

“Proclaim the Holy Birth!”

The Magnificat, Lukie 1: 46-55
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A pastor’s heart is always glad when asked, “How do we know Mary sang that song?” Someone has been reading their Bible! Yay!

There are two dominant points of view we learned our New Testament studies for answering that good question. Both answers think the song is based on an “Hannah’s Song” found in 1 Samuel 2: 1-10. Hannah sang her song of praise when God blessed her with a son after years of infertility. Her son, Samuel, became one of Israel’s great prophets and anointed David to be God’s chosen king.

Both points of view think Luke included Mary’s song for dramatic emphasis. One point of view is skeptical that such a sophisticated piece could be written by a young woman from a small town. They will argue that Luke most likely wrote it himself and inserted it here.

Bah humbug! Clearly such a person is too sophisticated to have seen *The Voice* last Mondayⁱ as sixteen-year-old Ruby Leigh from Foley, Missouri (population 98), open the competition with “Country Roads.”ⁱⁱⁱ Did you hear her version? It’s on-line several places if you missed it.ⁱⁱⁱ I thought she sang it better than John Denver and he wrote it. But Ruby Leigh grew up hearing “Country Roads” sung, probably before she drew her first breath. With her acapella “Country roads. . .” many viewers at home needed no subtitles to sing along, and the stage directors probably had to tell the live audience to lip sync silently. In fact, I bet right now that having read the words, “Country roads. . .” you are humming the rest of the song, “. . . take me home. . .”

I believe Mary sang her version of “Hannah’s Song”, because she learned it the same way Ruby Leigh learned “Country Roads.” Mary probably learned “Hannah’s Song” when she was a small girl and then sang after the angel told her she was pregnant until it became her own. As Mary sang her version, others joined her. Music scholars call this way of learning and evolving a song “the folk music process.”^{iv}

As Luke wrote his carefully researched account of Jesus time among humans, how could he dare to leave Mary’s song out?

How does anyone remember a song? You sing it! The human voice is our oldest instrument and we have written records of our songs from Adam and Eve leaving Eden. (see Genesis 3) When Eve praised God for her first child's birth, (Genesis 4) we suspect she sang her praise as the first lullaby. It's something humans do with babies; we sing to them, always songs we have no need to read either the words or the notes. Just like parents sing lullabies, English speaking Christians sing "Amazing grace . . ." Did you finish the line? How did you learn ". . . how sweet the sound?" Probably by singing it without a hymnal in your hand.

Mary's song has a Latin name, "Magnificat!" Her song is one of many that make the Bible a musical of salvation, a story that is better sung aloud than read silently. Before the shepherds arrived at the manger in Bethlehem, Luke reported three songs of praise were sung: Mary's "Magnificat!", Zechariah's song (Luke 1:68-79), and the angel choir's "Gloria!" (Luke 2:14) We still sing the angels' song; you may even hear it in background music on holiday commercials that overlook Christ.

Recently, several of us read United Methodist bishop (retired) Will Willimon's *Heaven and Earth*^{vi} and watched the videos series that went with it.^{vii} One of his best lines in the video was "Luke writes a musical in a maternity ward."^{vii}

The New Testament is full of quoted praise song lyrics the early church sang. You can't escape them. Their lyrics float into literally every work from Matthew to Revelation. Jesus even recited psalm lyrics as he died on his cross.

Bishop Willimon believes we sing praise because "Christ came to the world as it is and refuses to leave it as it was."^{viii} What a fine echo of Mary who sang, "His mercy is great for those who fear him from generation to generation. . . . He has . . . lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things . . . in remembrance of his mercy according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and his descendants forever." (Luke 1:50-55, New Revised Standard Version)

I love how Bishop Willimon broke a grammar rule taught to fourth graders. In any sentence all the verbs are supposed to agree in tense, that is they are all supposed to be actions either done in the past, done in the present, or done in the future. Writers short hand this rule by identifying verbs as past tense, present tense, and future tense. But often both faith and good theology require the use of all three tenses in a single sentence such as "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again"^{ix} from our communion liturgy. Willimon's reason for us to sing is past, "Christ came to the world. . .," present, "as it is . . .," and future, "refuses to leave . . ."

If you know the truth of how Christ came to you as you are and refuses to leave your struggle, then you too have cause to sing a song of praise. This month, a Christmas carol you learned to sing as a child is a fabulous choice. No matter our sadness today and its logical cause—for me it is a mix of grief and Scandinavians' common seasonal depression—singing our faith is our best way to pray.

So friends, when the nights are long and the struggle hard, may I suggest this lullaby as a starting point, “O Little Town of Bethlehem.”

O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie;
above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by.
Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light;
the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.

For Christ is born of Mary, and gathered all above,
while mortals sleep, the angels keep their watch of wondering love.
O morning stars together, proclaim thy holy birth,
and praises sing to God the King, and peace to all on earth.

How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given;
so God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven.
No ear may hear his coming, but in this word of sin,
where meek souls will receive him, still the dear Christ enters in.

O holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray;
cast out our sin, and enter in, be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell;
O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel.^x

ⁱ *The Voice*, NBC, recorded live on 12.11.2023.

ⁱⁱ Bill Danoff, Taffy Nivert and John Denver. Released as a single recording by John Denver on 4.21.1971. Google top answer on 2023.12.14.

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SXyNvv3vLWM>. Accessed on 2023.12.14

^{iv} I learned this term from Pete Seeger, in concert and on PBS. Academically Seeger is credited for naming this from his research at the intersection of sociology and music when he was a student at Harvard. If you want to know more, here is a great article: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/03007769108591422>. Accessed on 2023.12.15.

^v Abingdon, Nashville, 2023.

^{vi} *Heaven and Earth*, session 4, Amplify Media, 2023.

^{vii} Same as last endnote.

^{viii} *Heaven and Earth*, p. 119 Kindle edition.

^{ix} P. 10, *The United Methodist Hymnal*, The United Methodist Publishing House, Nashville, 1989.

^x Philip Brooks, CA. 1868. #230, *The United Methodist Hymnal*