

The Fourth Sunday in Advent
December 23, 2018
Christ the Rock Evangelical Lutheran Church
Farmington, NM

Luke 1:46-55 And Mary said:

“My soul glorifies the Lord

⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

⁴⁸ for he has been mindful

of the humble state of his servant.

From now on all generations will call me blessed,

⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me—

holy is his name.

⁵⁰ His mercy extends to those who fear him,

from generation to generation.

⁵¹ He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;

he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

⁵² He has brought down rulers from their thrones

but has lifted up the humble.

⁵³ He has filled the hungry with good things

but has sent the rich away empty.

⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,

remembering to be merciful

⁵⁵ to Abraham and his descendants forever,

even as he said to our fathers.”

“More Magnificent than Just Jolly”

Christmas is just around the corner, but let’s see a show of hands of the people who are already tired of Christmas. Ok, you are still looking forward to Christmas. But there are some factors of life we’ve been putting up with since the end of November that we are ready to be done with. If you were still doing any last minute shopping at all the past few days, you are looking forward to normal traffic delays, normally crowded parking lots and normally friendly motorists. As much as you love bargains, feeling like a pathetic salmon trying to swim upstream as you navigate packed department store aisles just to arrive at out of stock items on empty shelves is getting a little old. Being bombarded with constant commercials and pushy advertising resorting to desperate gimmicks that somehow still manage to grab your attention, Lord willing is almost mercifully ended.

And then there’s the music. Remember the warmth that just oozed through your entire being when you heard the season’s first Christmas carol, that feeling spreading through the farthest recesses of your body like you had just sipped on warm cocoa in front of a blazing fire. Now it feels like someone is inserting needles into your forehead every time a popstar mangles another Christmas classic. You have to choke back that instantaneous nausea every time Rudolf or Frosty rises above the busy din of your frantic activities.

But maybe there is a solution better than fast-forwarding to December 26th. In the words of Mary from today's Gospel we have a better example than someone retreating into snow-covered mountains. Mary gives us a great example of Christian praise that doesn't require unplugging every radio or smashing every smart phone. Mary's praise is more magnificent than just jolly.

1. Mary's Praise Focuses on the Lord

Mary's song is uncommon and unnatural, quite frankly. Think about your biggest reasons singing praises. We are thankful. We are grateful. We sing about everything we've been able to do. We crow about our thoughts and our feelings. We naturally fall into the trap of saying: 'I praise you God because I've been able to fight back against temptation; I've successfully separated myself from common concerns and pitfalls of the season; I've grown into a deeper understanding of God's will and a more profound relationship with my God.' Notice, none of those things are really wrong. Our praise isn't sinful, just self-centered.

And to tell the truth, selective. When we think about all the things for which we could boast we tend to latch onto every little thing we've done well, every good deed we've considered, and all the extreme sins we've managed to avoid. Escaping our memory is anything that could be considered incriminating in God's courtroom. The three missteps for every one good deed seem to get overlooked in our accounting.

Our personal praise problem is the major deficiency in too many of today's half-baked holiday tunes. There is way too much superficiality. There is happiness, but no real reason for it. There are merry sentiments, but no substance supporting them. And you can take it in minor doses. But it has the same effect as a steady diet of nothing but sugar cookies for a whole week. It leaves you wanting something more. That's the problem with our praise. We've disconnected ourselves from the true reason to sing praises.

Let's be honest, Mary was special. Her cousin acknowledged it. An angelic visitor informed her: **"you have found favor with God."** (Luke 1:30) Christians have recognized Mary's important place in salvation history over the centuries. Yet dissect Mary's song and uncover who gets all the focus. "My soul glorifies the Lord," she sings. (Luke 1:46) The lines of her song begin: **"for he has been mindful...for the Mighty One... His mercy... He has performed...He has brought down...He has filled... He has helped."** (Luke 1:48,49,50,51,52,53,54) Mary's song is so magnificent because it focuses on the Lord. Praise comes from remembering what God has done and still is doing.

2. Praise Embraces God's Mercy

The songs of the season that we grow tired of most quickly and most easily are the ones that are pure escape from reality. Don't get me wrong. Sometimes we need something light and fluffy, pure escapism. But have you ever noticed how some of the most time-honored and universally cherished Christmas hymns are tinged with a slight sound of melancholy? They have real drama. Christmas songs become tedious if there is no narrative, no conflict, just sentimentality. It's the Christmas cookie candle without any cookies backing in the oven. It's the picture of a warm fire roaring and crackling on your computer screen. Once you power off, there's no warmth left.

