

## "The Mary of the Song"

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*"My soul magnifies the Lord, <sup>47</sup>and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, <sup>48</sup>for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; <sup>49</sup>for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.*

*<sup>50</sup> His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. <sup>51</sup>He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.*

*<sup>52</sup>He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; <sup>53</sup>he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.*

*<sup>54</sup>He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, <sup>55</sup>according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever." (Luke 1:46b-55)*

Over the centuries, this powerful soliloquy from Mary has come to be known as "Mary's Song." I did some checking, and I was not able to readily determine how and why tradition has called this passage a "song," except for the fact that the language does have meter and rhythm and the words do take on the flavor of a melodic refrain. It does seem as if Mary, when her cousin Elizabeth greets her with the ecstatic exclamation, "*Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb,*"<sup>1</sup> kind of bursts forth with an aria of praise. So, it seems right to call it a song.

Given that the story of Christ's birth begins with this powerful and glorious Song of Mary, it seems odd that Mary would be so strikingly absent from the songs we sing about Christmas. Back in 2008, Michael Linton, a music professor at Middle Tennessee State University, did a survey of 381 English-language Christmas carols, and he concluded that Mary is only mentioned in 27 percent of them. She came in behind the angels and the shepherds, but to her credit she did beat out the wise men, who were only referenced in 13 percent of the songs.<sup>2</sup>

But that only measures how many times Mary is mentioned, and it even includes words other than her name – words like "virgin," "mother," or even "woman." Try to search your memory -- see if you can think of a carol or hymn in which Mary actually speaks. In the song "Do you Hear What I Hear?" everybody seems to speak: the night wind, the little lamb, the shepherd boy, and the mighty king. They all speak, but we hear no words from the one who speaks so powerfully in Luke 1 – the one who actually spoke with a heavenly messenger, the who would have the most to say and would be most deserving of a voice. Mary is not given even a reference, let alone a speaking role.

And how about the Little Drummer Boy strolling up to ask Jesus, "Shall I play for you?" Now, you tell me – how would a woman whose husband-to-be thinks she has been cheating on him, who has been riding a donkey over the rocky hills of Palestine for days, who has just delivered a baby in a barn, and who has just gotten her baby to sleep *finally*... how would she react to a strange little kid who wants to beat on a drum in front of her baby? Don't you think she might have *something* to say about that? But in that song Mary just "nodded... *pa rum pum pum pum.*"

The story of Christ's birth begins with this amazing and prophetic Song of Mary, yet the songs we sing never give her a voice. It is evidence of how a large swath of the Christian church has used

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 1:42.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Linton, "Looking for Mary in Christmas Carols," in <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2008/06/looking-for-mary-in-christmas>, June 18, 2008.



Mary over the years. And I say “used” on purpose. True, Catholic and Orthodox traditions venerate Mary as the greatest of the saints, an intercessor between humanity and God. Even so, Mary seems to be relegated into certain roles that are largely silent, even ornamental. The traditional Greek title *Theotokos*, which means “God-bearer” is reverent, but it also seems to suggest that Mary’s primary value was to be simply a vessel for a birth. The same is true of the Latin term *hortus conclusus*, translated literally as “enclosed garden.” It became popular in the early church as a way to highlight the doctrine of the immaculate conception. Mary was compared to a beautiful garden, but one that was impervious and sealed off from the rest of the world.

Even today, Mary often becomes a silent, passive pawn in all kinds of cultural chess games. People argue about whether the song “Mary, Did You Know?” is a commentary on the mystery of the incarnation or an example of some modern guy trying to mansplain the birth of Christ to the woman who actually gave birth. Modern politicians use her refugee status in attempts to score points in immigration debates.

