

Mary's Song • Luke 2:46-55

The eyes of the world were on Carlisle, Iowa, on November 19, 1997. The birth of the McCaughey septuplets made medical history. In six minutes four boys and three girls were born to Bobbi McCaughey. They averaged about three pounds each, although she gained only 25 pounds in her entire pregnancy.

When Kenny McCaughey, the father of the septuplets, stepped out of the delivery room to their waiting family and friends, he gave a “thumbs up” sign. With that they all began singing together the Doxology: “Praise God from whom all blessings flow; praise him all creatures here below; praise Him above ye heavenly host; praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost.”

As they stood before rows of microphones and scores of TV cameras broadcasting to nearly every television set in the world, the grandfather and father were jubilant. They were amazingly articulate, calling the seven-fold birth a miracle and praising God over and over. Quotations from the Bible flowed out of them. It was the stuff of legends, of news magazine cover stories and conversations for years to come.

I think it must have been much the same mood when a single pregnant teenager from Nazareth went to visit her older cousin Elizabeth, who was also pregnant. Apparently she traveled alone to a village in the hill country of Judea. Mary arrived at the home of Zechariah and Elizabeth and greeted her cousin. According to Luke 1:41-42:

When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!

The Bible doesn't say anything about gestures, but it was Elizabeth's equivalent to a modern American “thumbs up”!

What happened next was really quite amazing. The teenager, Mary, started singing an elo-

quent song that has become known as “The Magnificat”. She sang, “My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.”

When the Bible was translated into Latin, Mary's opening words were “magnificat anima mea Dominum”, which means, “. . . my soul magnifies the Lord.” Now to some of us this sounds a little farfetched. What are the chances that a teenage girl could come up with such magnificent poetry on the spur of the moment? How many people do you know who greet their relatives with singing? But, it is not as farfetched as it may seem.

Most of the words of Mary's song are direct or indirect quotations from the Old Testament. She grew up in a religious home. She would have been quite familiar with the Jewish Bible. She was from a devout family. But she probably

could not read or write. And we know that illiterate people are often far better at memorization and far more accurate in what they remember than we who can read are.

As far as singing in the home, actually it was quite common in the first century for people to learn and memorize and sing. It's still

common in cultures around the world. Believe it or not, it actually occasionally happens within our own culture.

But most of all, the Holy Spirit was closely involved in Mary's life, including his influence of the very words that she sang. But let us not be surprised so much by her eloquence or by her singing. Rather let us be impressed with what she chose to say.

Mary began by saying, “My soul glorifies the Lord.” She speaks from her innermost being, from the essence of herself, from her soul. The phrase “glorifies the Lord” means that she wanted God to get all of the credit and praise for the miraculous things that were happening.

Why is it that some people turn so negative under difficult circumstances and other people are so positive? Why is it that some people complain and gripe while others rejoice and praise?

One of the meanings of “glorify” is “to make God look good”, to “enhance God’s reputation”. That is exactly what Mary wanted to do, although that was not her only choice.

She could have complained. After all, she was poor, she was a teenager, she was unmarried, she was pregnant and she was probably going to be greatly misunderstood. Her plans and dreams had been disrupted. She was engaged to Joseph, but now there was every likelihood that when he found out that she was pregnant he would break off the relationship. She faced the very real prospect of being a single mother at a time and place in history where that was more difficult than probably any of us could ever imagine. The religion she loved might condemn her for immorality and reject her claims of supernatural impregnation. She might even have begun to foresee the heartaches that would come with her famous son’s life and death.

Why is it that some people turn so negative under difficult circumstances and other people are so positive? Why is it that some people complain and gripe while others rejoice and praise? It is not the circumstances that make the difference because some people with the worst circumstances are the most joyful and others with the best circumstances are the most miserable. Apparently the difference is in the way we deal with the circumstances. Some of us, in the midst of whatever the circumstances are of life, center everything on ourselves. By contrast, others interpret everything that happens in life in terms of God. Those who are self-centered often are miserable while those who are God-centered are filled with joy.

God-centered Mary glorified God for lots of reasons, but she lists three of them in the song that she sang. She starts out by glorifying God because of his special call on her life. Mary was convinced that she was special to God. God noticed her even though she was unimportant by all the usual standards of greatness. Mary believed that what happened in her life was part of God’s comprehensive plan for history. The great and holy God had chosen her, spoken to her and personally done great things in her life and body. In Mary’s words:

My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful

of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name.

Mary glorified God and sang his praises because she was so keenly aware of God’s special call on her life.

Perhaps you think to yourself, “Of course she felt special! I’d feel special too if the angel Gabriel appeared to me, gave me a direct message from God and performed an unprecedented and spectacular miracle in my body. Who wouldn’t? But I don’t feel so special because God hasn’t sent any angels, and the most spectacular miracle I’ve ever experienced was when my acne cleared up for my fifteenth birthday party.”

Now wait a minute. Don’t miss the point here. Of course you and I haven’t experienced Mary’s call or her miracle. That’s because we are not Mary! God’s call is different for every person. Special wouldn’t be special if it was the same for everybody. God has not called you to be the mother of Jesus. God has not called you to live in the poverty of first century Palestine. God has not called you to be Mary. He has called you to be you. He’s called me to be just me.

