

Mary's Song

DAVE BAST

Christmas is the festival of the incarnation; the celebration of the advent into the world of God himself. The incarnation, God's enfleshment, literally, is a fact of incalculable importance for human society and for world history. Well, today on *Groundwork*, we begin a series of Advent programs that will explore some of the consequences of the incarnation by focusing on the great songs in Luke Chapters 1 and 2. The first of those is Mary's Song; the *Magnificat*, which testifies to the massive changes that God brings when he comes into the world in person. Stay tuned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast, and today we are beginning a seasonally appropriate series of programs on the songs from Luke 1 and 2 that really set up the theme of what God is going to do when he comes in person into the world.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Luke is one of the best authors of the whole scripture. He is a great storyteller; and in the case of what we now commonly refer to as Christmas, if we did not have Luke, we would not have much to go on at all for Advent or Christmas. Partly because, even though we make a big deal out of the Christmas holidays now, in the Christian tradition, it is really not the oldest, and actually, in some ways, not the most important celebration that we observe in the Church year.

DAVE BAST

Those honors would go to Easter, hands down. Easter is the great foundation of our faith, and we know when Easter happened because that is actually dated and tied to the Jewish festival of Passover; so, that happens in the spring every year. Now, the dating of Christmas is traditional, and it really only goes back to about the fourth century after Christ. The Church wanted to celebrate his birth the way they celebrated his death and resurrection, so they picked a traditional date, and there is no real reason for believing that Jesus was born on December 25th.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Or maybe anywhere near there, for that matter; but that is where they put it down. It is interesting, too, Dave, because indeed, it goes without saying that we would not bother celebrating his birth if he had not been raised up from the dead at Easter.

DAVE BAST

Yes; nobody would have heard of Christmas if there had not been a real Easter.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is right; which is why in the New Testament we know you can have a complete Gospel of Jesus Christ without Christmas. Mark does not have anything in there about Jesus' birth. Mark just has Jesus emerging as

an adult at the time of John the Baptist's work, and John really does not have Christmas, either. He has the Word made flesh, and tells the back story, but John does not give us shepherds or angels or Bethlehem. Really, only Luke gives us that. Matthew gives us a very brief account of Jesus' birth – just a verse or two at the end of Matthew 1. So really, when it comes to Advent and Christmas, Luke is the go-to Gospel; it is the only one.

DAVE BAST

Sure he is, yes; although Matthew does have the Wise Men, so we bring those in from him, and John certainly focuses on the incarnation, which is the theology, the doctrinal truth that we are celebrating; but then there is this whole idea of Advent, because really, we are now in the season, as far as the Church is concerned, or the Church year, the season of Advent; we are not in Christmas.

I was just talking to a friend recently who goes to a very traditional, very orthodox kind of congregation, but they are very strict about this. They will not sing any Christmas carols until December 25th, so it is just Advent hymns, and this really part of the Church's wisdom, too, in saying down through the centuries we need a time to prepare to celebrate his coming, and not just the Baby Jesus – how wonderful – but the idea that he is coming again – how revolutionary that is!

SCOTT HOEZEE

Advent means arrival, coming; so, right; during the season of Advent traditionally we have looked at both horizons: His first coming in Bethlehem, and we anticipate his second coming. In any event, sort of like Lent leading up to Good Friday and Easter, so Advent leading up to the birth of Jesus that we celebrate traditionally on December 25 is a season of preparation. The idea being something this momentous, you need time to get ready. Again, in terms of a run-up to Jesus' birth, only Luke's Gospel gives us the back story, and it is punctuated by these four songs, two of them well before the birth, one on the night of the birth, and one not too long after the birth; and that is what we are looking at starting with the song that Mary eventually sings after the angel Gabriel has revealed to her that she, of all people, is going to be the Mother of God, the Church has traditionally said. According to the flesh, Mary will give birth to the Son of God in flesh.

DAVE BAST

Yes; the Gospel of Luke opens with a little preliminary paragraph; kind of a dedication to Luke's friend, Theophilus, who may have been a real person or may have been a composite figure; the name Theophilus means friend of God. So, maybe Luke just has an ideal reader in mind, or maybe there was a real person named Theophilus. It is a usable Greek name.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, it is a name, yes.

