

# Mary's song

We study a beautiful song named the "Magnificat" from the first word of the Latin translation of Luke. Note the religious context of this magnificent song, remembering there was no



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scribe present when Mary shared this miracle with Elizabeth and certainly no electronic recording device. Luke, the non-Jewish writer among the four Gospels, carefully researched his subject before writing his version of the Jesus story and the book we call Acts. Luke's goal was to present the good news in a style the Gentile world would more easily understand.

Mary was probably a teenager and hardly a sophisticated theologian or author, so this "song," beautifully composed, is likely a compilation of treasured memories and sound theology in the young church. Mary would have learned the Hebrew Bible in the synagogue every sabbath and visited the Temple for high holy days. Her song echoes the Song of Hannah from 1 Samuel 2:1-10. Putting all scholarly thinking in the background, this magnificent song of praise reveals a young girl who fervently believed in God and dared to surrender her life to the Yahweh who sends the Messiah into our world.

Given the strong laws against adultery and the marriage customs of that culture, a young unmarried pregnant woman would want to leave Nazareth for a time. The distance between Nazareth and Ein Karem, traditionally known as Elizabeth's home, was a long 80 miles. When the two women meet, the baby in the much older Elizabeth's womb (John the Baptizer) "jumped for joy" (v. 44). Luke 1:15 references this event, when the angel says Elizabeth's baby will be "filled with the Holy Spirit even before his birth." It is important that two women are in the middle of this incarnational story, the culmination of God's redemptive plan.

Compare the different way Luke

and Matthew begin their version of the Jesus story: Luke with a birth narrative, Matthew with a genealogy. In that male dominated day, women were very rarely included in a genealogy, but Matthew lists five women in Jesus' family tree. Look at the interesting women he names: Tamar, who became pregnant by her father-in-law (Genesis 38); Rahab, known as a harlot in Jericho; Ruth, a non-Jew from Moab; Bathsheba, whom King David seduced; and Mary, a descendant from King David. This lineage would have been seen as questionable if not revolutionary! But from these five suspicious women we begin to see how God uses ordinary, if not sinful, individuals to introduce his grace into our broken world.

Mary's words reveal a particular joy that God has chosen her to serve: "With all my heart I glorify the Lord! In the depths of who I am I rejoice in God my Savior. He has looked with favor on the low status of his servant" (vv. 46-48). We resonate with her declaration: "He shows mercy to everyone, from one generation to the next, who honors him as God" (v. 50). Here is a strong clue that this Messiah will reach out to "everyone," which includes people we may consider unacceptable if not beyond redemption.

The good news not only shocked the Jewish establishment then, it continues to disturb our generation with its openness to all the world. Mary's song signals Jesus will turn the world upside down: "He has scattered those with arrogant thoughts and proud inclinations" (v.51... "has pulled the powerful down from their thrones and lifted up the lowly" (v. 52)... "has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty-handed" (v. 53). The depth and wideness of God's redemptive love challenges all to see beyond comfortable expectations to new values and responses.

According to the "Magnificat," this is not a new idea from God. This mercy goes all the way back to God's promises to Abraham and his descendants and into the future.

## Formations

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Scripture: Luke 1:41-55

The four Gospels are crowded with stories about Jesus overturning the establishment and blessing social outcasts. The word "blessed" is used several times by Mary, but her meaning involves finding joy in serving God's purpose. Our modern idea of blessing is material success and advancement. In his beatitudes, Jesus reflected "blessed (happy) are you" when you live by God's standards rather than the world's (Matthew 5:3-11, Luke 6:20-22).

Mary's song reminds us that we frequently forget God does not plan or play by our standards or expectations. Study the characters of the Old Testament and the early church and you realize God can do wonderful things with imperfect people like us.

I suspect the eloquent wise words of the "Magnificat," as they are recorded, were not sung by a pregnant teenage girl, but refined by the older woman she became, who remembered that day when she found shelter with Elizabeth. In later years, having watched her baby become an eloquent preacher, a miraculous healer and the risen Savior, Mary refined her song, those words born out of joy and heartache, transformed into an eloquent praise hymn to the eternal God.

Advent begins the church year by pointing us to the One who invites us into the presence of God. It is not enough to plan beautiful musical programs and fun parties. We catch a glimpse of an inexperienced young girl in a little village, surprised by an angel from God, invited to bring God's only begotten Son into our world. Can we emulate her yes to God for something she could not rationally understand? Will we praise God for the gift of Christ? In this season of joy will we sing the melody of God's eternal grace and tell our world the Savior has come?

*Retired after 45 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques.*