

### *Disturbing Music*

**Luke 1:46-55 CEB** Mary said, "With all my heart I glorify the Lord! <sup>47</sup> In the depths of who I am I rejoice in God my savior. <sup>48</sup> He has looked with favor on the low status of his servant. Look! From now on, everyone will consider me highly favored <sup>49</sup> because the mighty one has done great things for me. Holy is his name. <sup>50</sup> He shows mercy to everyone, from one generation to the next, who honors him as God. <sup>51</sup> He has shown strength with his arm. He has scattered those with arrogant thoughts and proud inclinations. <sup>52</sup> He has pulled the powerful down 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-handed. <sup>54</sup> He has come to the aid of his servant Israel, remembering his mercy, <sup>55</sup> just as he promised to our ancestors, to Abraham and to Abraham's descendants forever."

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In the stories of the Old Testament, we repeatedly hear about women who can't seem to become pregnant and about the children that they eventually have. Over and over again, God overcomes their barrenness so that they conceive and have children. And the child always has an important part to play in the story of the people of God. In her old age, Sarah finally became pregnant and had Isaac, and the family line continued. As a matter of fact, for three generations in a row, God made it possible for the family to survive despite wives who were unable to have children. Rebekah was barren until God intervened, and then she had Jacob. Rachel was unable to become pregnant - until God heard her pleas and she gave birth to Joseph.

This isn't just a repeated theme for the first three generations of the patriarchs. During the days of the judges, the Philistines dominated the Hebrew people. A woman who had been unable to have children was visited by an angel and told that she would have a son. Indeed she did. His name was Samson, and he broke the domination of the Philistines over Israel. Years later, Hannah was unable to have children, until God answered her prayers as she prayed at the altar at Shiloh. Then she gave birth to Samuel, the important prophet who anointed the first two kings of Israel,

Over and over the story is repeated. A woman who can't have children. God intervenes. Her child is important in the history of God's people. Now, Luke tells us of two more women. One is Elizabeth, who had no children and she was getting on in years. An angel appeared to her husband and told him that they'd have a son. When he was born, they named him John. We know him as John the Baptist. Luke tells us of a second woman, a young woman named Mary. She, too, was unable to have a child - because she's a virgin. And God intervened once more. These two women were kin to each other. Two pregnant women on the margins, one young, poor and unwed, the other far beyond the age to be able to conceive, met in the hill country of Judea and celebrated their miraculous pregnancies.

It's a visit filled with joy and praise. Luke tells us that Mary burst into song! It's a song that we have come to refer to as the Magnificat. Mary has transformed from a frightened unwed mother, a teenager with a problem that could shame her for life. She's changed into a confident young woman who praises God for blessing her. She stands in the tradition of women who were blessed by God with a pregnancy that'll produce an important person in the history of Israel. Mary celebrates that God has blessed her with such an honor!

It's an odd song in some ways, however. It doesn't celebrate the glories of the nation. How can it, since they're occupied by the Roman army, who rules with an iron fist. Her song isn't like the praise songs of today, limited to repeatedly proclaiming how great God is. No, it's a hard-hitting proclamation about a God who overturns the commonly expected order of things. And Mary says that this is the beginning of a great story, a great reversal in which the lowly are made high, and the high are brought down, the hungry are filled while the rich are sent away hungry, the last become first and the least become the greatest.

In the women's actions, the world is turned upside down. These two marginalized pregnant women carry the future in their bellies, and they proclaim the Messiah's eminent arrival. This young, unwed,

pregnant woman, Mary, a woman completely on the edge of her culture, prophetically proclaims one of the most important sermons in Scripture. She sings about the promised topsy-turvy future of God as an already accomplished fact. Perhaps she does that because the future can already be seen in God's choice of Mary as the bearer of the Messiah. God hasn't chosen some important woman to give birth to the Messiah. No, the woman chosen is a peasant from a tiny village in the fringes of Palestine. She's a nobody from nowhere.

But Mary sings about more than her own rise to importance. She sings about how those who are arrogant and proud will be unsuccessful. Powerful people will be dethroned and those humble folks at the bottom of the social ladder will be lifted up. Those who are in great want will find their needs filled with good things, and the rich will be sent away with nothing. Is this good news? Is this something to celebrate? Or, is it an angry and sour prophecy? Is it a call to rebellion by those who are down trodden, those who are oppressed, the poor, the hungry, the people living a miserable existence at the bottom of the social heap? Is it a proclamation that there's special place in God's heart for those who suffer in some way?

The early church saw the Magnificat as an expression of the kind of salvation God brought through Jesus. This kind of salvation was one that the great and famous people of Earth wouldn't welcome. It was a challenge to the selfish powers of this earth and it elevated people of low position and place. Over and over we're told about how Jesus fed the hungry, healed the sick, and had compassion for those who were hurting. His compassion was exhibited not just with kind words, but with kind deeds. He lifted up the lowly. On the other hand, he had little praise for those who held high position and had full wallets. When we read the Magnificat of Mary, it's useful to remember when he was grown, Jesus told the rich young man that he would find salvation by letting go of the riches that consumed his attention and affection (Luke 18:18-30). Remember also, how Jesus said that salvation came to the home of Zacchaeus, when Zacchaeus learned to value fair dealing more than acquiring more wealth (Luke 19:1-10). In these cases, the well-off were urged to deal with their wealth in a way that put them into a positive relationship with the poor, in order that they too might partake in this promised salvation.

Think of the vision of God's kingdom that Mary sings about so joyfully. Then consider Christmas time today, with big flashy events that are largely focused around the twin idols of celebrity and consumerism. The contrast is ironic! In today's context, in a postmodern world, the Scriptures of Advent are deeply countercultural.

We can't be true to Christ unless we're restless and uncomfortable in light of what is really a very unchristian world. Yes, I said unchristian. Going to church doesn't automatically make you a Christian any more than sitting in a chair in your garage makes you a car. We need to be stirred with discontent. We need to be restless and rebellious against unemployment, needless poverty, and the drab wretchedness of substandard housing, discontent with the starved misery of exploited workers, and against the kind of insecurity that affects the job seeker who is no longer young, cute, and full of energy and strength.

Mary's song is good news for the poor and lowly. Does it have to be bad news for the successful and respected members of society? It doesn't have to be bad news. It's only bad news when we can't let go of our self-centered view of life. When we open our eyes to see others, when we reach out with real concern for those in need, when we overcome our poverty of spirit, we too, are lifted up. In reaching out to others, we find that we are no longer alone. In loving, we are loved. In sharing, we are made rich. In saving others from their need and pain, we find our salvation.

Like Mary, we'd do well to prepare for Jesus' birth with subversive laughter, singing, and astonishment. Celebrate the upside down world inaugurated by Jesus incarnation! Remember, His name is Emmanuel, which means "God with us." When God is with us, when God is in our hearts, we'll celebrate with great joy as we flip the world around us. While others will see this as turning the world upside down, with Christ in our hearts, we'll know that we're really just turning the world right side up! The Babe is coming! Make room in your heart! Amen.