

Mary's Song

1 of 5 in *Songs of Christmas* series

Nov. 29, 2020

Lk. 1:46-56

On November 1st, before people even had a chance to take down their Halloween decorations, CHFI radio FM 98.1 started into their annual 24-hour-a-day Christmas music format—all Christmas, all the time.

For me, that's just too early for Christmas music. What do you think? Is November 1st too early for Christmas music? If you're watching live, go ahead and type Y for yes or N for no into the chat.

Of course, now that it's the first Sunday of Advent, I find myself more than ready for some Christmas tunes. I mean, what would the Christmas season be without Christmas music? We all have our favourites, both sacred and secular, from *O Little Town of Bethlehem* to *Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer*.

Songs and Christmas just go together, don't they? And in a manner of speaking, this has been the case since the very first Christmas.

As the gospel of Luke begins, it's been 400 years since God last spoke through the prophets. But that long silence was about to be broken. The time to announce the birth of the promised Messiah—the Saviour— was finally at hand.

And as God lets the story's key characters in on what's about to happen, we find them responding to this news by breaking into poetic praises at various points in the text. Biblical scholars often refer to these poetic praises as "songs."

Today we begin a new series that will explore 5 of these biblical "Christmas songs" from the early chapters of Luke's gospel.

As we study these biblical songs of Christmas praise, it's our prayer that God will stir your heart in a fresh way with the wonder and hope of what Christmas means—for you, for me, and for the world.

And the world's need for that hope—the hope that only Jesus can bring —and our own need for that hope— stands out all the more after the kind of year we've all been through, doesn't it?

Today, we'll hear the song of Jesus' mother— Mary. Her story actually starts in the Old Testament, some seven hundred years before she was even born.

Through the prophet Isaiah, God revealed that a young virgin woman would give birth to a son, whose name would be called Immanuel, which means, "God with us."¹

God himself would enter human history. Born of this woman, God would actually become a human being to identify with us, and to save us from our sins. This would be God's decisive move toward eventually setting the entire creation right, once and for all.

Fast forward from Isaiah in the Old Testament to Luke chapter 1 in the New Testament.² The angel Gabriel appears to a young woman named Mary. She's just a teenager, engaged to a young man named Joseph. They married young in that culture.

She lives in a small backwater town called Nazareth. She comes from a poor, working-class family. Perhaps Mary has wedding preparations on her mind, when suddenly, this angel appears, addressing her with these words:

Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you.

In that moment, the script of Mary's life would change forever. The gist of the angel's message is this:

God has chosen you, Mary. You are going to be the mother of the promised Messiah—the mother of Immanuel, God with us.

Mary is remarkably accepting of this shocking announcement. But she is curious about one thing. Because young though she is, she knows how babies are usually made:

"How will this be... since I'm a virgin?"³

The angel explains that her conception will not involve a man, but rather a miracle of the Holy Spirit.

Now how do you think a teenage girl would respond to all this? Mary simply says to the angel:

"I am the Lord's servant... May your word to me be fulfilled."⁴

¹ See Isaiah 7:14.

² See Luke 1:26-41.

³ Luke 1:34 (NIV)

⁴ Luke 1:38 (NIV)

And later in the chapter, Mary breaks out into the following song of Christmas praise (and this is our main passage for today):

And Mary said:

“My soul glorifies the Lord
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has been mindful
of the humble state of his servant.
From now on all generations will call me blessed,
for the Mighty One has done great things for me—
holy is his name.
His mercy extends to those who fear him,
from generation to generation.
He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.
He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.
He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
remembering to be merciful
to Abraham and his descendants forever,
just as he promised our ancestors.”

Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home.⁵

This worshipful poem, or “song” as it’s often referred to, is traditionally known as the *Magnificat*. It’s one of the most famous songs in Christianity. Bible scholar N.T. Wright explains that:

It’s been whispered in monasteries, chanted in cathedrals, recited in small remote churches by evening candlelight, and set to music and kettledrums by Johann Sebastian Bach.⁶

Today, I’d like to share two important lessons from Mary’s song. The first lesson is to:

1. **Replace worry with worship.**

⁵ Luke 1:46-56 (NIV)

⁶ N.T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone*, p. 14.

