

Mary's Song

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[0 : 00] Music is a powerful thing. It can bring us to tears and it can also transport us back to various times in our life. Whenever I hear one by you two, I always think about our wedding day.

Music can bring us great joy and it can also bring us great irritation. And I think of the classic 1980s Agadou, shake pineapples, crave the tree and also Baby Shark, which came out a couple of years ago and drove most parents around the twist.

But music speaks to the innermost parts of our souls. The Christmas story is full of gifts and the Advent story begins with a gift of a song.

In the passage we've just read, we discover two women, Mary and Elizabeth, who chose to surrender their lives to do God's will and to do so with joy.

Now, for most of us, when we have to surrender, we're not very joyful about it because usually it involves us giving up something that we love or something that's really important to us.

[1 : 09] But when we know that what we're giving up and what we're surrendering to is actually part of God's will and his plan, then there will be joy. Because however much we love that thing or how important it was, it can never be as important as doing God's will.

This morning's reading was taken from the NIV version, the New International Version. But there is an older translation called the King James Version. And that starts off the passage saying this.

And blessed is she that believed, for there shall be a performance of those things which were told her from the Lord. I think the King James translators chose the word performance because they deeply understood that this song was going to be sung throughout the centuries as a worship song by all types of people because it's an expression of worship and of joy.

The NIV probably says it more accurately when it says, Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord will fulfil his promises to her. But I think there's something about performance that underlies Mary's song.

The scenes being set for the great joy of the long-awaited saviour being born. Now Mary and Elizabeth could not have been more different. It says in the Bible that Elizabeth was well on in years.

[2 : 35] Not very PC, I know. And that her and her husband couldn't have children and hadn't had any children. She was married to the priest Zechariah. They lived in a Judean hill community and had been settled in society for many years.

They were probably very respectable, very settled and maybe lived in some kind of retirement complex in Judea somewhere. On the other hand, Mary is a teenager and she's come from really humble origins and she doesn't have any status.

She's engaged, but just to a carpenter, a guy named Joseph. And then she finds herself pregnant with a baby that cannot be his. She was in such a precarious and dangerous position.

She could have been stoned to death for having a child out of wedlock. And these isolated and lonely women were not brought together by their commonalities or their differences.

But what joined them together was spirit birth joy. Can you imagine being in a community that is united by spirit-filled joy? Before they get together, Elizabeth and Mary are isolated and they're scared and fearful.

[3 : 53] They're entering places they never thought they would. But the shared experience of them both having an unexpected pregnancy and a first child to be born to both of them sees them spending three months in seclusion together.

And I wonder what they might have been doing. Maybe doing each other's hair and makeup or doing jigsaws or crosswords or sudoku. What they actually were doing, though, was worshipping God.

They studied the word of God in a house that had no male voice. Elizabeth's husband, Zechariah, had been struck mute by the angel Gabriel because when Gabriel told him that his wife Elizabeth was going to have a baby, he didn't believe him.

And so there's two women and a chap. I do feel a little bit sorry for him, to be honest, because I can imagine him sitting there wanting to scream at them. Let me say something. Let me interject and tell you what I think.

And I imagine him writing lots of notes and handing them to them. But Mary and Elizabeth sang and worshipped in joy. They were part of a beautiful performance.

[5 : 02] And Zechariah was listening to them. And he would get his moment to worship after his son, John the Baptist, was born. And as it says in verse 64, he broke into worship then.

And God wants us to have that sense of joy and worship too. God wants us to give us that gift. We are all part of God's beautiful plan. There are times of great joy and also of great sadness.

But whatever season we're in, if we have a close and an intimate relationship with him, then it helps our hearts sing. When we've been Christians for a long time, we might think, I just don't have it.

I used to have it, but I don't anymore. And that's why I find Psalm 51 so encouraging when David wrote, Restore to me, God, the joy of your salvation. There may be seasons when your heart sings a song of lament.

And I'm sure for many of us this year, a lot of us have been lamenting when we've seen what's been going on in this country and over the world with the coronavirus. And we've lost people maybe and we've seen so many people ill.

[6 : 07] But there will be also seasons when our hearts sing songs of worship. Our souls were made to worship. We are worshipful creatures and our souls were made for God's pleasure.

When our souls meet the understanding of who God is and how great his love for us is, that is where worship is produced. And Mary and Elizabeth really understood this.

Their joy was contagious. They knew the truth. For generations, their people had waited for a saviour. They are waiting for a messiah. Years and years.

And in these beautiful moments, an elderly woman and a teenager come to the realisation that God is faithful. God has answered those prayers.

