

Still Climbing the Charts

Luke 1: 46b-55

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By

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To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

What does it take to write a successful song? Where does the inspiration come from? The music business is rapidly changing these days due to technology. Who owns records anymore? Or 8-track tapes, or cassette tapes, or even CD's anymore? Now it's all about streaming music. Perhaps you saw this week that both Stevie Nicks of Fleetwood Mac, and Bob Dylan, sold the rights to their music catalogues for ridiculous amounts of money. Over 600 songs of Bob Dylan's sold for an estimated \$300 million. Apparently, writing the right song can set you up for life, and not only you but generations to come. What's the magic recipe? There are thousands trying to find the secret sauce.

The home we recently purchased in Nashville was previously lived in by a singer/song writer. He told us the story of arriving in Nashville, sponsored in part by Linda Ronstadt, for a recording session at Warner Music. It went badly, unfortunately. Warner told him he would have to get better if he wanted to make it in the music business. As disappointing and hard as it was to hear, he took the lesson to heart. It motivated him to dig deeper. He subsequently made a living writing songs in Nashville for twenty years — but not for Warner Music. The amazing thing was that he told us that story seated across from the guy who turned him down at Warner, the same guy who was his neighbor for the past five years, and now is ours. They are friends able to laugh about their experiences in the music business.

Whatever the special recipe is for writing a song, Mary had it. She may be a “one hit wonder” but that one hit is still climbing the charts. The worship team laughed this week when planning this worship service, realizing that Mary's song, *Magnificat*, will be sung twice during the service, in different settings. Pretty remarkable after 2,000 years.

John the Baptist has been the messenger of the news of the coming of the Messiah during Advent — until now. It is Mary who now becomes the messenger — this young woman who

breaks into song, “My soul magnifies the Lord. And my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.” She is so sure of it that she begins singing about it ahead of time, not in the future tense but in the past, as if the promise had already come true. Biblical characters (and song writers) always get their verb tenses mixed up. They see the world as God sees it, not divided into things that are already over and things that have not happened yet. They see this eternally unfolding mystery that surprises everyone.

Luke’s Gospel tells the story of Christmas from Mary’s viewpoint. In a time when women were often unnamed in the story (like “the woman at the well” for example), Luke was interested in a woman’s perspective. In Matthew’s Gospel, Mary is mute. In Mark, the birth narratives don’t appear at all. Throughout the New Testament, Mary (when she is acknowledged by name) doesn’t have much to say. The Apostle Paul simply writes that Jesus was “born of a woman.”¹ But Luke’s Mary not only has something to say, she has something to sing about! Known as the Magnificat, Mary’s song has been set to music by the world’s greatest composers throughout the centuries. Mary, who was of “low estate” (a euphemism for being poor), sings not only a solo aria about her own destiny, but also sings a freedom song for all those who experience oppression, especially of poverty. She sings for all who, despite their circumstances, still believe that God will make a way where there is no way. Her cousin, Elizabeth, declared Mary’s faith when she said, “Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”²

Mary didn’t have any more certainty than we do about how things are going to turn out. In fact, she probably had more reason to worry because she had fewer options and everything was at risk; her relations with her own family, her engagement to Joseph, her standing in the community, her economic future, even her life – stoning in such circumstances was not out of the realm of possibilities. Mary’s life was on the brink of disaster. Everything was at stake and nothing was certain, and yet Mary sings. With all her questions she goes along with the Word she receives and sees herself as a servant of the Lord, ready to fulfill her role in God’s saving story. And it all seems to be happening inside of Mary before it happens anywhere else.

1 Galatians 4:4

2 Luke 1:45

Mary knew that God was present because he was stirring within her – and the future was bright because God was present! That's all she really needed to know.

One day at an elementary school, all the dads were invited to come to class with their children. Reality however intervened and only a few fathers found the time to come. The teacher went around the room and asked each child what his or her father did for a living. The first child got up and said, "My father is a lawyer." And the second said, "My father owns a business." And the third child said, "My father is a doctor." And so it went around the classroom, until it came to a boy whose father was not very prominent professionally, or in business. And so the boy stood up and looked at his father, not quite knowing what to say, and then he brightened and smiled and said, "My father is here!" Those simple words, "My father is here," and whole worlds of social standing and pressure simply evaporated.

Mary, in the Christmas story says, "My God is here! I am blessed, and the world holds no power over me anymore." That means everything. And when you know that your God is here, you can allow life to be ordered by reality, by things as they really are. Not everything will work out well or just as we want, but we can stop trying to satisfy ourselves and become part of a much larger, grander, cosmic, historic plan to right what is wrong in life — to redeem what is broken and to repair what is shattered. To know that God is here, and loves you – *that* is what leads to a song in your heart. Do you know any loved-starved person who is satisfied? I don't! In fact, I've never met one.

We simply need to learn this lesson: Since God is with us, life will definitely have some surprises. What if, as we go about our chores and preparations, God is trying to get our attention, to give us a gift? What if we suddenly discover a new challenge to be met? What if we are confronted with some human need that we didn't expect to encounter? What if our plans are interrupted and our complacency disturbed by what is happening in the news on the other side of the county, country, or the world? Ever notice how the gifts God gives always require something from us, as it did from Mary?

Are there any big changes going on within you this morning? Is something underway in your life that has no predictable ending, and your stomach is turning with your own version of morning sickness? Maybe the Holy Spirit has come upon you. Who knows? Maybe you will want to follow Mary's lead and begin singing ahead of time. As they say, the one who sings prays twice.

Every once in a while, our vision of the world deepens and brightens, and we get a sense that our lives are not just happening to us but are trying to tell us something of remarkable importance. Something new and shattering is breaking through, something is trying to be born in us and through us, and if the new thing is going to make it then the old thing is going to have to give way, and there is often agony in the process as well as joy.

When Mary wrote her song it was a year when everything cost more. There was a soaring national debt, and religious and racial tensions remained explosive and unresolved. It was in that year, as the emperor called for a census and for higher taxes, that Mary began to sing.

And it was also in that year that the heavens split wide open and people heard music they had never heard before and God spoke in ways they had never heard before. And Mary wondered, How it would all end — in glory or in heartbreak? When you know that you matter to God, that God listens to you, that God thinks about you, that God treasures you . . . then you feel deeply loved, and profoundly and deeply full. Inner satisfaction comes from knowing God treasures you. And instead of anxiety about the future, and worry about the present, you find a song in your heart, like Mary.

One Sunday during Advent, an Episcopal preacher went into the chancel of a cathedral and spoke the traditional words from the Prayer Book, "The Lord be with you." Sometimes I use that expression to sign off on letters or emails. If you've grown up in that tradition, you know that the response is either, "And also with you" or "And also with your spirit." But this was a large cathedral and the priest had to depend upon the public address system to amplify his voice so he could be heard. The congregation couldn't hear his opening remarks because two little wires in his microphone were disconnected. Catching the eye of his assistant, the preacher shook the microphone and as he did, the two little wires made contact. What he said to his assistant now

came loudly across the sound system throughout the sanctuary. "There's something wrong with this damn microphone!" he shouted. And the people came back with the traditional response, "And also with your spirit!"

This Christmas, in the midst of your preparations, maybe it's time to listen to what is wrong with your spirit, and then to listen again to the story of God's coming to our world and living in Jesus Christ. But this time, listen as if you have never heard the story before, which may be closer to the truth than we think. Mary will show you the way to respond to God's in-breaking with a song in your heart and new life stirring within.

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God, my savior." That's a thrill of hope for a weary world. Amen

