love you. It's why when you see pictures of children in what we once called third-world countries, they are so often smiling. They know the score, but they smile anyway.

But a lot of people throw such simplicity and gratitude under the bus. They complain, "Life is hard," and choose to steel themselves against it instead of embracing our inherent vulnerability.

Probably the most quoted Presbyterian author is Frederick Buechner. Here's what he had to say his family's reaction to his father's suicide when he was young. To soften the blow his mother chose to move the family to Bermuda. A place with sun and water – a place to heal. Her imperious mother-in-law disapproved strenuously. "You should stay and face reality," she said.

Buechner wrote about this in his memoir, *Sacred Journey*.

*In terms of what was humanly best, this was perhaps the soundest advice she could have given us: that we should stay and, through sheer ... will, courage, put our lives back together by becoming as strong as she was herself. But when it comes to putting broken lives back together— when it comes, in religious terms, to the saving of souls— the human best tends to be at odds with the holy best. To do for yourself the best that you have it in you to do — to grit your teeth and clench your fists in order to survive the world at its harshest and worst — is, by that very act, to be unable to let something be done for you and in you that is more wonderful still.*

*The trouble with steeling yourself against the harshness of reality is that the same steel that secures your life against being destroyed secures your life also against being opened up and transformed by the holy power that life itself comes from. You can survive on your own. You can grow strong on your own. You can even prevail on your own. But you cannot become human on your own. Surely that is why, in Jesus' sad joke, the rich man has as hard a time getting into Paradise as that camel through the needle's eye because with his credit card in his pocket, the rich man is so effective at getting for himself everything he needs that he does not see that what he needs more than anything else in the world can be had only as a gift. He does not see that the one thing a clenched fist cannot do is accept, even from [a loving God], is a helping hand.*

Mary's Magnificat teaches a simple truth: You cannot receive a gift unless you have a place for it. You cannot learn anything if you think you know it all. You can't enjoy beauty unless there is a place in you that yearns for it. You can't receive love unless you know there is a place in you that is empty and needs love to fill it.

As Rev. John Buchanan has said, "You can't be lifted up unless you know you are poor."

I think that's something of what Mary had in mind. "My soul magnifies the Lord; the Mighty One has done great things. He has scattered the proud, brought down the powerful. He has lifted up the lowly and filled the hungry with good things."

Now I want to say a word about music since it is the means Mary uses to bring hope to the poor. You know, singing used to be a very American thing. I mean, everyone used to be encouraged to sing. But something happened in the last century to change that.

We're so star struck these days that most of us are too intimidated by fame and talent to sing out-loud ourselves. We've forgotten that once upon a time it was acceptable for *everybody* to sing in public.

Well, the tradition of common singing is **not** dead everywhere. In Ireland today you go into most any rural pub and sit with locals they will ask you to sing something. It is expected. They sing their song -- now you sing yours.

I will never forget the day 42 years ago, I went to Golden Gate Park to hear Luciano Pavarotti sing. I couldn't see him, the crowd was that big . . . but the voice – it was like a miracle.

What is your song? Who is your singer? Often that changes over time as we change. I remember a particularly lonely period of my life back in the 1970s when nothing but melancholy songs by Frank Sinatra would do. I'm not making that up.

You know, it doesn't even have to be a great singer if the song is right, like Louis Armstrong singing, "What a Wonderful World." There's just something so very healing in that music.

Nancy Burke testifies to such a reality. Here is what she says.

*Every week, for two winters and two summers, as I drove to and from the cancer clinic for treatments, I played [Patti Labelle's music] over and over. When I was frightened and thought I couldn't make one more trip, I played those songs to get me there. Afterward, when I was tired and thought I couldn't make the drive home, I played them again. My spirits never failed to recover, and the miles just flew by. I found such courage and hope in her passionate music ... In the midst of the darkest time of my life that voice made me feel grateful to be alive ... There's a song for everyone, one incalculable mix of melody and magic that so neatly wraps the heart that we are lifted out of the here and now. And something in us is healed.*

In a letter written during what we now call, the Italian Renaissance, Marcilio Ficino wrote the following to a friend. "Do not be surprised, Francesco, that we combine medicine and [music] with the study of theology. Since you are dedicated to philosophy, you must remember that within us, nature has bonded body and spirit with the soul. The body is indeed healed by the remedies of medicine; but spirit . . . is tempered and nourished by airy smells, by sounds, and by song. To the Egyptian priests medicine, music, and the mysteries were one and the same study."