God has sent a saviour. And not only that, both those women are playing starring roles in the performance. They're some of the main characters. Can you imagine that moment in that culture?

[7 : 11] That's all everybody's ever been talking about. There's a messiah coming. There's a messiah coming. Generations have been born and died and there is still a messiah coming. And then Mary realises, he is coming and he's coming through me.

I'm going to give birth to the saviour of the world. How could they not burst into worship? For those of you who know me, you will know that I wouldn't be able to contain myself.

I'd be running around everywhere screaming and shouting and telling everybody I knew. Years of waiting and years of questioning and years of doubt. It's actually here.

It's actually happening. And do you know what is so amazing about all of this? It's that we are a continuation of this story.

We now get to play our part in the performance. For some of you, you're like Elizabeth and maybe you've been waiting for such a long time. You may even have given up hope that God's going to use you and work through you.

[8 : 17] But Elizabeth's story is really clear. It's never too late with God. You might write yourself off, but God will never write you off. So maybe the thing that's stopping us from achieving what God wants to do through us is us.

His timing is always perfect. And I'm not standing here as a person that God it's all sorted and standing here completely comfortable with it. I know that this is his truth, but I do struggle with this on a daily basis.

It did take me about 45 years to work out what I wanted to do when I was big and what God wanted to do through me. But I really want to get to the point where I know deep in my heart that this is true for me.

Elizabeth played a pivotal role in her 80s in this story of the coming saviour. She was in her 80s and her son John prepared the way for Jesus. He was the opening act that was probably the most incredible act of this whole eternal story.

For some of you, you're like Mary. Your life has not gone the way that you thought it would. You had an expectation of the trajectory and the way your life would go.

[9 : 35] But for various life experiences, both good and bad, things have changed. But God is in it. The story of Mary is that God is with you.

There may be times when you feel really lonely, just like Mary did. You feel scared, like Mary did. And maybe you feel confused, like Mary did. But you are part of a plan.

You are playing the starring role in God's performance. The scene is set and the curtains are raised. And you've just got to make yourself available and walk on stage. And God will use you in a way that only he knows can bring you true joy and fulfilment.

So don't hide in the wings too long. Walk onto that stage. But it needs us to trust him. Both Mary and Elizabeth had to trust God. They were not passive in this story.

Waiting's not always passive. They actually chose to believe that God had got it all in hand. And that his ways were higher than their ways. And that his thoughts were greater than their thoughts.

[10 : 42] In this story, God performed not just one, but two birth miracles. And in response, Mary and Elizabeth collaborate and write a song together. Now, I don't know if it was Mary featuring Elizabeth or Elizabeth featuring Mary.

But in the midst of all the uncertainties, they didn't know what was going on. They join in worship to God. And they sing, My soul glorifies the Lord and my soul it rejoices, God my Saviour.

For the Mighty One has done great things for me. Holy is his name. There is joy in salvation. And going back to that psalm, Psalm 51, when King David wrote, after he had really messed up and sinned badly by sleeping with Bathsheba, he sang in prayer, Restore me to the joy of your salvation.

Notice he doesn't say my salvation. He says your salvation. David knew that there was nothing he could do to earn his salvation. It was a gift from God, just like joy is.

He desired joy to return to him as he acknowledged his failings. And for some of us here today, that may be at the heart of it. Maybe we're not experiencing that joy because we haven't turned away from the things that distract us and separate us from God.

[12 : 01] And the amazing thing was that just as David wrote that psalm, his joy was restored. Just as Zechariah's voice was restored when John the Baptist was born, so was King David.

They were separated by centuries, but they were connected by joy after failings. Now, I might be speaking this morning to a group of people that have never done anything wrong.

And for those of you that are perfect, you can stop listening right now. But for the rest of us here today, whatever our life circumstances are at the moment, whatever we're going through, there is joy.

There's real joy in knowing that we're saved. With all the darkness that's going on in the world right now, we may be scared. We may be really confused and we may feel a bit guilty.

But this morning, I'm here to tell you that whatever your circumstances are, if you love Jesus, you are saved. It may be that you're hearing this for the first time or that I'm reminding you for the hundredth time, but you are saved.

[13 : 11] Amen. Let's pray together. Lord, I ask that you come to each and every one of us here and that you would restore the joy of your salvation this Advent season, as we celebrate that you loved us so much that you sent us Jesus so that we did not need to die, but rather we would live forever with you as it was meant to be.

Thank you for the gift of life. And Lord, I ask that you open our lips so that our mouths can bring your praise, just like David. Amen.