It all serves to distance Mary as a person, even Mary as a concept, from our own experience in the here and now. The author D.L. Mayfield, a free-lance writer who focuses primarily on subjects of faith, recalls a time when, at the age of 15, she was roped into playing Mary in her church’s Christmas pageant. “I was embarrassed,” she writes, “stuffing a pillow under a robe to signify pregnancy, but I felt I had no choice: I was the pastor’s daughter, and there was no one else who could play the role. My cheeks burning in shame, I remember feeling little connection to Mary, the mother of God. I was silent in the play. Mary, in our tradition, was a vehicle for Jesus: a holy womb, a good and compliant and obedient girl.”<sup>3</sup>

That is the Mary we tend to sing about today. But what about the original Song of Mary? The evangelist Luke has no interest in silencing the real Mary. In fact, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor and theologian who dared to preach against the Nazi regime – who gave up a coveted place of safety just down the road at Union Theological Seminary in New York to return to Germany and lead a revolution from within, and who was gruesomely executed by the Nazis as a result, called this Song of Mary that we read this morning

*“the most passionate, the wildest, one might even say the most revolutionary hymn ever sung. This is not the gentle, tender, dreamy Mary whom we sometimes see in paintings; this is the passionate, surrendered, proud, enthusiastic Mary... This song has none of the sweet, nostalgic, or even playful tones of some of our Christmas carols. It is instead a hard, strong, inexorable song about collapsing thrones and humbled lords of this world, about the power of God and the powerlessness of humankind. These are the tones of the women prophets of the Old Testament that now come to life in Mary’s mouth.”*<sup>4</sup>

This is why the Song of Mary has become a such a well-known and beloved text to oppressed, victimized, and marginalized communities around the globe. In Mary’s words, they hear God’s promise that help is coming. With Mary’s voice, they call for revolutionary change. Resting on Mary’s hopes, they look forward to the day when the lowly will be raised up, and tyrants brought down.

In his book *Unexpected News: Reading the Bible with Third World Eyes*, biblical scholar Robert McAfee Brown shares the story of one South American country where persecution of the church

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<sup>3</sup> D. L. Mayfield, “Mary’s ‘Magnificat’ in the Bible is revolutionary. Some evangelicals silence her,” <https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2018/12/20/marys-magnificat-bible-is-revolutionary-so-evangelicals-silence-it/>, December 20, 2018, accessed December 9, 2022.

<sup>4</sup> [http://cdn.bakerpublishinggroup.com/processed/esource-assets/files/1780/original/8.40.Luke\\_1.46-55\\_\\_The\\_World%27s\\_First\\_Advent\\_Hymn.pdf?1524151427](http://cdn.bakerpublishinggroup.com/processed/esource-assets/files/1780/original/8.40.Luke_1.46-55__The_World%27s_First_Advent_Hymn.pdf?1524151427)

had been on the rise. Despite the pressure, a group of dedicated priests, at great risk to their own personal safety, had “cast their lot” with the poor who were living in the slum of the country’s largest city. On Sunday afternoons, they would host sessions when residents could share the details of what they were suffering, and the priests would try to interpret those experiences through the lens of biblical teaching and wisdom. The author shared details of one such gathering on September 12, 1976, as residents of the slum were remembering the assassination of Salvador Allende, a physician who had been become President of the neighboring nation of Chile and had been a bold champion of the working class.<sup>5</sup>

“Allende’s death makes me think of the death of Martin Luther King,” one worker said.

“Why do you think of the deaths of those two together?” the priest asked.

“Because both of them were concerned about oppressed peoples.”

“Doesn’t the day mean anything but death to you?” the priest responded.

“Well, today is also the Feast of the Holy Name of Mary,” another person said. “So, this day also makes me think of her.”

That prompted the priest to ask, “Is there any connection between Allende and Martin Luther King and Mary?”

“I guess that would depend on whether Mary was concerned about oppressed peoples too,” the man answered.

The priest then read aloud the scripture we have read aloud today. He gave special emphasis to Luke’s language, “God has scattered the proud in the imaginations of their hearts, put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree... has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.”

“Bravo!” one hearer exclaimed. “But Father, that doesn’t sound at all like the Mary we hear about in the cathedral. And the Mary in the holy pictures certainly doesn’t look like a person who would talk that way.”

