

Mary and Elizabeth

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[0 : 00] You know, I love this time of year, and one of the reasons I love it is because of the music. I just love the songs that we sing, and I'm particularly grateful for our music team.

They do such a good job every year of singing familiar songs and then integrating new songs. A couple of these songs, I think, are newer, at least for me, and I love discovering new music around this time of year.

You know, if you were to look at all of the songs that have ever been written for or about Christmas, you're dealing with a list of nearly 10,000 songs over the years, and some of these songs actually date back quite a long time.

Silent Night, one of the favorites of many people, that was written in 1818, so it's been around for a while. The words, if not the melody to O Come, O Come, Emmanuel, go back to at least the 12th century.

That's a fairly old song as well. There's even a carol. I'm not sure if we've ever done it at Advent, but there's a carol called The Angel's Hymn that was written in A.D. 129. So people have been singing songs for and about Christmas for a long time, and this morning we're going to be looking at what many consider to be the first ever Christmas carol, written by the Holy Spirit, sung by Mary herself.

[1 : 27] This song has come to be known as the Magnificat, and I would suggest that it's perhaps the greatest song ever written because it's a song that turns the world upside down.

That's what this song is about. It's more than just a melody. It's more than just words. It's a prophecy. And it declares the work that the coming Messiah will accomplish, and it does it with such confidence that it does it in the past tense.

His arrival signals the certainty of the things that are going to happen. So we're going to look at this wonderful Christmas carol together that turns the world upside down in Luke chapter 3.

First, we'll look a little bit at the singer, Mary, and then we're going to look at the song itself. So let's pray. Our Lord, we thank you for this time of year.

We thank you for the hope that it brings. But we know that for many of us, there are some here who feel the excitement. We feel the love. We feel the anticipation. We're caught up in the season.

[2 : 32] And for others, this may be the hardest time of the year for us. We may be struggling. We may be alone. We may be depressed. We may be in the midst of grief or hardship. And Lord, we know that you are uniquely able to meet us and minister to us in whatever state we find ourselves this morning.

So Lord, we open ourselves to you that you would do your work through your word in us. And we pray this for our good and for your glory. Amen. So first, let's look a bit at the singer of this first Christmas carol.

At this point in the story, Mary has seen the angel Gabriel, what we call the Annunciation. And Gabriel has shared with her what is going to take place, that she's going to conceive, she's going to bear a son.

She's to name this child Jesus. To Mary's great credit, it's clear that she doesn't fully understand what's about to happen. Nevertheless, she submits herself fully to the Lord.

She doesn't fully understand what's about to happen until she visits her relative, Elizabeth. We can tell from the timing that she leaves almost immediately because she finds out that the Lord has also touched Elizabeth's life.

[3 : 48] Elizabeth is already pregnant. And so she visits her relative, Elizabeth. And at the moment she walks in, the child in Elizabeth's womb leaps in recognition, and Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit.

Now, this is something that in the Old Testament only ever happened to the great prophets. And it happens when God wants to speak directly through a person. So God's Spirit fills Elizabeth, and she exclaims with a loud cry, Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.

And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? She refers to Mary as the mother of my Lord. But then she says, verse 45, And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.

So it raises a very strange question. Who exactly is the Lord? There's the one who sent Gabriel, verse 26 of chapter 1.

Gabriel sent from God. The one who's been directing all of this, the father of this child to come. There's that one. Then there's the one who would overshadow Mary.

[5 : 10] The one who fills Elizabeth to speak God's word. The one who will illuminate the truth of what's happening. There's that being. And then there's the child, who is also called Lord.

The Son of the Most High, the Holy One. And so it raises this question, which one of them is the Lord? And of course the answer is yes. It's all three.

And we see Mary and Elizabeth here being given a glimpse of the true mysterious nature of God as a trinity of persons.

These are faithful Jewish women. They grew up praying the Shema, the core of the religious identity of the Jews. Hero Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.

They're faithful monotheists. And yet somehow the nature of that one God is being revealed to them ever so slightly. It would be centuries before the doctrine of the trinity would begin to be worked out.

[6 : 10] Mary and Elizabeth are given a unique glimpse into the mysteries that are unfolding. What this means is that the child to be born is no mere prophet, no mere teacher, no mere social activist, here to do some good and set an example for others to follow.

What this means is that God himself is going to be born into the world through a human mother. Now, we've heard this time and time again every Christmas, but if we think about it, it has staggering implications.

First of all, the uniqueness of the Christian faith as a result of these events. The uniqueness of the Christian faith. John Hick, up until recently, I think he passed away around maybe 10, 12 years ago.

He was probably one of the most prominent, rigorous proponents of religious pluralism out there. His quest was to try to bring the religions of the world together so that they would fit together in harmony.

Sort of the popular idea that many people have, you know, at the end of the day, all religions are basically the same. They're saying basically the same things. But he wrote this in his autobiography.

