

“Singing Mary’s Song”

Luke 1:39-55

In the merry month of December,

it is pretty common to hear people complaining about how busy their lives become around Christmastime.

In addition to the fact that our normal life and responsibilities continue,

there are gifts to buy and wrap, Christmas cards to write and send, cookies to bake, Christmas parties and programs to attend.

You know the routine.

But, we ask, is this the way it’s supposed to be? All this busy-ness and hurry?

Isn’t Christmas supposed to be a time of peace and wonder,

when the nights are silent, and the days are merry and bright.

Instead we see a lot of people having days that are stressful, and nights when they collapse in exhaustion.

Well, in the Gospel of Luke today, we find someone who may understand.

Mary is experiencing her own pre-Christmas hurry:

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country...

Perhaps there is some comfort and validation in remembering

that things weren’t exactly calm and serene for the characters of the biblical story in the days leading up to the birth of Christ.

Mary has just been visited by the angel Gabriel,

who told her this amazing story of the wonder God is about to work in her life.

As seasoned parents always like to say to first-time, expectant mothers and fathers,

Gabriel has just told Mary, “Your whole life is about to change.”

Well, no kidding!

At first Mary had questioned, *How can this be, since I am a virgin?*

Then, she seemed more trusting – or perhaps it’s resignation, when she said to Gabriel,

Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”
Then, she starts running. She hits the road, flees the scene;
she runs to meet her relative Elizabeth.
It's not clear whether she runs because she believes the angel
and wants to see what God has done for Elizabeth, as the angel had said,
or because she can't believe what the angel said,
and is going to see if Elizabeth is really pregnant,
for some confirmation of this strange announcement.

Whatever the reason for her haste,
it is clear that what happens when she gets there is an experience that generates
not only great faith, but great joy.
When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child (who is, of course, John the Baptist)
leaped in her womb.

And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry,
“Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.
And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?
For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting,
the child in my womb leaped for joy.

It is a miraculous encounter.
But the miracle is not simply that the child leaped in Elizabeth's womb –
remember, Elizabeth is in her sixth month of pregnancy,
surely she has felt the baby kicking a good deal by now –
The miracle of this encounter is that Elizabeth perceives God at work.
Elizabeth perceives this encounter with a heart of faith,
or we might better say a *womb* of faith.
That was not just a baby kicking,
it was a baby inspired by the presence of his Lord in the womb of his mother Mary;
the baby was leaping for joy.
Who knows but that it was *Elizabeth's faith* in that moment
that inspired Mary's faith.

Who knows but that it was Elizabeth's faith
that gave Mary the courage to believe the announcement of the angel.
*And blessed is she who believes that there would be a fulfillment
of what was spoken to her by the Lord.*

Faith begets faith. Joy leaps up and gives birth to joy.

And so begins one of the most celebrated songs in scripture,

Mary's Song of Praise:

My soul magnifies the Lord,

and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior

for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

As we celebrate Christmas, year after year,

we have come to expect Mary to sing this song.

Because we have the benefit of knowing the whole Christmas story,

and the story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection which follow,

it is a bit easier for us to see why Mary ought to be rejoicing.

But if we are not amazed by her joyful response,

then we are not reading the story closely enough;

If we are not in awe of her joyful heart, we are not fully remembering Mary's situation...

Mary is pregnant, out of wedlock. She is engaged, but not yet married to Joseph,

a capital offense in her day, punishable by stoning.

Luke doesn't tell us anything about how Joseph has taken the news,

if he's even heard yet,

but we learn from Matthew that Joseph's first inclination is to break off the engagement.

And if the personal trauma of this pregnancy is not enough,

consider the political implications.

Mary has been told that her child will be the king who will sit on the throne of David;

only, that throne that has long been devoid of any significant power in the world.

By Mary's day, the Jews have suffered a long history of defeat and exile;

their attempts to regain any political standing among the nations have mostly failed.
and now they are occupied by the great Roman empire,
ruled by a tyrannical Roman vassal named Herod.