The image in their minds was much like the one printed on your bulletin this morning – a picture of a calm, regal, but distant mother of Christ. That image on your bulletin may help you understand what happened next.

“Tell us about the Mary in the holy pictures,” said the priest.

“Here she is,” one worker said as he showed a small printed icon to the group. “She is standing on a crescent moon. She is wearing a crown. She has rings on her fingers. She has a blue robe embroidered with gold.”

“That does sound like a different Mary from the Mary of the song!” the priest exclaimed. “Do you think the picture has betrayed the Mary of the song?”

“The Mary who said that God ‘has exalted those of low degree’ would not have left all of her friends so she could stand on the moon,” one woman said.

At that, the entire crowd shouted in one voice, “Take her off the moon!”

“The Mary who said that God ‘has put down the mighty from their thrones’ would not be wearing a crown,” another said.

“Take off her crown!” yelled the crowd.

“The Mary who said that God ‘has sent the rich away empty’ would not be wearing rings on her fingers,” said another.

The gleeful response came from the crowd, “Take off her rings!”

“The Mary who said that God has ‘filled the hungry with good things’ would not have left people who were still hungry to wear a silk robe embroidered with gold.”

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<sup>5</sup> This story is found in Robert McAfee Brown, *Unexpected News: Reading the Bible with Third World Eyes* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1984), pp. 85-88.

“Take off her robe!”

At that, some of the people in the crowd began to hesitate. One blushing person humbly said, “But Father, this is not right! It’s like we are doing a striptease of the Virgin.”

The priest pivoted masterfully. “Very well. If you don’t like the way Mary looks in this picture, what do you think the Mary of the song would look like?”

“The Mary of the song would not be standing on the moon,” one person replied. “she would be standing in the dirt and dust where we stand.”

A second person chimed in. “The Mary of the song would not be wearing a crown. She would have on an old hat like the rest of us, to keep the sun from causing her to faint.”

“The Mary of the song would not be wearing jeweled rings on her fingers,” another said. “She would have rough hands like ours.”

“The Mary of the song would not be wearing a silk robe embroidered with gold. She would be wearing old clothes like the rest of us.”

After a time, one woman broke the silence with an embarrassed thought. “Father, it may be awful to say this, but it sounds like Mary would look just like me! My feet are dirty, my hat is old, my hands are rough, and my clothes are torn.”

“I don’t think it is awful to say that,” the priest replied. “I think the Mary you have all described is more like the Mary of the Bible than the Mary we hear about in the cathedral and see in all the holy pictures.”

“I think she’d be more at home here in the slum with us than in the cathedral or the General’s mansion,” someone else said. “I think her message is more hopeful for us than for them. They are mighty and rich, but she tells them that God puts down the mighty from their thrones and sends the rich away empty.”

“And we are at the bottom of the heap and very hungry,” the man next to him added, “but she tells us that God exalts those of low degree and fills the hungry with good things.”

At that, the priest stood up. “Now,” he said, “let’s see... how could we begin to help God bring those things to pass?”

As we draw closer to the manger... as we sing the familiar songs and do the familiar things... may we listen a bit more closely in the hope that we might actually hear -- in all the hustle and bustle and noise of the season -- the Mary of the Song.

May we remember, every time her name is sung or even whispered, that Mary the mother of Jesus was no shrinking wallflower. She was more than a womb... more than a walled garden... more than a silent ornament at the back of the creche. The Mary of the Song was a bold prophet who was raised up out of obscurity and anonymity to bring good tidings of spiritual, political, and economic revolution to those who were struggling under the weight of poverty, war, hunger, and want. She was a model of true faith, an example of discipleship and commitment that follows God’s lead even when the path seems costly and dangerous. And her powerful words continue to bring hope to places where might is prevailing over right, places where injustice continues to hold people back, places where people who walk in darkness are dying to see just a little light.

And the Mary of the Song is whispering to us in the quiet places of this season, urging us to ask ourselves, “How can I begin to help God bring those things to pass?” **Amen.**