

“Singing after the Blessing”

by Greg Smith-Young (Elora-Bethany Pastoral Charge)
An Advent Reflection

Luke 1:46-56

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Something has been perplexing me.

We heard Zechariah’s story a couple weeks ago. He is a priest, serving in God’s Temple. An angel-messenger from God surprises him, announcing he is going to be a dad; his wife Elizabeth will be pregnant. Their child, John, will ready the way for God’s return to God’s people. Right away, Zechariah sees the flaw in the plan. They are childless, and now they are on in years. Zechariah asks about it. The angel chides Zechariah for not believing, and sentences him to a silence that will last through Elizabeth’s pregnancy.

But then, last week, we heard about Mary. She is a young woman, from a “nothing” town, betrothed but not yet married. God’s angel-messenger surprises her, announcing she is going to be a mom; she will soon be pregnant. Her child, Jesus, is God’s fulfillment of God’s promises, the everlasting sovereign, the promised Messiah who brings God’s reign of justice and peace! Right away, Mary sees the flaw in the plan. She knows where babies come from, and knows that will not be happening anytime soon. Mary asks about it. The angel basically answers: *“Trust God. By the way, your much-older cousin Elizabeth is pregnant too! Can you believe it? With God . . . yes!”*

So, Zechariah and Mary both react pretty much the same way to the angel’s incredible announcement: “How can this happen?” Zechariah gets silenced. Mary gets encouragement. Why the difference?

Then, it hit me. God does not treat us the same. God knows each of us perfectly well, and gives each of us what we perfectly need. I’m thinking Zechariah needs a long silence. Sure, he is a religious professional, but he has to learn to listen to God.

Mary needs encouragement. She will be pregnant and unmarried, and that will be very shameful. Many will see her as a curse. But Elizabeth . . . she is also experiencing the power of God. She will understand Mary, and believe.

When Mary arrives, Elizabeth celebrates what God is doing through Mary. Not a curse, Mary is a blessing.

After Elizabeth’s blessing, Mary can sing!

*My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Saviour.
For He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant;
for behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed.
For He who is mighty has done great things for me,
and holy is His name.
And His mercy is on those who fear Him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with His arm;
he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.
He has put down the mighty from their thrones,
and exalted the lowly.
He has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich He has sent away empty.
He has helped His servant Israel,
in remembrance of His mercy,
as He spoke to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his children forever.*

Luke 1.46-55
New King James Version (adapted)

II

C. S. Lewis said this about Mary's Song: it's terrible!¹

I'd say Mary is terribly nery. Who is she to talk like this? She's a woman. She's poor. Her Jewish people are persecuted. She's pregnant *and* not married. She should know better. She's powerless, but she's speaking boldly against those in power. She's at the bottom, but she's letting loose against those on top. She's got nothing, but she's claiming victory over those with everything. Her reputation is shameful, but she's singing shamelessly.

Next, she'll be saying that God will raise up Indian Residential Schools survivors, and bring down the churches that ran the schools. That God will raise up refugees, and bring down those who sow fear and hatred. That God will raise up the person living on the street, and bring down those who rush by on our way to "more important things." Once the likes of Mary get started, you never know what they'll say. Nery!

¹ Scott Hoezee cites this in his article about the passage. I have not been able to locate the source of the quote. http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/advent-4c/?type=the_lectionary_gospel.

Lewis said it's terrible. I'd say Mary is terribly naive. The idealism of youth! She'll learn. We all do.

Lewis said it's terrible. I'd say Mary is terribly impolite. Musicals (and sermons) are supposed to cheer people up, right! This sounds far too serious.

Nervy and naive, impolite . . . and irreverent. Has Mary studied theology? Sat at the feet of the masters? Can she even read or write? Yet she thinks she knows what God is doing! Best leave that to the experts.

III

Well . . . she might have been illiterate, but she's sure digested God's Word. For her Song, she's sampled from all over Scripture, and what a mix she's made!²

Listen carefully, and you'll hear two counterpoints she's woven through the Song.