DAVE BAST

And then, interestingly, even though this is kind of Greek oriented, it is focused – Luke's Gospel is the one written, we think, most for gentile readers – he starts smack in the middle of the Old Testament; and in the first chapter in particular, we are steeped in an Old Testament setting and we see Old Testament figures. One of them is this old priest, Zechariah; we are going to look at his story and song next week; and the other is this young girl, Mary, who is living in Galilee in the town of Nazareth; probably just a teenager; she is engaged to be married to an honorable man, Joseph; and then one day, the incalculable happens to her, as an angel appears to her – the angel, Gabriel – and announces to her that she will become the one. She will be the mother of the Messiah. She will bear a child who will be called the Son of the Highest.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And the one thing that we get from that first part of Luke 1 – and of course, you can read the story in Luke 1:26-38 – the angel, Gabriel comes to her, terrifies her, scares her silly, as angels tend to do all through scripture, but then says to her, "You are the highly favored one," and Mary here – sometimes we Protestants shy away from thinking too much about Mary because we have seen some of the parts of Roman Catholic theology that we do not always understand, or even agree with fully, but Mary is rightly praised for her faith;

and it begins right here where she is stunned by this message; she asks, “How can that be?” and the angel says it will be because God will do it, and she says, “Let it be.”

DAVE BAST

Right; “Let it be unto me according to your word,” she says with submission. So, the great thing about Mary, and the thing that singles her out and causes us to say yes, she is blessed, is not necessarily her purity or her virginity because a married woman is just as pure as an innocent virgin, but it is her submission to the word and will of God. I mean, imagine how things would have gone if Mary had said, “No, thanks. I do not think I want any part of this,” but no; she hears this staggering news that she is to be the bearer of the child, and she has no husband, and it is going to happen because of the power of the Holy Spirit, and she says: Okay; okay, I am in. I am yours. That is what really makes Mary blessed.

SCOTT HOEZEE

She responds in faith, and then she does some reflecting; and obviously, how could you not, right? Your whole world has just been turned upside down. She does some reflecting. She will go visit her cousin, Elizabeth because she has been told: Your cousin, Elizabeth, is also going to have a child in her old age. It is part of this whole package here of what God is up to; so Mary will go to Elizabeth, and when she gets there she will sing a song that expresses some of the things that come about as she ponders this incredible news. We will look at the content of that great song of Mary in just a moment.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, where today we are looking at the song of Mary, as we begin a series of programs for Advent, and Mary’s song is recorded in Luke 1. We talked a little bit about the incident that is known as the *Enunciation*, when Mary is told this staggering news, and how she submits to it in faith; she accepts it, she embraces God’s word and will for her life, which makes her truly great and truly blessed, and then she sings a song. It is called the *Magnificat* because of its opening words in Latin: My soul magnifies the Lord; in fact, all of these songs – these four traditional songs – have Latin titles to them. They have long been clustered together in the Christian imagination. So, let’s hear how this song opens, Scott.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Luke 1, the 46th verse; she is talking to Elizabeth, and then Mary says:

My soul – this translation has – My soul glorifies the Lord. ⁴⁷And my spirit rejoices in God my Savior. ⁴⁸For he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on, all generations will call me blessed, ⁴⁹for the Mighty One has done great things for me. Holy is his name. ⁵⁰His mercy extends to those who fear him from generation to generation.

DAVE BAST

Yes, I actually prefer the translation, *magnifies* – My soul magnifies the Lord – which is, I think, a little bit closer to the original. It makes me think of magnifying glass. Because what she is really doing is talking God up, here. How great God is; how big God is; she is magnifying him; and that is what praise is. In a way, glorifying is a synonym for that.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It always struck me that, how can little old, puny human beings like us – how can we make God bigger? How can we magnify God? I mean, he is already huge! But, actually, the testimony of scripture – in the book of Psalms as well in the Old Testament – says that it is possible for us to magnify God when we witness to God; when we lift up God’s name so others can hear and know God. In that sense, we make God bigger for other people who maybe are missing him in their lives, or maybe they have spiritual blindness, and that is what Mary wants to do. She wants to say, “This is the God I believe in. This is the God who has done great things for me. I am going to sing about him so that everybody can know.” In that sense, she makes God’s reputation bigger. She magnifies him. Because she is gob-smacked; she is flabbergasted by what God has done for little

old her, and it sets off in her mind all these reflections – first of all, on the character of God – that is the first part of the song here that we just read, where she really pulls out three main characteristics of God’s power and justice and love.