[7 : 28] He says, I came fairly soon to see that for Christianity, the problem of religious plurality, in other words, the issue that prevents us from being able to fit Christianity in with all of the other religions of the world, hinged on the central doctrine of the incarnation.

He says, if Jesus was God incarnate, Christianity alone among the world religions was founded by God in person and must therefore be uniquely superior to all others.

As much as people might prefer to think of all religions as being basically the same, Christmas means that that is simply not the case. Either God has entered into our world through a human mother, meaning, as John Hicks says, that Christianity is utterly unique, or the entire religion is built on a lie.

Much worse than that, on blasphemy. Right? If you're Muslim, if you're Jewish, this idea is blasphemous. So it's either true or it is a horrible lie and it's blasphemous.

So either we believe it or we reject it. But trying to fit it in among all the other religions of the world is simply not an option that we are afforded. That's not one of the choices.

[8 : 57] So it tells us something about the uniqueness of Christianity. It also reveals the uniqueness of Mary. You know, those of us who grew up Protestant probably need a bit of a corrective here when it comes to Mary.

No greater honor has ever been bestowed upon a human being. Mary chosen by God to be the theotokos, the word that means the God-bearer.

The early church fathers rightly understood how important it is to understand the role Mary plays in the coming of Jesus.

Mary was more than just a channel or a vessel through which God entered the world. Right? The promise is that she would conceive and bear a son.

That implies a gestation. Her body, in other words, formed his body. Right? The one who formed the heavens and the earth was himself formed in the body of a human mother.

[10 : 07] And so the early church fathers rightly understood that in order to have the right theology of Jesus as being both fully God and fully human, you have to have the correct theology of Mary.

We need to recognize the unique place that Mary occupies in the history of the church, the theotokos, and that she is worthy of great honor and great respect.

She's worthy of our celebration, as she has rightly been celebrated through much of the church, through all of history since these events took place.

So this is the singer, Mary. But what does the song itself show us? Why does this song turn the world upside down? When the enormity of what is going to happen finally begins to sink in, Mary is so moved that her very soul breaks out in song.

It's a beautiful moment. If you've ever had a moment like that where you're just filled with such joy, I mostly only ever see it in young children. I see it in my daughter when she's so happy that she just begins to sing with a band.

[11 : 16] And most of us adults, we're too self-conscious. And that's one of the wonderful things about this moment. There's a kind of blessed self-forgetfulness. She's so overwhelmed with joy.

The spirit fills her and she's moved and her soul breaks out into song. And then her soul, through the song, magnifies the Lord. Opens up to us the range of things that this coming Lord is going to accomplish.

The coming of Jesus is the beginning of a great revolution that turns everything upside down. The coming of Jesus, according to this song, is going to bring about a new world order.

Socially, politically, spiritually. Many people make the mistake of missing the social and political implications of this story.

They are there. Other people make the mistake of only focusing on the social and political implications. There's much more going on. But it's worth saying that this song has been used to justify Christian participation in revolutions against totalitarian regimes throughout history.

[12 : 27] That there is a time and a place to stand up to tyranny. And the Magnificat would justify that in the minds of many. If you're living in North Korea and you hear a song that prophesies that one day the totalitarian leaders that are oppressing you are going to be toppled from their thrones, that would fill you with great hope, as it should.

But there's much more going on here. There's a spiritual new world order underneath the social and the political. What does this mean?

Well, essentially, it means that the world we live in is a meritocracy. The world we live in is a world in which our worth, our value, hinges on what we do, what we accomplish, what we achieve.

Our worth comes from what we do, what we're able to earn through our hard work, through our moral excellence. If you're a religiously inclined person, through our piety and our devotion, through our educational achievements, through our work success, whatever markers of success we choose to value, we rely on those things to prove our worth, to prove our excellence, to justify our existence in the world.

And the world has always operated this way. It's baked into human nature. So it's easy to assume that God, if there is a God, would operate the same way.

[14 : 00] That's why when you look at the man-made religions of the world, they're all built around the idea of human merit. We have to earn our way into heaven, into nirvana, into wherever that next place is.

We have to earn our way there through our moral performance, through our self-discipline, through our devotion, through our piety. Man-made religion says essentially, the good people go to heaven when they die, and the bad people get punished.

I grew up always thinking that's what all religions said. Man-made religion says this, he sees you when you're sleeping. He knows when you're awake.

He knows when you've been bad or good, so be good for goodness sake. That's the message of man-made religion. And Mary is singing this song that suggests, more than suggests, claims with divine authority that the coming of Jesus changes everything.

That the coming of Jesus signals a new world order, not built around human merit but around grace, an entirely different operating system for the world. And in this new world order, those who are proud, those who are self-sufficient, they're going to be brought low.

