

The Upside Down Kingdom

Luke 1:46-56

The birth of Christ has inspired more music and songs than any event in human history. From Handel to Bach, to Charles Wesley to Isaac Watts. Andrea Bocelli and... for your listening enjoyment, KC and the Sunshine Band released a Christmas album a couple years ago. Remember them?? Who knew!

This morning we are looking at the very first song inspired by the coming of Christ: Mary's song, or, as it is often called, the Magnificat (because she sings, "my soul *magnifies* the Lord"). This is one of the most influential songs in history, and certainly one of the most profound, and insightful. And it has inspired all kinds songs and music. Mary's *faith* has inspired all kinds of music.

You remember that Beatles song "Let it be"? Paul McCartney wrote, "When I find myself in times of trouble, mother Mary comes to me, speaking words of wisdom, let it be." I used to think he wrote that song about Mary the mother of Jesus, because she said, "*Let it be* to me according to your word" in response to the angel Gabriel's announcement. I was telling that to a group of people once and a good friend who is a Beatles aficionado said, I hate to break it to you, but he didn't write it about *that* Mary. He wrote that about his own

mother, whose name was Mary, who died when Paul was a child. When he was going through a hard time as a young man, his mother, Mary, appeared to him a dream and she said to him, “Paul, everything is going to be okay. Let it be. Let it be, and an answer will come.” Well, dang it. There went my excellent sermon illustration that I had planned to use. It’s still a good illustration, though, because it speaks to a mother’s influence on her son, which is true of Mary with Jesus as we’ll see.

Context: Gabriel comes to Mary and reveals God’s plan. She asks an innocent question of how this will happen, and after Gabriel’s reply and his affirmation that, with God *all things are possible*, Mary trusts Gabriel’s word and she says, “let it be... to me according to your word.” Then Mary goes to visit with her cousin Elizabeth and Mary discovers that another improbable conception has taken place between Elizabeth and Zechariah, who, in Luke’s often understated words, were “getting on in years.” Elizabeth then blesses Mary with words of joy and encouragement. And here is Mary’s reply:

Luke 1:46-56

46 And Mary said,
‘My soul magnifies the Lord,
47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
48 for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
50 His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
51 He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
53 he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
54 He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.'

This is the word of the Lord.

So this is Mary. What do we know about her? She's young. Probably barely a teenager. A peasant, living in poverty, in a remote corner of the Roman Empire, out in the far country, in Nazareth. Think Washtucna, Washington.

And it's not like Nazareth was like one of those sleepy, snowy, picturesque little New England towns you see on Christmas cards. Palestine was occupied territory. The godless pagans no longer lived *over there*, at a safe distance, but were right there, in their midst. And it made for plenty of turmoil. Religious conflict. Political upheaval. People being suspicious of each other, and occasionally violent toward each other. Sounds like the nightly news!

And into that turmoil, God raises up a poor teenager. Just past puberty, pregnant, and out of wedlock.

If you can try to hear this story as if you're hearing it for the first time, does this sound just a little bit problematic to you? Not very promising, right?

Yet, God is on the move! And Mary knows it. She gets it that she's a part of God's great salvation story. Mary's song, the Magnificat, makes it clear: in a poor peasant teenager the highest of heaven touches the lowest of earth! So she sings: "My soul magnifies the Lord!"

A closer look at the song reveals that the lyrics are not entirely original with Mary. There are echoes of Hannah's song here, from a 1000 years earlier, as we heard from 1Sam 2:1-10 – a song of praise to God for a miraculous pregnancy and the birth of a son. It's not exactly like Mary is plagiarizing, though. Let's think of it more like the remake of a golden oldie. Because, Mary is connecting dots, saying, God was faithful and *remains* faithful, and still works out good in unexpected, we might even say inconceivable, ways.

But notice also that Mary is not singing a lullaby. It's not exactly "rock-a-bye-baby in the tree tops" – although I suppose it's not like *that* tune is very

soothing either by the end, with the cradle and all coming down! Some of those old nursery rhymes and stories are kind of disturbing. But you get the point. Mary's song could hardly be categorized as a lullaby. More like, part song of praise and part revolutionary song, or protest song.

Indeed, Mary is belting out her praise to God – she begins by marveling at the fact that God is using her... In the first half of the song she sings, “God has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant... all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.”

But Mary's song is not only about what God has done for her. It's about what God has done for many. Notice how the song begins to open up as we move into it more deeply: She sings “His mercy is for those who fear him, from generation to generation.”

And then, as the song continues, notice how the tone changes, how it gets a bit more intense. Mary kind of ramps it up, really.

God's activity in Jesus the coming Messiah is spelled out in three dramatic movements, or acts:

First: “He has shown strength...and has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.”

Second: “He has brought down the powerful...and lifted up the lowly.”

Third: “He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.”

Mary is singing in the *reign* of God (the original singing in the reign!), giving us a picture of the kingdom, and it’s about the world being turned upside down! It’s the upside-down Kingdom—like she is singing the beatitudes, except a bit more of an intense version; and... more subversive.

Everything is turned on its head. The high and mighty knocked off their pedestals. The lowly exalted. God is champion of the poor, the lowly, the hungry, the powerless. And Mary herself is exhibit A.

This is no lullaby. More like a song of revolution.

No wonder Methodist missionary and everyday mystic E. Stanley Jones called the Mary’s song the most revolutionary document in the world. It reads like a manifesto. In today’s language we might say that Mary is “sticking it to the man.”

Here is a wonderful historical tidbit about this song of Mary: in the 1980's the government of Guatemala banned any public reciting of Mary's song because it was deemed too politically subversive. This song from a poor peasant teenager is so influential and powerful that the government of an entire nation forbids it said or sung in public. Talk about revolutionary!