Do you know anybody who is really, really good at worrying? If you know someone like that, type Y into the chat. If the person you know who excels at worrying is *you*, type “It’s me!” unless you’re too worried to do so, that is.

Maybe you’re finding that there’s plenty to be worried about these days—especially given the times we find ourselves in— worries about health, work, finances, relationships and school. Worries that can come with isolation and loneliness. Worries about the world’s troubled political and social landscape.

In our passage, Mary finds herself in circumstances which provided her with plenty to be worried about.

Remember, she’s just a teenager! The text tells us that she stayed three months with her cousin Elizabeth, who lived in the hills of Judea some 100 miles away from Mary’s hometown of Nazareth. So for starters, young Mary is away from home, away from her parents.

And then there were the concerns that awaited her when she did return home. Because how was she supposed to explain her condition to her parents, to the people in her hometown, to her finance Joseph?

Hey, guys, I’m back! Guess what? It’s a miracle— God made me pregnant!

Who would believe her story? Would Joseph end their engagement? Would her family still accept her?

What about her reputation? I mean, she lived in a small town where everyone knew everyone else’s business. And in that culture, women who got pregnant out of wedlock were presumed to be promiscuous, and were often ostracized, mocked, beaten and even stoned to death.

And then there’s the ample opportunity Mary would have had to worry about the pregnancy itself. Imagine being pregnant in a poor village where women often die in childbirth and children often die in infancy? That’s the kind of place Mary lived.

Add to that the responsibility of being the Messiah’s mom. *No pressure, Mary.*

Surely, she was conscious of such concerns. And yet, remarkably, in our text, do we find Mary worrying? No. Instead, we find her worshipping.

In the face of so much she could have worried about, we find Mary saying:

“My soul glorifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.”⁷

That word, “glorify”—or “magnify” as some translations put it, literally means “to make larger.” Think of how a magnifying glass makes things look larger.

You see, **worry magnifies your troubles. Worship magnifies the God who is greater than your troubles.**

In her song—which is just 10 verses long—Mary lists as many as 17 names or attributes of God, all drawn from scripture. In her song we hear echoes of themes and verses from the biblical books of 1 and 2 Samuel, Deuteronomy, Job, Psalms, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Micah, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah.

When she was growing up, Mary must have listened very well when the scriptures were read during worship at synagogue, and when her parents shared Bible stories with her at home, because this song clearly shows that Mary’s mindset and worldview were steeped in God’s word.

Parents, what does this say to you about making a commitment to explore the Bible with your children at home?

And what does it say to each and every one of you watching now about making a commitment to seek God in the scriptures yourself? You see, a big part of replacing worry with worship is to immerse yourself in God’s Story, to steep yourself in the scriptures.

Some people don’t know where to get started with the Bible, so let me recommend a few good resources to help you with that this Christmas season.

- Parents with kids, make the most your extra time at home this winter. Visit the web page you see on the screen (www.cornerstonechurch.ca/cornerstonekids) for a **Christmas Gift-Giving Guide** featuring a list of the best children’s Bibles and other great Bible resources for kids curated by Cornerstone’s very own Children’s Ministry Director, Kerri McIntosh.
- **The Bible Project Advent Series** – This is an online cluster of 4 animated videos that unpack the meaning of the key biblical themes behind the 4 Sundays leading up

⁷ Luke 1:46b-47a (NIV)

to Christmas— Hope, Peace, Joy, Love. Anything The Bible Project does is incredibly well done, and this Advent series is no exception. To find this free resource, just search *The Bible Project Advent Series*.

- ***Hidden Christmas: The Surprising Truth Behind the Birth of Christ*** (Timothy Keller). In 8 short chapters, this book compellingly explores a variety of Christmas texts in the Bible. I think you'll find it a great way to steep yourself in scripture this Christmas season, and if you order the e-book version of the book, you can start reading it today, on the first day of Advent.