[15 : 17] Those who are humble, those who are lowly, are going to be lifted up. So if you're among the proud, if you're the kind of person who believes you don't need God, you don't need saving, if you're generally successful, if you live a comfortable life, if you're fairly self-sufficient, the Magnificat says you may be exalted in this world for a while, but the time will come when you meet Jesus face-to-face, and you're going to be humbled, and you're going to be brought very low.

You're going to realize that all of the markers of success in this world are meaningless in the kingdom of God. They were part of the economy of the old world order, but there is a new economy, and in that economy, they don't mean anything.

And no amount of effort can ever earn God's blessing. You're going to be brought low. You're going to realize you built your life on the wrong things. But, she says, if you're humble, if you know the truth about yourself, if you know that we all need God's forgiveness because we live our lives mostly ignoring God in the world that he made, in bodies that he made, if you're the kind of person who knows you need a Savior, then God is going to pour his mercy in your life.

He's going to lift you up. He's going to forgive you and restore you and renew you from the inside out. Grace turns everything upside down.

It's a new operating system. So, grace doesn't, she doesn't sing that grace, that God's going to scatter the bad people and lift up the good people.

[17 : 07] God scatters the people who believe they're good. And he lifts up those people who know they need a Savior. You know, earlier I said that I believe Protestants need a corrective when it comes to the role of Mary.

We do. On the other hand, in the Roman Catholic Church, various traditions and doctrines have arisen in the following centuries around the idea that Mary was not only uniquely blessed and honored, which she was, but that Mary was actually born sinless.

This also, I would humbly suggest, needs correcting. Look what Mary herself says. My spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked on the humble estate, meaning the lowliness, of his servant.

I think it is profoundly meaningful that she does not say, God looked with favor on my sinless life. God looked with favor on her virtue.

God looked with favor on her social activism and level of engagement. God looked with favor on all of her achievements. It says here, God looked with favor on her lowliness.

[18 : 22] I believe this is the first and clearest sign that the upside-down revolution of Jesus has already begun. It began with the selection of Mary.

Right? We see it in the fact that God did not choose a morally excellent, sinless, successful, powerful, famous person to be the mother of Jesus. He chose someone lowly.

He chose an unmarried teenage girl from the margins of society. It is because Mary is so ordinary that this story is so extraordinary.

And it is because Mary is sinful that this is a story not about merit, but about grace. Though Jesus was still in the womb, she declares with confidence that he is already her Savior.

She is already a recipient of God's grace and mercy through Jesus. And this is what we see again and again and again.

[19 : 30] This is a society where if you were a clean person, you were terrified to come in contact with anything or anyone unclean because uncleanness was contagious. Uncleanness would make you unclean.

But Jesus turns everything upside down. Jesus goes and he embraces the unclean. He sits and eats and dines and befriends the unclean.

When he heals lepers, he doesn't do it from a distance. Speaking a word over a curtain, he touches them. And it's because Jesus turns everything upside down.

With Jesus, holiness is contagious. Cleanliness is contagious. Everyone and everything he comes in contact with is made clean and made holy, beginning with his own mother, beginning with Mary.

And because of all of this, Christmas continues to offer hope to the world. Verse 50, His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

[20 : 37] She's looking down the way. She's looking at us. The offer still stands. So for those of us who are here who might be considered successful or important or influential in the world's eyes, if you're there, chances are it's because God has put you there.

But there is a very real temptation in our culture to chase status and to chase recognition and to chase influence and to promote ourselves at every opportunity.

But if we want to experience and participate in the life of God, we have to let that go. If you want to participate in the life of God, know that God draws near to those who know they need him.

God draws near to the lowly. God draws near to those who humble themselves before him. And for those of us who may feel lowly this morning, if you feel overlooked, if you feel forgotten, if you feel unworthy, if you feel unseen, God's favor rests with you.

God draws near to people exactly like you. Mary's lowliness is not a disqualification. It's precisely the place where God enters in and does his best work.

[22 : 13] So our failures and our weaknesses and our character flaws are actually God's entry points into our lives. That's where he does his best work. So here's the message of the Magnificat.

God sees you. God loves you. And your worth is found in his regard, not in the worldly markers of status and success.

Let's pray. Our Lord, our Heavenly Father, these are great mysteries, and yet we know that while we can't understand everything or even close to everything about how this all took place, we know that it means that you love us dearly and that you have done the unimaginable to be near to us.

And we pray for hearts that would be receptive to that. I pray particularly for those who need to be challenged, need to be humbled, that we would experience that this Christmas.

I pray that those who feel alone, who feel forgotten, who feel that they are on the margins, we pray that this Christmas they would feel lifted up, that through your Holy Spirit they would feel your love and your closeness like no other time that they can remember.

[23 : 38] And we pray this in the power of your Holy Spirit, in the name of your Son, Jesus. Amen.