DAVE BAST

And the idea – little old me, you mentioned – is big here, too; because she says here, “He has been mindful of the humble estate of his servants, and from now on, all generations will call me blessed.” So, part of the greatness of God is that he stoops so low. There is this contrast here between big and small; so Mary is quite lowly and simple and humble. There is nothing special about her, which is also hard for us to wrap our minds around, because she has become the Blessed Virgin Mary; the Holy Mother of God; but to start with, nothing special, just a simple Jewish girl; no doubt devout and pious, and she loved God as much as she knew him; but God’s greatness is seen in his condescension. That is a great idea; our spiritual forbearer, John Calvin, loved to talk about how God is so great that he can make himself small and stoop low and get down to our level. In fact, so great that he can become small enough to enter Mary’s body and be born there.

Scott Hoezee;

I remember some years ago the writer, Philip Yancey, had a line about that, sort of riffing on John 1: The word became flesh; but he said: Really, it is amazing to think of God the Son becoming a human baby, but before that he was a zygote. The word became microscopic; the word became invisible to the human eye, which is what a zygote in Mary’s womb would have been. So, right; we have that kind of interesting stuff going on there of God making himself small; Mary making God big by magnifying his name...

DAVE BAST

And becoming great herself, eventually. I saw this bumper sticker – you just reminded me of it – one of these things you see: God is too big to fit into any one religion – or just one religion. You know, this idea that we are all... And my thought when I read that was, “No, friend. You have it exactly wrong. He is small enough to fit into one body, not just one religion; one human being; and that is part of his greatness; his true greatness.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is almost as though here, and this is so interesting, because we do think, Dave, that Mary was probably fairly young in the standards of her day and age. She was what today I think we would regard as a teenager. She was a young woman; a young girl; and yet, there is something amazing – and some of the really startling parts of this song we will look at in the next segment; but it is as though – even though God has become microscopic – the Son of God has become a zygote within her and is now growing and the cells are duplicating, as in his true humanity, it is almost as though – nevertheless, having God tucked inside her, she is now bursting with theology. She is the word about God: Theology. She sings these incredible things about God the Mighty One; God the Holy One; his mercy extending; she is a compendium, in the first part of this song, like a little theological encyclopedia of all the great characteristics of God. It is as though she is bursting with Godness; and just cannot hold it in.

DAVE BAST

I think most of that stuff came out of the Psalms, too, because this reads a lot like the Psalms.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; she would be steeped in that language.

DAVE BAST

Even some of the phrases; it sounds a lot like Hannah’s song from the Old Testament, when Hannah was told, “Yes, you will have a child,” and she eventually became the mother of Samuel. So, we mention that power – the power of God – which is able to do the impossible. Mary had said to the angel, “How can this be?” And the angel replied, “With God nothing is impossible,” which actually does not mean God can do anything. It means he can do everything he wants to do – he chooses to do.

SCOTT HOEZEE

By reaching back to the language of the Psalms, and talking about generation to generation, Mary is saying, and we will see in the next program, Zechariah will say: This is an amazing thing that has happened to me; but Mary does not just say: Ooh, look at me, look at me, look at me; look at this brand new thing. No, Mary, in this song is saying: This is a brand new thing that has happened to me, but it is part of a very long story; generation to generation. God has been getting ready for this for a long, long time. So, it is a novel experience for Mary, but for God it is the climactic chapter in a very, very old story of God's working with his fallen creation.

DAVE BAST

You know, Scott, you mentioned the intersection of things that are happening here that Mary sees in God and what he is doing: His holiness, his power, and his love all coming together in doing the great act of salvation in Mary; and I cannot help but think of where this is going to lead as we trace through the Gospels, where those three same things intersect at the cross, supremely. Mary can look at her own body and see this going on; but for us, we look at the cross and we see the place where supremely God's love and his holiness and his mercy somehow come together in order to create salvation for all of us, and it all is made possible by this one girl's wonderful act of faith.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; but she is also going to reflect now – and we will look at in just a moment the next part of the song – where she also anticipates some of the big changes that are coming to the world on account of this great thing God is doing.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast, and we are looking at Mary's song, the *Magnificat*. Let's listen to a little bit more of it right now. So, Mary talks about the mercy and the holiness of God; the Holy One, the Mighty One, and then she says:

⁵¹“He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. ⁵²He has brought down rulers from their thrones, but has lifted up the humble. ⁵³He has filled the hungry with good things, but has sent the rich away empty. ⁵⁴He has helped his servant, Israel, remembering to be merciful ⁵⁵to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised to our ancestors.”

So, that really actually has a lot of revolutionary stuff in it; the last part of the song.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; you know, C. S. Lewis once called this a terrible song; and by that, he did not mean it was bad...

DAVE BAST

Yes, poorly written; poorly performed.