When we magnify our worries, our faith begins to shrink. But when we magnify God in worship, it's our worries that begin to shrink. In her song, instead of listing the 17 things that she had to worry about, Mary lists 17 names and attributes of the God who was greater than her circumstances—and is greater than *your* circumstances.

Is God calling you to replace worry with worship today? If so, type "amen" into the chat.

Of course, it's not like you can just shut off your worries like flicking a switch. Things rarely work that way, especially if you're someone who suffers from clinical anxiety. Still, worship is something we can all choose to do, and magnifying God through worship will reduce your worries.

So whether it's steeping yourself in scripture each day, turning on your favourite worship music, or making a commitment to join God's people for worship each Sunday, replace worry with worship.

A word about Sunday worship services. Yes, for now, our worship services need to happen online. It's not the same as gathering to worship together in person.

Still, it is vital that you and I prioritize weekly online worship until we can gather in person again. I mean, if this pandemic had happened 15 ago, or maybe even as few as 10, we wouldn't have been able to do what we can do now with online worship. So let's not take this opportunity for granted.

If worship magnifies the God who is greater than our troubles, then in this worrisome time, we need to make the most of *every* opportunity we have to worship together, even if those opportunities are online, amen?

If you agree, I encourage you to type "amen" into the chat once again.

Let's move on to the second lesson we learn from Mary and her song. That lesson is to:

2. **Live in the sure hope of a renewed world.**

As she continues her song, Mary declares that one day, God is going to reverse all that is wrong with this world, and make it right. A day of both judgment and renewal is coming when God will cast down the proud, powerful and self-sufficient, and lift up the humble, weak and God-dependent. Here's how Mary puts it:

He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.
He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.
He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty.⁸

Notice those verses are written in the past tense, as if the scattering of the proud and the lifting up of the humble has already fully taken place.

Of course, we can easily look around today and see that the world is far from being renewed. But by writing this in the past tense, Luke is suggesting that through Jesus, the hope of a world renewed is such a sure and certain thing that Mary can sing about it as if it's already happened.

Right inside her womb, the renewal of this fallen world had begun, and one day that renewal will be complete. Mary sang, because the child she was carrying would ultimately turn this upside-down world right-side up, once and for all.

To hear such powerful declarations coming from a rural teenage girl, of all people, seems ironic. In the society she lived in, people like Mary were nobodies to those in power. The most powerful ruler of all, of course, would have been the Roman Emperor, Caesar, whom many revered as a god. On the other hand, as a female young person, and a poor member of a religious minority, Mary would have had no voice, no human or civil rights to speak of.

Nonetheless, Mary finds her voice in the praises she sings, because she knows that in spite of her humble state, she has not escaped the notice of God Almighty, who has taken a deep and personal interest in her.

⁸ Luke 1:51-53 (NIV)

Mary is essentially saying:

My King sits on an infinitely greater throne than any Caesar. A kingdom is coming where there will be one throne—just one—and this child I'm carrying will sit upon it. Unlike this world's rulers, my King will put an end to all tyranny and oppression, and bestow on all people dignity, value, and worth. He will fill the hungry with good things, the blind will see, the lame will run, the oppressed will find justice, and those who weep will be filled with joy.

"If God is in charge," we ask, "why does poverty persist? Why are people oppressed? Why all the terrorism? Why are there pandemics? Why does the news only seem to be getting darker? Why did I get cancer? Why the divorce? Why no job? Why am I going through such hardship?"

I cannot answer those questions, but what I can do is point you to Mary's song.

It points to the fact that with the coming of Jesus the Messiah, the restoration of this fallen world is inevitable. Therefore:

Caesar doesn't get the last word.
Poverty doesn't get the last word.
Oppression doesn't get the last word.
Terrorism don't get the last word.
Dark news reports don't get the last word.
COVID-19 doesn't get the last word.
Neither do divorce or unemployment.
Even death itself doesn't get the last word.