One of the interesting things to note here, one of the almost shocking things here is the verb tense. Did you notice? Mary sings, God *has* shown strength, *has* scattered the proud, *has* brought down the powerful, God *has* filled the hungry... It's *past tense*. That's not a mistranslation. For you grammar nerds, the aorist tense of the verbs in the original Greek is a deliberate way of expressing "what is timelessly true – past, present and future without differentiation." It's a way of expressing confidence and certainty, that these things are as good as done. Even though Mary never saw it completed in her lifetime. Even though we haven't seen it fulfilled yet in ours. But we can be sure: *God's kingdom of justice and righteousness will prevail!* God will make it so—even though we only experience it in appetizer-like portions now.

Mary's song turns everything on its head. And shows us once again, the values in God's upside-down kingdom. Then Mary gives birth to a child named

Jesus, who came to embody God's kingdom, and to come near to us and to the world, in love. In *love*...

When Jesus came he did not go to the **top**. Jesus did not go to Caesar, say, or Pontius Pilate, or Herod, to the powers that be.

When Jesus came to live out God's reign he did not go to the political **left**, to the Zealots, to try to *overthrow* the powers that be. And Jesus did not go to the political **right**, or to the religious right-wing, like the Pharisees. He didn't go to the **money** people and the aristocracy, like the Sadducees and priests.

No, when Jesus came, he went to the **center**, to the human heart. That's where he staged a show down and engaged the struggle for renewal and for the reign of God, on the turf of every living soul, which then affects every human relationship and societal structure.

Alexandyr Solzhenitsyn (Nobel prize winning author; survivor of the Russian gulags, and Christian) puts it this way: *"The line between good and evil is not drawn between us and them, between nations or parties. The line between good and evil runs down the center of every human heart."* And that's where Jesus went, and still goes today. To reach every human heart.

Which means that Jesus was radical, in the true sense of that word.

“Radical” comes from the Latin word “radix” which means “root.” Jesus got to the root of the matter, by waging an ongoing revolution of love and grace, a battle against darkness and the power of death... in the human heart, which affects relationships, and society.

And... he learned it from his mother. In my imagination I think of all of those moments when Mary would sing this song to her son, and tell him the stories of when the angel Gabriel appeared to her and what happened after that. In my imagination I picture her singing the song and telling the stories to Jesus as a baby, then as a young boy, and even to him as an adolescent.

So...consider this: Jesus is Mary’s song come to life. Jesus is Mary’s song come to life. Jesus embodied what Mary sang, and also what she experienced.

For example, Jesus encounters a rich young man and challenges him to sell what he has and give it to the poor. He goes away sad and Jesus turns to his disciples and says “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than it is for a rich person to enter the Kingdom.” His disciples ask, “who, then, can be saved?” And Jesus says “*For God, all things are possible.*” Where did he learn that?

Then Jesus says things like: the last shall be first and the first shall be last.

Where did he learn that?

One time large crowds are following Jesus and at the end of the day they're all hungry. The disciples want to send them away, but the *all* of gospel writers tell us that Jesus had compassion on them. And so he takes some meager resources of fish and bread and multiplies them to feed the hungry crowd (*he fills the hungry with good things*). Where did he get that idea?

In the garden of Gethsemane as Jesus is praying and sweating drops of blood, he wrestles with God about the ordeal and comes to this conclusion: "Not my will but yours be done." Where did he learn that? Jesus may as well have said, let it be to me according to your word.

Certainly he learned these things because of his intimacy with God his heavenly Father, our heavenly Father. But certainly, he was also influenced in all of this by his mother.

So, here is one takeaway from Mary's song, and her life: for parents and grandparents—not just *mom*s and *grandmas*, but *dads* and *granddads*: keep singing songs of faith to your children and grandchildren! Keep telling them your

stories. Not just the stories from the Bible, but **your** stories, the stories of what God has done for **you**, and what God *is doing* in your life. Sing the songs, tell *your* stories of what God has done for you and is doing in your life. No matter how old they are. And, no matter how old you are! Zechariah and Elizabeth, in their older age, had a song to sing and a story to tell.

The greatest place of influence for passing on the faith to our children is not at church—as great as Sunday school teachers and children’s programs can be, and as great of a welcoming place that we create here. If you think about it, we only get you for an hour or two a week. The place of greatest influence for passing on the faith is in our families and our homes. It’s those moments at bedtime, in the car, baking cookies together, working in the yard, at the dinner table, serving others together, reflecting on a movie you watched or a book you read, talking about something that happened at school for them, or at work for you. Sing the songs, tell your stories.

The other invitation to us from Mary’s song, as we affirm that Jesus embodies the upside-down kingdom that Mary sings about, is that we, too, as his followers, are called to embody this upside-down kingdom, as Christ’s representatives on earth. As... Christians.

The word “Christian” has fallen into disrepute in recent years, and I know people who are truly Christian and live it out beautifully, but who refuse to use that word to describe themselves, because that descriptor has been ruined by some people who misrepresent it. However, the word “Christian” literally means “little Christ.” That word was first used in the book of Acts as people saw the believers giving of themselves in love and humility, being gracious like Jesus, and started calling them Christians.

Christians are “little Christs” as we go about our lives. And I think that’s cool, and amazing. Hundreds of thousands of little Christs going about feeding the hungry, serving the lowly and marginalized. *Being* lowly, humble people.

It actually doesn’t matter what we call ourselves, or how we want to be named. What matters is, will we join in Mary’s song, with Jesus, and embody this upside-down kingdom?

There is no expectation of perfection or flawless behavior. Only an invitation, once again, to respond to God’s call to join in God’s revolution of love and justice and grace as we embrace and embody this upside-down Kingdom.

Canticle of the Turning...