



My Soul Gives Glory to My God

Luke 1:39-55

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In this season of Advent, we are studying some of the great hymns that sing of Christmas to come – the *Songs of the Season*. Music, perhaps better than any other form of art, has the ability to transport us emotionally to a place no other medium can. Music engulfs us, swallowing us whole – spirit, mind, and body. Not to say that other art forms are not meaningful and significant, but have you ever seen a mosh pit in the National Gallery of Art? ... There's something about music that changes us – it takes over us. It just so happens to be that Advent and Christmas have the largest repertoire of music devoted directly to this holiday season. It's the greatest season because it has the best music – music that helps us prepare to celebrate once again the birth of Christ.

You know the Christmas favorites – like “Joy to the World” and “Jingle Bells” ... but Christmas music is not limited to the awe-inspiring and wonderful tunes we enjoy singing. It's such a popular holiday to sing about, that it brings out both the best, *and the worst*, in music production. You can look them at your own risk, but trust me when I say they exist. Snoop Dog partnered up with Boyz II Men just a couple years ago and produced a song based on an old James Brown special titled, “Santa Claus goes straight to the Ghetto.” There's also the songs that re-imagine Christmas, like the wonder from Homer & Jethro, titled, “Santa Claus the Original Hippie.” Or, if you prefer fantasy over reality, you could look up Sufjan Stevens' Christmas special, “Christmas Unicorn,” in which he imagines himself to be a “Christmas unicorn in a uniform made of gold.”

Ok, so perhaps not all Christmas music is equal – but whether you're singing about a Christmas unicorn, a hippopotamus, missing front teeth, or the lowly infant born on a silent night in Bethlehem – it's easy to see, the season is packed with Christmas music. *Our* focus in this season of Advent – in this season of preparation that leads us to Christmas – is on songs that invite us to prepare for the gift of God in the birth of Christ. Today's hymn of focus, which can be found on page 198 in the *United Methodist Hymnal*, is “My Soul Gives Glory to My God.”

The hymn is a newer hymn, written and published by Dr. Miriam Therese Winter in 1979; it was published in our *Hymnal* in 1987. At the age of 17, Miriam became a Medical Mission Sister in the Roman Catholic Church with the hope of one day being a physician. However, her love for music won her over, and she became a hymn writer and scholar. Dr. Winter continues to teach Worship and Liturgy today at Hartford Seminary in Connecticut.

The hymn is one of many art pieces to have been based on Mary's poetic song in Luke 1, which is known as the *Magnificat*. The *Magnificat* has inspired artists such as Rembrandt and Botticelli, as well as famous composers, such as Vivaldi, Bach, Rachmaninoff, and John Rutter.

To understand our hymn and the emotion it seeks to elicit, we must first understand Mary's song, which is found in our scripture today.

Our story today takes place immediately after Mary was visited by the Angel Gabriel. The Angel had appeared to Mary to inform her that she had favor with God, and that she was to conceive a child, whose name was to be Jesus. Gabriel tells her, "He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

To fully understand the emotion of the text, we would do best to put ourselves in Mary's shoes. Mary is a young woman ... no, she's a young teen – maybe 14 years old – who is betrothed, but not yet wed. After hearing the angel, she responded, "How can this be, for I am a virgin?" ... She's young, but she knows how things are supposed to work. For her, pregnancy is not conceivable. "This is impossible she says ... it's not *physically* possible."

Gabriel responds, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called the Son of God."

I'm no 14-year old girl, but even as I hear this, I start to wonder, what's going to happen to her?

Gabriel doesn't elaborate, but he does add, "And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." ... Mary responds, "Here am I, a servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word."

The very next verse is where our text today begins, in verse 39. "In those days, Mary set out with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and Elizabeth."

This 14-year old, unwed, yet miraculously pregnant young girl set out on what was likely a 3 to 4 day walk through the Judean countryside on her own to visit her elder relative, Elizabeth. She had no Google Maps to guide her, she had no Waze app to let her know what might be lurking around every blind corner. She went with haste, on her own, leaving her fiancée behind, to determine for herself if this prophecy of the Angel could be true. ... What better way to know if she just had a bad dream, or if the dream was a reality, than to verify if Elizabeth is indeed pregnant. Elizabeth was older – she was at an age that was beyond the expected age of child-bearing, and was said to be barren. If she was indeed pregnant, which would be a miracle in and of itself, her pregnancy would prove the angel's words to be true.

Have you ever made a road trip like this, to go see a loved one? Growing up, my family used to travel to my dad's family property in Tallahassee, Florida. We'd pack the car the day after Christmas, and make the 5-6 hour drive south to spend time with my grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. By the time we arrived the evening of the 26th, many of the family would already be gathered. As our car started down the gravel road onto the family property, those who were in the house would come out to greet us. By the time our car pulled up to the house, we'd be surrounded by dogs and children running around, and aunts and uncles prepared to greet us with a warm embrace. ... This is how I envision Mary's arrival to Elizabeth's place. As Mary is drawing near to Elizabeth's place, Elizabeth went out to greet her. Seeing her from a short distance, Mary exclaimed, "Hello!" I know, this isn't laid out in the narrative of the text, but it makes sense when we keep reading.

Verse 31 says, "When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb." (That is, Elizabeth's child leapt in her womb.) In response to the in-utero child leaping, 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 leapt for joy."

