

The First Carols: The Magnificat

Sunday, December 8, 2019

Luke 1:47-55

“Hush, little baby, don’t you cry, momma’s gonna sing you a lullaby.” Every good mother knows the calming power of song to help settle a fussy baby. There’s something about a mother’s voice that brings a sense of peace, a “lull,” as the song suggests, to help a little one drift into a blessed rest. That rest is good for the child, and good for the mother, too!

Studies suggest that the influence of music and of a mother’s voice on the development of a child begins in the womb. A fetus senses audio vibrations and rhythms early in pregnancy, and babies recognize their parents’ voices right after birth. When a mom sings to her unborn child, particularly when she sings the same song over and over, the maternal crooning can lower the fetal heart rate and calm the child in utero. It is even proposed that reading a story many times to an unborn child may result in a child’s preference for that story throughout childhood. A song or a story can imprint a child’s mind even before birth. A familiar song or story, sung and repeated over and over, can have a lasting influence.

Christmas carols are some of the most familiar songs we sing, and we might imagine that a baby born close to Christmas might prefer those songs over any other, particularly if mom has a favorite that she sings. In Luke’s gospel, the first Christmas carol sung is the one composed by a young mother named Mary who is suddenly expecting a child. Hers is a song of praise to God. We call it the *Magnificat* (from the Latin of the first line in verse 47: “My soul magnifies the Lord”). It is a song that sets the stage for the mission that Mary’s divine and human Son will soon undertake.

Some scholars and theologians hold that Luke placed these words in the mouth of Mary as a way of introducing the themes of his gospel and of Jesus’ future ministry. Other scholars, John Wesley among them, maintain that Mary’s song is proof that she is one of the great biblical prophets because her song was composed “under a prophetic impulse.” If so, then it’s not a stretch to see this as a song Mary repeatedly sang to her unborn child and as an influence imprinted on Jesus even before he emerged in a manger in Bethlehem.

Yes, Jesus was divine and clearly had a divine mission, but might it be possible that the early imprint of his mother’s song reinforced all that he was about to do? Could this first-

ever carol be the song to which Jesus returned when he needed assurance that, despite the fierce opposition, he was doing the work ordained for him from the beginning?

If you’re waiting for the arrival of a baby, you know it’s going to take nine months, give or take. That’s a lot of time for prenatal singing! But the song that Mary sings is a derivation of one that God’s people sang for centuries, hoping for the birth of a Savior who would come and set things right. The announcement of the Savior’s coming went way back into Israel’s history, all the way back to Abraham. So, Mary sings: “[God] has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever” (vv. 54-55).

God promised Abraham that through his family, all the families of the world would be blessed. From Abraham’s family came the nation of Israel, whom God rescued from slavery in Egypt and to whom God gave the Promised Land. There, God established a king, David, and promised David that one of his descendants would sit on the throne of Israel forever to establish God’s justice and mercy and peace, to usher in God’s Kingdom for the world.

But Abraham’s family and David’s kingdom both crumbled under the weight of sin. What was beautiful spoiled because of their disobedience and rejection of God. The result was a people broken, divided, overrun, and exiled. Foreign powers enslaved God’s people and the insidious powers of sin and death subjugated the world.

Yet, the promise of the prophets remained: one day a new king would be born who would challenge and depose the powers of sin and death. Isaiah described this Savior as the Suffering Servant, a Wonderful Counselor, a Mighty God, a Prince of Peace, and the One for whom the whole world longed (Isaiah 9:2-7).

Mary knew this story: it was the story of her people. For her, as for all of God’s people, the story of Scripture was *the only story* that mattered. And now, somehow, impossibly, unbelievably, this young woman will play a leading role in God’s unfolding drama. The time of waiting is coming to an end! So, Mary sings: “My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior” (v. 47). Her song is intended to amplify, reflect, and illuminate what God is doing through her son, God’s Son. Indeed, God announces the imminent arrival of the Promised Messiah to the very people who need to hear it most: the poor, the lowly, the broken, the marginalized, to those who have no power.

