

How Can I Keep From Singing?

^{NRS} **Isaiah 58:6-7** Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? ⁷ Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? **Isaiah 61:1-2** The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; ² to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn;

^{NRS} **Luke 1:46-53** And Mary¹ said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, ⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, ⁴⁸ for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; ⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. ⁵⁰ His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. ⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. ⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; ⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

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Verse 1

My life flows on in endless song; above earth's lamentations,
I hear the sweet, though far off hymn that hails a new creation.
Through all the tumult and the strife, I hear the music ringing.
It finds an echo in my soul. How can I keep from singing?

In 2006, a young woman named Kyle Paxman was planning the wedding of her dreams. One hundred eighty guests were coming from all over the country to a resort on Lake Champlain in Vermont. An elegant reception was planned. It was going to be a very, very posh wedding followed by a honeymoon in Tahiti. Just six weeks before the wedding Kyle learned that her fiancé was having an affair with another woman. Kyle cancelled the wedding and all of the various arrangements that she could, but there was no way to cancel the expense of the reception, which included a four course dinner for 125.

Kyle was, to say the least, resilient. She invited 125 women to the reception dinner. Instead of bringing wedding gifts, they wrote checks to two charities, one benefiting children in Vermont, and one relieving suffering internationally. Then Kyle and her mother went to Tahiti.

We also find resilient women in the Bible. Today's text recounts how Mary, after learning that she was pregnant, went to see her cousin Elizabeth. There, Mary burst into song, singing, ^{NRS} **Luke 1:46-53** "My soul magnifies the Lord, ⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, ⁴⁸ for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; ⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. ⁵⁰ His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. ⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. ⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; ⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty."

In the midst of what had to be an emotional disaster for Kyle, her guests left with their checking accounts a bit emptier, but at the same time their hearts were full because many who were hungry could be filled with good things. Like Mary, Kyle was faced with a radical change in plans. But she turned from her own hurt to the poor, the hungry, to a hurting world. She turned disappointment into a celebration of generosity. This not-quite-a-bride was a woman who could not keep from singing.

Verse 2

What though my joys and comforts die? My Savior still is living.
What though the shadows gather round? A new son Christ is giving.

No storm can shake my in-most calm, while to that Rock I'm clinging.
 Since Love commands both heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing?

The name of this beautiful hymn is *My Life Flows on in Endless Song*. It was popular in the 1800s. Sometimes new verses are written for popular hymns. The first four verses of *Amazing Grace* were written by John Newton, a slave trader who changed his life and became an Anglican priest. We don't know who wrote the fifth verse of *Amazing Grace* years later. The words to the hymn "My Life Flows on in Endless Song" have been attributed to various poets. We know that the hymn was sung by Quakers, and that may be the source of the hymn. In the 1950s a new verse was written by Doris Plenn and inserted as the third verse. The third verse caught the attention of artists outside the world of church music and the song was recorded by Pete Seeger, Bruce Springsteen, and Enya, among others. Doris Plenn wrote the third verse during the McCarthy era when people lost jobs, friends deserted them, and people lost their freedom for being accused of being communists or communist sympathizers. Only a few people stood up in protest to the smear campaign of Joe McCarthy, and one of them was Doris Plenn. She had been raised in North Carolina and had learned this hymn from her Quaker grandmother. Her grandmother said that the hymn had been written long ago when Quakers were being thrown in jail for their beliefs. And so, Doris Plenn wrote this third verse about persecution – because she couldn't keep from singing.

Verse 3

When tyrants tremble, sick with fear, and hear their death knells ringing;
 When friends rejoice both far and near, how can I keep from singing?
 In prison cell and dungeon vile our thoughts to them are winging.
 When friends by shame are undefiled, how can I keep from singing?