First . . . listen . . . God is not distant, God is not indifferent, God is not passive. God gets involved, intrusively, even aggressively. God is the "Might One." God does "great things." God shows "strength." God "scatters," "brings down," "sends away." God wades into the fray, steps up for the fight. Scholars call this "the Divine Warrior motif." Mary simply knows . . . it's God.³

Listen again . . . God is faithful. God keeps God's covenant, the relationship God promised with God's people. God remembers back to Abraham and Sarah, and every generation since. God remembers with mercy. God is attentive. God is good. God loves. Scholars call this the "Covenant Faithfulness motif." Mary simply knows . . . it's God.⁴

IV

When C. S. Lewis said Mary's Song is "terrible," he did not mean it is bad. He was not judging it poorly composed or wrongly worded. He meant "terrible" in the truest sense: dread-full, fright-full, fear-full.⁵ Terrible, as in shaking our foundations. Terrible, as in rattling our perceptions. Terrible, as in quaking ground out from under us. Terribly good!

Mary's Song is terribly good. She knows that trusting God is not about having your head in the clouds, just thinking lofty thoughts while the world goes by. Some spiritualities are like that. But the spirituality of Mary's Son Jesus is very concrete, very this-worldly.

² Raymond Brown calls Mary's Song a "mosaic" of Old Testament imagery, and provides a helpful chart of the many allusions. See The Birth of the Messiah (New York: Image Doubleday, 1977), 357, 358-59.

³ Joel B. Green, The Gospel of Luke, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 102.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ See Hoeezee's article. Lewis was harkening to the Latin word *terribilis*.

Mary's Song is terribly good. She knows that God *does* take sides in our worldly struggles. The world thinks that, because of their apparent success, their seeming wealth, their presumptive power, God is on the side of the "winners" who huff and puff about their greatness. And a lot of religion loves to snuggle up with power. But Mary's Son Jesus sides with those who are thrown to the side. Jesus sides with those trampled to the bottom. Jesus sides with those otherwise forgotten.

(That's because Jesus' loves everyone . . . *including those on the top*. But the only way they — the only way *we* — can be freed to follow him is when Jesus scatters us from our pride, knocks us off our pedestals, empties us of everything that's got us stuffed. Remember, God knows each of us perfectly, loves each of us fully, and gives us exactly what we need.)⁶

Mary's Song is terribly good. She knows that what God has done for her, choosing her to bear the Messiah, God's world-changing ruler, means God is fundamentally shifting history's direction.⁷ With her Jesus, everything changes.

V

God does this.⁸

Mary's Song is not a guilt trip. It's not a call to arms, a demand that we do something.⁹

Mary is making an announcement. This is what God is doing! In her Song, all the actions are Gods. God is on the move. God is changing the world.

Believe it. Don't believe it. God is still changing the world.

Like it. Don't like it. God is still changing the world.

⁶ As Joel Green writes, "[*Mary's Song*] is not to say that God's overruling human rulers is God's last word for them. Quite the contrary, God's triumph over those who oppose him is itself a redemptive act, placing his opponents in a position whereby they might elect to join God's project." He then quotes liberation theologian Leonardo Boff: "God flings the proud of heart to the earth, in the hope that they will be . . . delivered from their ridiculous vaunting and flaunting, to become free and obedient children of God and brothers and sisters to others." Green, 102.

⁷ Green, 104.

⁸ "Note that this Song describes dramatic acts of grace and power, places those active verbs repeatedly in the anterior position, presents this action in the aorist tense, and consistently locates God as the subject of these verbs. The effect of this presentation of divine activity is to underscore the decisive work of God, dramatically in operation, and unmistakably in control of human affairs, as the advent of God's peaceful, just kingdom is realized." Green, 99.

⁹ "Mary's Song is not a revolutionary call to human action but a celebration of God's action. . . . On the other hand, the story of God's redemption is not God's story only. Through his gracious initiative, God seeks out other actions, partners like Mary and Anna, who will share in God's work." Green, 100.

Do something. Do nothing. God is still changing the world.

God's announcement to Zechariah did not depend on Zechariah believing it. God was doing it.

God's announcement to Mary did not depend on Mary believing it. God was doing it.

The things God is doing in your life, and in our church, and in our community, and in this world are not waiting for our permission. God is doing them.

The choice for us, God's invitation to us — to each of us, to everyone everywhere, and to us as this church — God's call is this: Will you be part of this? Will you join me? Will you share in what I am doing?

Mary said, "Yes, I want this to happen. Yes, God is glorious. Yes, I rejoice in my Saviour. Yes, I am blessed."