Medicine, music and the mysteries.

Singing does amazing things to the human spirit. It's powerful; sometimes it's downright dangerous. One December, late in the 1980s, near the end of its rule, the white government in Pretoria, South Africa banned the lighting of candles AND . . . the singing of Christmas carols in the township of Soweto. Can you believe it?

When asked, "Why?" by a member of the press, the government spokesperson said, "You know how emotional black women are. Christmas carols have an emotional effect upon them."

Geez, you let a poor Jewish peasant woman like Mary, or a black mother in Soweto sing -- well, you don't know where it might lead. Well, they were right. They proved the moral bankruptcy of their rule by saying it, but they were right.

In 1961 Bob Dylan sang, "The Times They are a Changing," and they were – more than anyone of us at the time could know. Who can calculate the power of solidarity created in that decade by the singing of the song, "We Shall Overcome?"

It has often been noted that when a child is starving, utterly emaciated and near to death, he no longer cries. Tears dry up and the child is silent. The hunger becomes so deep it moves beyond pain, beyond feeling to utter empty silence.

For such people Mary sings her remarkable song: "My soul magnifies the Lord ... God has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree."

Mary sings for Elizabeth who had cried herself to sleep countless nights in her youth; crying for a baby that she must have believed would never ever be born.

In that way she sings for the black women of Soweto who were forbidden to respond to the call of their own hearts.

She sings for mothers all over the world who worry about their yet to be vaccinated children.

For all of us who care about these things, Mary sings.

Someone once said of Mary that she is "like any cup, easily broken; like all vessels, [she is] too small for the destiny she must contain." (Rosario Castellanos)  
Unable to contain it, she overflows with song.

She is like the nation of Israel in exile in Babylon 400 years before Jesus. I spoke of them in the first sermon in this series.

Remember how they said, "By the rivers of Babylon our captors required of us songs, 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion.' They taunted. How can we sing the Lord's song in exile in a foreign land?"

But they did. Well, they couldn't sing the old praise songs they knew about God triumphing.

In the place of those, they made up a song out of their sadness. They sang about being forsaken, and the music we now call, *The Blues*, was born. Those are the Psalms.

Mary sings knowing she is going to have to say something to her fiancé about her pregnancy, knowing that there is no way in the world he is going to understand.

She sings knowing that for Elizabeth, having a child at 43 isn't going to be anything approaching easy, and this birth will be just the beginning of it all.

Despite questionable circumstances and doubtful outcomes Mary sings because singing is what life is about. It's the real reason humans have mouths like we do.

And let me admit, we need to sing, too. That's been the hardest part of worshipping in person, right? That we have not felt safe singing.

Okay, one last story, and I've saved the best one for last:

There is a tribe in East Africa where singing is the single most important thing in life for everyone to do. In this tribe when a woman is pregnant she is encouraged to spend a lot of time reflecting about what is going on inside of her. She thinks actively of the life within her. Out of that reflection she hums to herself a melody and that melody becomes her child's song.

So, when that child comes into the world the women around her and her mother, her Elizabeths, sing that song to aid the birth and to welcome the child.

But that's only the beginning. Throughout the child's life the song is sung at significant times. At the coming of age, at the child's wedding and finally, when that child has grown old the song is sung at the death bed by her children, and her family, and her friends.

"There's a song for everyone, one incalculable mix of melody and magic that so neatly wraps the heart that we are lifted out of the here and now. And something in us heals." .

Amen