We read the Bible through sanitized lenses because we know the ending of the story, even as we begin to read at the beginning. That can handicap us from understanding the intense drama and turmoil of what we tend to read as a pleasant nativity story. We know how it plays out. But Mary was blindsided by events. She was living in the beginning without the benefit of knowing the Easter morning outcome. Mary was a peasant girl in Nazareth. She had very little except her good name and the security of an impending marriage. Sure, he was just a carpenter. That meant that he didn't own any land, but still, he was probably the best that her father could arrange for her - and he was a good man. Then an angel appeared to her and ruined what little bit of security there was in her life. We're told that Mary was troubled by the appearance of the angel, who responds by telling her not to be afraid. Then the angel told her that she would conceive a son by the action of the Holy Spirit. Fear not? Don't be afraid? Look at her choices! Say nothing. A swelling belly would soon tell the story. She could be stoned to death for this! Okay. What other options are there? Tell Mom and Dad, "I'm pregnant, but it's okay. God did it." Just maybe, just maybe, she might be lucky enough that they decide that she's insane. It's for sure that they won't say, "That's nice dear. I think that happens every now and then. Why, just a few years ago I heard about a young woman over in Capernaum who had the same experience. No, at best they'll think she's insane. More likely, in claiming that God did it, her story will be heard as blasphemy on her part, and the punishment for that is stoning to death. The same options exist if she tells Joseph. He'll think she's gone crazy, or she's lying, or being blasphemous. None the less, she told Joseph. Joseph may have been angry. He may have been heartbroken. The male ego is both a fragile and dangerous thing. We don't know, but we do know that he was compassionate. Joseph was a good man. Rather than expose Mary to public disgrace, much less stoning, he decided to put her away quietly. Later, an angel's visit changed his mind and he decided to marry her.

Mary left and went to visit her kinswoman, Elizabeth. It was a long journey of about fifty miles on foot. Her mind must have been in turmoil. "I saw an angel. It was a scary experience. Was it just a dream, a delusion, a nightmare? It doesn't make any sense. I'm nobody. I'm poor. I'm uneducated. My family is poor. My fiancé is poor. We only have a meager future. We're nobodies -- living nowhere that anybody ever heard of. Joseph was so much kinder than I dared to hope when I told him I was pregnant. He wasn't going to shame and condemn me publicly. Then he said he had a visit by an angel. I wonder if he has any

doubts about **his** vision? A year from now, will he wonder if it was all a dream? And when the baby is born, there's not a person in our little village that can't count to nine. Tongues will wag -- and both Joseph and I will be talked about. It's all so complicated!! Is this what it's supposed to feel like if you're favored by God? And yet, and **yet** -- I'm pregnant and I have no other explanation!"

When Mary reached Elizabeth's house, she was greeted warmly and enthusiastically by her, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb."⁴³ And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?⁴⁵ And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." (Luke 1:42-43, 45 NRS) Elizabeth was kin but lived far away down near Jerusalem. As we would put it these days, Elizabeth had "no skin in the game." Yet, here she was, in the first words of greeting, confirming, congratulating, and honoring this unmarried, pregnant, teenage girl. Perhaps it was only then, that Mary's fears completely receded and her doubts were totally calmed.

Mary cannot keep from singing! She bursts out in song. "My soul magnifies the Lord,⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,⁴⁸ for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant." Mary knows that she is still a poor peasant girl, but she praises God for the favor shown her. "Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.⁵⁰ His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation." She declares her trust in God. God is steadfast in love and mercy, generation after generation.⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm; he has **scattered** the **proud** in the thoughts of their hearts.⁵² He has **brought down** the **powerful** from their thrones, and **lifted up** the **lowly**;⁵³ he has **filled** the **hungry** with good things, and sent the **rich** away **empty**." God is turning the world upside down. Mary is confident. She is defiant. She has put her trust in God. She knows that her situation runs counter to all expectations, to all propriety. Her parents may never approve. Her best friends may shun her. The whole village may barely tolerate her, but she trusts that God loves her, and she must follow the path that God calls her to walk.

Verse 4

I lift my eyes, the cloud grows thin; I see the blue above it.
And day by day, this pathway smoothes, since first I learned to love it.
The peace of Christ makes fresh my heart, a fountain ever springing.
All things are mine, since I am Christ's – how can I keep from singing?

Amen!!

Use of hymn and story of Kyle Paxman from "How Can I Keep From Singing?" by Lillian Daniel, Journal for Preachers Vol. XXXII, Number 1, Advent 2008, page 17 ff

Various thoughts inspired by Mike Slaughter, *Christmas Is Not Your Birthday* (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 2011)

Sisters and brothers,
Walk with Mary as she trods the path to see Elizabeth.
Ponder how you are called to walk a path that will
not always meet with approval and admiration, but is
the life that God calls us to lead as we follow Christ.