Almighty God—who was born into human history in the flesh-and-blood person of Jesus Christ—gets the last word. And his word is that one day, the knowledge of the Lord will cover the earth as the water covers the seas, and there will be no more death, or mourning or crying or pain.⁹

And here's the thing about that. To live in the sure hope of a renewed world buffers us from falling into despair in those times when it seems like the world is falling apart around us. What word could be more relevant for us in the times we find ourselves in?

⁹ See Habakkuk 2:14, Isaiah 11:9; Revelation 21: 1-5.

God has the last word, and in Jesus, he will one day make all things new. Mary reinforces this hope by singing in verses 54-55 that:

[God] has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors.¹⁰

Way back in Genesis, the first book of the Bible, God promised that he would bless all nations through Abraham's offspring.¹¹ From Abraham's seed came God's chosen people, Israel, and from Israel came the Messiah, Jesus, who came to bless all nations, and who will come back again to set the world right once and for all. The point? God keeps his promises!

As in his time, he will surely keep his promise to bring the renewal of this world to its full completion.

If living in the hope of a world renewed buffers us against despair when it seems like the world is falling apart, then at the same time, it compels us to spend ourselves in the loving service of the poor, hungry, sick, hurting, oppressed, and vulnerable of this world, whether locally, or globally.

If Jesus was born into this world to inaugurate a kingdom in which sin, poverty, hunger, disease, pain, and injustice will ultimately be eliminated, and the meek and the lowly will be lifted up— then our only proper response as God's people is to start living in line with that vision right now.

As the Bible says in Isaiah:

... if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday.¹²

How can we live into that invitation, practically speaking? Cornerstone has a Christmas outreach webpage that offers you a number of opportunities to do just that, both locally and globally. <https://cornerstonechurch.ca/christmasoutreach/>

- You can assemble care packages for the homeless in downtown Toronto.
- You can put together gift bags for women who have recently exited the human trafficking industry.

¹⁰ Luke 1:54-55 (NIV)

¹¹ See Genesis 12:1-3

¹² Isaiah 58:10 (NIV)

- You can help feed people in Roatán, Honduras whose livelihood has been devastated by the pandemic.
- You can help build a protective fence around our partner church's vulnerable property in Nicaragua.

(Both Honduras and Nicaragua, by the way, have recently been hit by not one but two devastating hurricanes.)

Live in the sure hope of a renewed world by checking out the opportunities on our Christmas outreach page, and then taking action as the Lord leads you.

In spite of all the worries she could have preoccupied herself with, Mary basks in the wonder of the fact that God would set his sights on her—even her— a young woman who was of next to no religious or social importance in her culture. Mary marvels that:

From now on all generations will call me blessed for the Mighty One has done great things for me [for me!] —holy is his name.¹³

Mary is overwhelmed, but *not* by the risks of the unspeakably challenging path God has called her to walk. Rather, she is overwhelmed by the fact that God has poured out his favour on her. She knows full well that God owes her nothing, but that nevertheless, she has received everything from him.

Though no one else in history has the honour of giving birth to the Christ child, as Mary did, those of us who are Christians know the blessing of becoming God's own children through Jesus. God owed us nothing, but in Jesus, God has turned his sights on us, he has sought us out, and has given his life, blood, and last breath for us, adopting us into his very own family.

Therefore, you and I would do well to echo Mary's amazement in our own worship today. You and I have no less reason than Mary to say. "The mighty one has done great things for me—holy is his name."

To close this message, I'd like to invite you to respond by typing into the chat, "He has done great things for me!"

¹³ Luke 1:48b-49 (NIV)

BENEDICTION

By the grace of God, may you replace worry with worship this Advent season, and always. As you live in the sure hope of a renewed world, may you experience God's love, peace and strength— even in the midst of the troubled times we live in.

And out of that love, strength and peace, may you spend yourself in the service of those who are in need, for the honour and glory our Lord Jesus Christ, who spent himself for us when we were in greatest need. Amen.