If the angel is right about who Jesus is,
there is going to be some major political turmoil in this child's future.
So Mary's life is about to become infinitely more difficult
physically, socially, and politically – much, much harder.

But we do not hear her complaining. She's not whining about her schedule.
She's not cursing at the traffic on her way to Elizabeth's house.
She's not fretting out loud about how she and Joe are going to pay for it all.
Somewhere, somehow, she finds it within herself to sing a song of joy.
The 'somewhere' is in the presence of God.
The 'somehow' is in believing that God is a keeper of promises

Mary sings this song not only asserting that God is going to keep God's promises,
but as if these promises have already been fulfilled.

Listen to the verbs! They are not future tense, but past tense...

...the Mighty One has done great things for me...

he has shown strength with his arm;

he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

He has brought the powerful down from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly.

He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy...

Let's be clear about the historical record:

these things had not come to pass at the time Mary would have sung this song.

These were not yet realities, they were hopes.

Yet Mary's great joy springs up from her rock-solid confidence that God said it,
so it's as good as done.

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As we run around in our own pre-Christmas haste,
do we have this kind of confidence in God's promises?
Do we trust God so deeply that, despite our circumstances,
we are able to sing Mary's song?

We live in our own form of exile, different from the Jews, but also much the same.
We are carried away from God and God's good purposes for our lives,
cut off from the wellspring of life.

We live under the occupation of commercial powers that push and pull in every direction,
and do not care about our well-being, but would use us any way they can.
Some live with bodies that have been occupied by cancer, or some other disease.
Others are stuck in unemployment, without much hope of anything over the horizon.
Some of you are lonely; surrounded by people, but none of them really know you.
Some of you are caught in the grips of grief over what you have lost,
and your gut is ablaze with anger at God and everyone else,
for robbing you of your joy.

Others of you live under intense stress at work, or at school,
and the fear that you might not be smart enough, strong enough to keep up the pace.
Some of you teenagers are feeling occupied by those raging teenage hormones
that can make life a whirlwind of confusion.
Many of you are worn out from trying to engineer your lives
to make everything turn out just right, storybook perfect.
You are surrounded by a wealth of nice things,
but somehow they leave you empty in your soul.

Well, if you are living in exile, then the Christmas story brings good news.
God has made big promises to you. And God keeps God's promises.

The message of Advent and Christmas looks beyond the here and now
and celebrates what God will do,
saying it is as good as done.

Because when all *has* been said and done, God will keep God's promises.
God will make all things new. God will reign over heaven and earth.
And those whose lives have been devastated by sin, and grief, and pain,
will find their lives restored when God comes to save.

Do you know Mary's song? If not, would you like to learn it?

We can sing Mary's song, too

*for God has looked with favor on us in our lowliness;
the Mighty One has done great things for you and for me.*

When we believe as Mary did that God will keep God's promises,
when we trust that, despite what our lives have become,

despite the messes we have made, despite the emptiness we feel,
despite how tired, and confused, and lost we are,

God can bless us, God can save us, and God can use us anyway,

when we are truly gripped by this good news,

then there begins to arise in our hearts a holy joy

a joy like Mary's

Do you know Mary's song? Perhaps you'd like to learn it.

Then go, like Mary, and seek out a faithful friend, or a relative, or a mentor
who has the kind of faith you desire.

Even better, find a community of faithful people who share your faith,
and be with them as often as you can.

Mary went to Elizabeth in a crucial hour, and it kept her faith alive.

Faith begets faith. Joy leaps, and gives birth to joy.

This is the mystery of the incarnation of God, the miracle of Christmas.

God becomes flesh. God with us in the world, with us in our lives,
with us in Jesus Christ, and with us in the body of Christ.

Nothing in our experience is too lowly, too sinful, too broken, or too sick
for Christ our Savior to touch and to redeem.

God has given us the ultimate gift.

Mary's song can be your song, if you will learn to sing it.