Every one of us is special to God. God cares about every detail of our lives. He has called us to live out what he wants us to be, what he wants us to do. And that varies with each one of us. For some it may be the kind of misunderstanding that Mary faced for her entire life. For others it may be physical limitations and challenges. For others of us it is the awesome responsibility of great wealth, power or influence over other people. The point is that whatever the call of God is upon our lives, it is special and it is unique to each of us.

The important fact is that we join our voices with Mary and glorify God for who we are and live out God’s called on our lives: MY soul glorifies the Lord and MY spirit rejoices in God MY Savior, for he has been mindful of ME.

The second reason Mary glorified God was because God lifts up the humble and lowers the proud. In some ways this seems like a strange thing for Mary to sing. I think it is especially a concern and song of those who are poor. If it seems strange to most of us it may be because we are so rich.

One of the hardest things for the poor and

down trodden to understand is why they have so little when others have so much. Why are some people millionaires when others can't pay their rent? Why are some people so successful when others repeatedly fail? Why are some so healthy while others are chronically sick? Why are some so powerful and others so weak?

The problem isn't just that some have so much while others have so little. The problem is in the attitude of those who are so much better off. Those who have the most often become proud. We say, "I'm healthy because I take care of myself. I work out at the club; I maintain a low fat, high fiber diet; I go to the dentist every six months. The reason I have so much money is because I work hard, I invest smart, I am better, I deserve to have more."

Such attitudes are devastating to people who have less. It implies that they are bad people, that they are lazy, that they chose to be sick or that they want to have less. It implies that God cares more for us and less for them.

The sad reality is that the more we have the more likely we are to become greedy and proud and arrogant. And the very worst of the worst is that we can become greedy and proud and arrogant and not even know it.

Mary praises God because God knows what's really going on in peoples' lives and hearts. God blesses those who fear the Lord, those who are truly humble in their hearts, those who may not have much but are devoted to

God. At the same time, God does whatever he needs to do to lower the proud. If necessary he will bring pain and poverty into the lives of those who are arrogant, self-sufficient and self-centered.

Does this mean that health and wealth, position and power are somehow wrong? Of course not! But greed and pride that so often go with prosperity are always wrong.

Listen carefully to Mary's song:

(God's) mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hun-

gry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.

She praises God because she's the living example. She's nobody. She has nothing. She's unimportant. She's insignificant. She's poor and humble and godly. And the Lord has blessed her to be the mother of his Son!

The third reason Mary glorifies God is because God keeps his promises. Her mind goes back 2000 years to the time of Abraham, her ancestor. She recalls the promise of God's mercy to Abraham and to all of his descendants right through to her. And she is impressed with the faithfulness of God.

Running through Mary's mind must have been the history of Israel. In spite of sin inside and out, God preserved the Hebrew people. Even though they turned away from God, God did not turn away from them. When other nations tried to destroy them through wars, slavery, idolatry and intermarriage, God preserved his chosen people.

But most of all, Mary has in mind a long-ago promise of God, an ancient promise that he would provide a Messiah, a Savior who would come to redeem his own people and then redeem people

of every nation, of every ethnic group and language, of every continent. Inside her body was developing the greatest promise of all. God was sending his Son

to save his people from their sins. God had not forgotten. God is faithful. God keeps his promises. Therefore Mary sang: "(God) has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers."

That has to be one of the very best things about God—he keeps his promises! When he promises a Savior, he sends a Savior. When he promises to love us, he always loves us. When he promises he will never forsake us, he sticks with us no matter what. When he promises that he will always seek his very best in our lives, he always seeks his very best in our lives.

Other people may break their promises and let us down. Governments may come and go. But

That has to be one of the very best things about God—he keeps his promises!

God will never break his word. God is always faithful.

It is a good thing that we have an annual holiday called Thanksgiving. We are forced, at least once a year, to count our blessings, to rehearse God's faithfulness, to remember the many ways that God has kept his promises to us.

It was shortly before Thanksgiving that Charleen and I visited a life-long friend who was a patient at the Cardinal Bernadin Cancer Center of Loyola University in Chicago. He was battling a rare form of cancer that was not responding well to treatment. In a medical procedure that was literally life or death, his body was massively radiated nine times and he was given six times the normal maximum dose of chemotherapy. All of this was to kill the cancer, but it also devastated his immune system. He was then given a bone marrow transplant with a 40 to 60 percent chance of success.

We spent the evening together at the Bernadin Center. We had dinner that was brought in. The three of us—Carol, Charleen and I—ate while Richard watched because his mouth was so full of sores and there was so much nausea that accompanied his treatment. We talked and prayed together. And our friend was filled with faith and joy. All that he said, everything about him, made God look very good. God's reputation was safe with him. His soul glorified the Lord because he was living out God's special call, because God

was lifting him up, because he believed that God keeps his promises.

I don't know what your circumstances are today. For most of us, our lives are very good. For some of us, they are very hard. Whatever our situation may be, let us join our voices with Mary's Magnificat and say, "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." Amen.

Faith Matters® is the Broadcast Ministry of
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