Mary represents these people. As a young, unmarried woman, Mary is barely noticed in her patriarchal culture. She had no status (as a woman) and no prospects (without a husband). She is pregnant outside of marriage, a scandalous situation in the minds of her neighbors. She lived in a tiny village in the middle of nowhere, out of sight and out of mind. But God sees her, and so Mary sings: *"[God] has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the mighty one has done great things for me, and holy is his name"* (v. 48).

Remember that when the angel greeted Mary, he addressed her as *"favored one"* (v. 28). We have no reason to believe that Mary was particularly righteous or worthy, or that she was somehow better than any other young woman of her day. Yet, God chose her, "favored" her, and blessed her with the task of bearing God's Messiah. Like her ancestor Abraham, God "favored" Mary, an ordinary girl from an ordinary place, and blessed her so that she might be a blessing to the world, a vital link in the covenant chain that God began with Abraham many generations before (Genesis 12:2).

We call her "blessed" because she blessed the world by saying "yes" to God: *"Let it be with me according to your word"* (v. 38). The blessing that God will work through her comes in the Son that she bears, God's Son, who will save his people from their sin and overturn the power structures that held people in slavery. Grasping the enormity of what God is initiating, Mary sings: *"[God's] mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty"* (vv. 50-53). Mary's song speaks to the promise of what happens when God occupies the earth as its true King. When God is king, all human power structures are overturned: the proud are replaced by the humble, the hungry are filled and the wealthy go hungry.

Notice the verbs in Mary's song: they are all in the past tense. Mary sings as though these things are already come to pass. Such is the confidence of faith! The child whom she carries is God's Messiah, and this Messiah is truly God come in the flesh: the king who comes and announces in his words and actions that God's promised kingdom is arrived.

Mary's song is the outline for everything that God's Son will do when he grows to manhood. He will scatter the proud and self-righteous by exposing their true selves. He will challenge powerful kings like Herod and Caesar, by demonstrating the greater power of love. He will

advocate for justice, mercy and peace. He will sit with the poor, hungry, sinners and outcasts, filling them with hope. He will denounce the wealthy who oppress the poor. He will require his followers to deny themselves, pick up a cross, and follow him. The gospels tell us that the rich fools and rich young rulers walked away from Jesus empty, while the poor are fed with an abundance of bread on a hillside. Mary's child will turn the world upside down, and all because he heard the song of his mission even as he still enjoyed the warmth of the womb.

Mary's song, as joyous and hope filled as it is, contains an element of sadness. Her acceptance of God's favor will cost her dearly. While Jesus is still a baby, she is warned that a sword will pierce her soul (2:35). She will lose him and frantically search for him for three days when he is a boy because he is about his father's work in the temple (2:41-52). She will think he is completely mad when he turns 30 and leaves home to start preaching and challenging the religious and political authorities (8:19-21; Mark 3:21). She will suffer the agony of watching him die on a cross, nailed there by the powers that always crush those who would oppose them (23:44-49).

Still, Mary sings, and we (like Mary) sing our Christmas carols knowing that Good Friday is not far away. We sing, knowing where this child will go and what he will do. We sing, knowing that the pain of a cross lies ahead, but there will also be the joy of an empty tomb. While *"The Magnificat"* may not be on the hot list of Christmas music played on the radio during this season, it is the song that reminds us who Jesus is and what he is about. It reminds us, too, that we are called to follow him in lifting up the lowly, filling the hungry with good things, and saying to God every day, *"Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word"* (v. 37).

Prayer: O God, whose word is fruitless when the mighty are not put down, the humble remain humiliated, the hungry are not filled, and the rich are; make good your word, and begin with us. Open our hearts and unblock our ears to hear the voices of the poor and share their struggle; and send us away empty with longing for your promise to come true in Jesus Christ. Amen.

Sources:

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