SCOTT HOEZEE

He meant terrible in the Latin root, *terribilis*, which is *startling*, earth-shattering, a terrible song in the sense that it talks about – Lewis said here you have this teenager, this young girl singing about the scattering of the proud and the sending away of the rich and the upsetting of the whole normal order of things; that is a rather startling sentiment to hear. If we had a teenage daughter who sat in the living room one day and sang about economic and social upheaval and revolution, we would say: Where are you getting that from? You do not expect that on the lips of a young girl, but here she is saying: God is up to such an incredibly new thing in history, here; that all of what we consider to be the normal ways of the world are going to be turned right

upside down.

DAVE BAST

So, it is a turning upside down of ordinary, social conventions, beliefs. She talks about a spiritual or personal/psychological reversal, where those who are humble are going to be raised and those who are very proud in their own imagination – that is a great phrase: He scattered those who are proud in their own inmost thoughts – people who think they are something special – they are going to be discombobulated – they are going to be thrown out – they are going to be put down and the humble will be raised; so there is this total reversal.

SCOTT HOEZEE

If we noted in the previous segment, Dave, that the first part of this song – so, basically verses 46 through 50, Mary there sounds like an Old Testament psalmist, now, in the second part of the song, she sounds like an Old Testament prophet...

DAVE BAST

There you go.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Now we are in the land of Amos and Micah and the prophets who assailed Israel for abusing the poor and for giving deference to the rich. In God's order of things for Israel, it was supposed to be that you paid attention and took extra care of the marginalized and the poor. Israel did not do that, so the prophets upbraided Israel. Now Mary is doing it. She is basically saying: Look, you know, we all pay attention to the beautiful people, the wealthy, the famous, the rich; but you know what? God has his eyes on the little people like me. Something like what happened to Mary – little, old, humble Mary – reminded her that that is God's MO. That is how God works. He is always lifting up the lowly – and that becomes a major theme in Luke, of course, as well.

DAVE BAST

Right. You know, there is a story I ran across years ago about a medieval scholar who was poor and destitute, and he fell sick, and he was brought into a hospital, and the doctors, thinking he was just some bum, were discussing his case in Latin, not dreaming that he could understand every word they were saying, and they concluded: Nobody is going to miss this guy. Let's use him for experimentation. And he replied to them: Call no man worthless for whom Christ died. I think that is a wonderful getting at what Mary is saying here, that the people we tend to dismiss and despise, God says: No; those are the ones that I especially care about; and I am going to flip the whole thing on you, so the people you admire; the people who are on the cover of People Magazine, the people who matter – the celebrities – they are going to end up down and out and the poor and the humble are going to end up on the inside.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And of course, for any and all of us who know we are among the poor and the humble – we are not the rich and the famous – this is good news. The Good News of Advent; the Good News of Christmas is that indeed God came for all people, not just the beautiful people.

DAVE BAST

On the other hand – sorry to interrupt – I mean, we really are – if you look at the world...

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is true.

DAVE BAST

We really are the rich and the powerful. It is always easy to compare yourself to those above you...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Let's compare upward.

DAVE BAST

Yes, but compare downward to the vast majority. You remember the parable that Jesus told about the rich man and Lazarus, and he says near the end of that: To the rich man, you already had yours. It is almost like, you can have it now or you can have it later, but you cannot have it both.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Luke, I think, is the only one who has Jesus telling that parable, which is part of... But, that is good news. I often notice that the New York Times newspaper, starting around Thanksgiving and running through Christmas, they will frequently – just all over their newspaper – just on random pages at the head of the page or something they will put: Remember the neediest. And they will do that through the holiday season, which – you know, that is a nice thing to print – but it is actually an appropriate sentiment for Christmas that God remembers the neediest – so, it should not just be at Christmas that we feel extra charitable. The Gospel says Jesus – and Mary here in her song reflects – Jesus came here for the neediest; he came here for the lowly; he came here for the nobodies – and that is the really Good News; and Mary now, this young woman just now becoming the bearer of God's own Son – God is inside her – and she is already realizing: Yes, that is the way it works. That is the message, not just for Christmas, but at all times.

DAVE BAST

Yes, well, it is; and when I hear that, I think: Frankly, I am the neediest. God, remember me. Because, yes, he is going to turn everything upside down; economically, socially, politically; but if you recognize your need, and if you humble yourself voluntarily before him, then he will come and fill you with good things, and not send you away hungry; and that is really Mary's message to each of us. Just make sure that you get low so that you can get God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is right. Well, thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation. I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and we would like to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into scripture. So, visit groundworkonline.com, and tell us topics or passages you would like us to dig into next on *Groundwork*.

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