Picture these events – talk about emotion! In my mind's eye, I can see the Judean country side (it is the hill country, not an urban setting) with a house on top of the hill. Elizabeth sees a figure coming in the distance and goes outside to greet her. As she begins to make out that it's Mary, Mary yells to her. Mary is still some distance off, but the reaction of the child in Elizabeth's womb upon hearing Mary's voice proclaims this visit is about more than a family gathering. Elizabeth exclaims to her with a loud cry – she's yelling out to Mary, who is not yet standing next to her, but still finishing the final stretch of her four-day walk.

Elizabeth finishes her proclamation by saying, "And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

This final statement by Elizabeth offers us more than what first meets the eye. Mary hasn't even made it all the way to her yet, she's still walking up the drive. They haven't had time to sit and chat ... they have not yet begun to chew the fat. How did Elizabeth know that Mary had come to see about the fulfillment of the Angel's proclamation? How did Elizabeth know that Mary had been told about her pregnancy, and that the reason Mary was visiting was to confirm Elizabeth's pregnancy?

Even as she arrives, Mary has the Angel's words fully confirmed. Elizabeth confirms that 1) she, Elizabeth, is pregnant, saying "the child in *my* womb leapt for joy; 2) that she, Mary is pregnant, saying, "the mother of my Lord comes to me;" and 3) that the Angel's promise was not just a bad dream, but a reality, saying "blessed is she who believed in what was spoken to her by the Lord."

Part of me wonders if the confirmation of the angel's visit didn't fill Mary with great fear and trepidation. Had she come in hopes of *dispelling* the prophecy of Gabriel? Yet, instead of screaming in fear, pulling out her hair in anxiety, and weeping at Elizabeth's feet, Mary breaks into song.

Have you ever seen the opening scene of *The Sound of Music*? You know, the scene where Julie Andrews is running through the alpine meadow, spinning in circles, singing "The hills are alive"? Indulge me for a second, and imagine, what if Mary's response was similar to this scene? ... Mary's has just had the angel's visit confirmed by Elizabeth, she now knows that both she and Elizabeth are pregnant, and in response, Mary breaks out in song. She spreads her arms and spins around, pauses for a moment of introspection, walks through some trees and crosses a stream, she runs up the hill to Elizabeth, all the while she's singing this song. A young girl singing in awe of God's work being done in and through her, the one to be the mother of the Son of God.

"The *Magnificat* relates Mary's present joy and overflowing praise as a response to what God has done, both for her personally in granting her the admiration of all future generations and for God's more encompassing salvation."ⁱ In these words she not only praises God, singing, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior," but she also acknowledges her role in this miraculous moment, offering, "From now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name."

It's fascinating to me that the rest of the song, instead of singing about all that Christ *will do*, Mary sings in a past tense – it frames the coming birth in terms of what has already been accomplished. Beginning in verse 51, pay close attention to the verbs, "He *has shown* strength with his arm; he *has scattered* the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He *has brought down* the powerful 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."

Mary is not looking forward to something God *will do* in the future, but work that God has already done. In the fulfillment of the Angel's promise, in the reality of the Son of God being conceived ... in the certainty of the Incarnation, God has *already* done great things. "For Mary, there is something about the Christ child that has already won the revolution, even though as she sings her song the child has not yet even been born."ⁱⁱ

I've heard it said that Christmas is about nothing more than the celebration of the Incarnation. And make no mistake, Christmas *is* about the celebration of the Word made Flesh dwelling upon us. But even Mary, the mother of Christ, was spirit-filled enough to acknowledge that the Incarnation is about more than the simple birth of a child. For Mary, *upon receiving confirmation of the Incarnation of the Son of God growing inside of her*, she sang not about a child to be born, she sang not about the person of Jesus who would teach in Israel, she sang not about a church that would be formed to proclaim God's love in the world ... the moment she

had confirmation that she indeed was carrying the Lord, she sang about God's work to overthrow the social structures of society and the overturning of systems of exploitation.

It is this proclamation, this claim of God's action at the news of the Incarnation, that Miriam Therese Winter echoes in our hymn. This hymn is not just calling our mind to the coming birth of Christ ... this song does not just ask us to transport ourselves to a cradle in Bethlehem ... this song invites us to consider the full weight of the Incarnation – the full reality of what it means that God is sending the Word to be in-fleshed. Dr. Winter writes of Mary's song, saying, "Often through the centuries, the *Magnificat* has been considered a dangerous hymn because it sings of overturning the status quo, promising food for the hungry, power for the powerless, and a reversal of economic fortunes. ... It is a song of hope for times of disparity and for any situation in which we feel personally or systematically overwhelmed."ⁱⁱⁱ

The promise of the *Magnificat*, and the invitation of our hymn, is to trust in the promise of God that is proclaimed in the birth of Christ. This is a perfect hymn for Advent, as it invites us to consider God's work in the world and how we might be prepared to join in this work. The song is an invitation to follow in the work of God in Christ, to walk alongside the poor, to lift up the marginalized, to heal the divisions that separate us, and to repair the damage we have done to others in our quest to be like gods. It is both a song that proclaims God's work, and a song that invites us to consider our own engagement in the work of God in the world.

How could an unwed 14-year-old girl in the early near-east break out in song and celebrate a miraculous conception? Because she knew that this birth, the birth of the Son of God, the birth of her child, was an act of God that would bring good news to the poor, would bring love to the unloved, healing to the infirm, and peace among creation. That is the message we sing today. Praise be to God.

ⁱ Stephen A. Cooper. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 1*. Eds. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.

ⁱⁱ Robert Williamson. *The Politics of the War on Christmas*. Politicaltheology.com. Retrieved December 4, 2019.

ⁱⁱⁱ Miriam Therese Winter. *History of Hymns: "My Soul Gives Glory to My God"*. Umcdiscipleship.org. Retrieved December 4, 2019.