We need songs with drama, because there is real tension in our real lives. Expectations in life leave us with dissatisfaction or despair. Complaints accompany unfair returns on our faithful investments with God. Despair greets honest hearts laid open with the true condition of what we deserve from a righteous and holy God. There is real tension in Mary's song of praise, because Mary praises God for His mercy.

Mercy isn't what you expect. The first step in praising God according to Mary's pattern is to focus on what God does. The second step is to realize why we need God's help. It allows each of us to be honest about ourselves and what is hiding in our hearts. Mary's words echo the sounds of so many songs from the Old Testament. We can particularly remember the song of Hannah, Samuel's mother when she praised God for his mercy (1 Samuel 2). She had been ridiculed and mocked by her rival because she didn't have as many blessings as she did. Mary's song foreshadows the words of Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5 – 7) and his ministry where he is drawn to the sick and sinners instead of the healthy and self-righteous.

Mercy isn't about making a list of all the nice things you have done and all the ways you've avoided being naughty. Mercy has nothing to do with what I can do for God or what anyone else has done for God. Mercy is about upsetting every earthly expectation about what we deserve and the reactions we should get. Mercy starts to bring about praise when we realize how badly we need our Savior, how absolutely helpless we would be without him.

Mercy was itself gestating inside the belly of the one singing God's praises. Mercy is about the King of all coming into the world clutching to life by the umbilical cord attached to his young Jewish mother. Mercy is about what God sending His Son into this world because of the mess of who I am and wrong I have done. Mercy is fulfilled on the cross when Jesus absorbs the despair of the sinful world and the disappointment of a heavenly Father with His unfaithful and unwilling subjects. God's **"mercy extends to those who fear him,"** those who embrace His sacrifice by faith. (Luke 1:50)

3. Universal Salvation Pours out Praises

Some don't feel like celebrating Christmas right now. Some people feel it would be inappropriate to sing "Jingle Bells" and "Frosty the Snowman" and "Here Comes Santa Claus" and think those jolly tunes will make sadness and sickness and loneliness disappear. Some people in our community just can't bring themselves to set up a tree or decorate their homes. Too much bad news. Too much stress. They just don't feel enough reasons to be festive.

But remember why Mary was praising God so magnificently? Mary could sing praises even though she was just a poor maiden from a tiny, insignificant village bringing an unexpected child into a chaotic world. She knew she was blessed even if she was carrying a baby without the support of a social safety net, left living out the story as the supporting character in a tale too unbelievable to be fictitious. She was blessed for the same reason you and I are blessed even if life is full of frustration and disappointment. Even if your heart is so heavy with stress and grief that you can't whistle a happy holiday tune, you can have joy. Joy comes from believing God remembers you.

We all believe in a virgin birth of some sort. Noted atheist and Princeton University professor says it this way:

"We can assume that somehow in the primeval soup we got collections of molecules that became self-replicating; and I don't think we need any miraculous or mysterious [explanation]."

Or maybe you prefer the proposal by the genius Stephen Hawking about the explanation for our universe:

"...the universe can and will create itself from nothing. Spontaneous creation is the reason there is something rather than nothing, why the universe exists, why we exist."

Everyone believes in some sort of explanation for our existence that we can't see or prove. Mary gives us the example of someone who is truly blessed to believe God's promises.

We call Mary blessed. And that is entirely appropriate. But we don't need to put her on a pedestal and put her in an entirely different category of believer than us. One Bible scholar gives this important definition of blessedness:

"Blessedness is a condition for which God alone is responsible. Mary's blessedness is the result of an act of divine grace which God gives to her as gift. Mary is blessed because of the presence of Christ in her just as the church is blessed because Christ dwells in her... Mary's blessedness is a state of faith that grasps the future promises of God that are already beginning to come to fulfillment for her and in her." (Just, p. 76)

Mary sings it: **"He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers."** (Luke 1:54-55) You are blessed because your God remembers His promises to humankind. You are blessed to know God has an explanation for your existence. You are blessed to have confidence in God's purpose for your life. All of that comes from God's mercy sent to you in the person of Jesus Christ.

Yesterday our community turned out in droves to welcome a hometown hero. When Chevel Shepherd passed through the streets of Farmington to be greeted by waving and sign-toting fans, I couldn't help wonder how many of them loved her music. How many of them would even consider her their favorite musician? Yet, no matter our personal tastes and preferences, we can be united in celebrating her accomplishments.

Do you know what made Mary truly great? It was the heroic, yet humble heart of faith that allowed her to respond to the angel: **"I am the Lord's servant."** (Luke 1:38) Through humble and heroic faith, you too can become God's mouthpiece for praise. You have a Savior who was carried by remarkable Mary. He is your Savior. You can echo Mary's sentiments: **"The Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name."** (Luke 1:49) That's a song that never gets old. Amen.

+ Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God forever and ever. Amen. +