

Advent Lutheran Church
An Unexpected Song
December 22, 2024
Malachi 5:2-5a & Luke 1:39-55

There are so many songs of the season. It seems like everyone has their own favorite playlist. And, nearly all of us share in common many of the classics – or at least I think we do.

Let's find out. I'll share the start of the first line of a Christmas carol, then cue you to complete it . . .

- O come, O Come Emmanuel and (ransom captive Israel)
- Joy to the world the Lord is come (let earth receive her king)
- Silent night, holy night (all is calm, all is bright)

And now we'll try a few popular secular songs . . .

- I'm dreaming of a (white Christmas)
- Jingle bells, jingle bells (jingle all the way)
- It's beginning to look (a lot like Christmas)

And then there is that newer one that always seems to get people talking: Mary did you know? If you've heard it once, you've probably heard it many times. It was written in the 1980s and is filled with questions inquiring about what Mary knew or didn't know. For example:

- Mary did you know that your baby boy would one day walk on water?
- Mary did you know that your baby boy will give sight to a blind man?
- Mary did you know that your baby boy is the Lord of all creation?

For some reason this song brings out the armchair theologians. Many people have strong feelings about specifically how best to answer some of the song's questions. I, however, am more interested in what we actually do know about Mary. I'm more interested in improving our biblical literacy about Mary.

We can begin with this morning's Gospel lesson that features some of Mary's story, including her song. While you may know the song's title as "The Magnificat," I doubt you can sing along or even say aloud many of the words. At best, you may know it got its name from the first word of its first verse: Magnificat (or, in English, magnify). Mary exclaimed, "my soul magnifies the Lord."¹

Maybe we should rename today Mary Sunday, but I suspect that sounds too Catholic for comfort. We are open to thinking about Mary, especially during Advent and Christmas. We know her as the one who conceived, carried, birthed, and raised Jesus.

I remember reading a book a number of years ago titled *The Real Mary*. The author uses Scripture to negate the popular view that Mary is a passive and willing teenager as well as the common Catholic perspective. In contrast, he invites us to consider embracing Mary for who she really was as the mother of Jesus and as a woman of faith who "struggles and learns and grows" in response to her experiences of Jesus.²

Hopefully this has you wondering if there is more you should know about Mary. And, as a means of helping us better connect with Mary and with her story, I invited her to visit us on Wednesday.

I know not all of you could be here for our mid-week worship. If you were present then you know that each week we were visited by folks who were there – the wise men, the midwife, and this past Wednesday by Mary herself.

Izzy played the part of Mary. She shared a Christmas letter with us that was written by Ruth Boling. It included a section that focuses on today's passage, which reads:

¹ Luke 1:46

² Scot McKnight. *The Real Mary* (Paraclete Press, 2006), p.144.

My part of the Christmas story begins with an angel showing up and saying, "Hey Mary, here's an idea. How about getting yourself pregnant outside of marriage? Don't worry, this is God's idea . . .

After guarding my virginity as fiercely as a girl my age was expected to, I should have given the angel a firm "No" on the spot. You know, stranger danger and all that. To do otherwise would be the ruin of any young woman, but especially me, dirt poor with zero connections to people in high places. But I said yes . . .

Actually, I didn't say "Yes" to the angel. My exact words were, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord," and I want to make sure you see what I did there. "Here am I" is what important men in the scriptures always say when God gives them important work to do. What a thrill to hear those words coming out of my own mouth, the mouth of a woman! I was Moses in the wilderness startled by a burning bush! I was young Samuel, sleepless after three dreams in a row where God called him by name. I was Isaiah in the Holy of Holies with seraphs winging about overhead, bringing burning hot coals to my lips!

Really, I was just me being me, just Mary, bolted to the ground in the wonder of the present moment. Remember, I was engaged to Joseph and therefore honor-bound to save myself for him. Somehow, I had the nerve to consent on the spot to this new plan of having God's baby. "Here am I," I announced confidently, becoming at that moment the first woman in scripture ever to talk to God in that manner, using those exact words. "Here am I," I said, taking my hands off the grip rails of my obscure life in the permanent underclass of my gender so that I could yield to God as no woman had ever done before in human history. "Let it be with me according to your word".³

³ Ruth L. Boling. Seasons Greetings: Christmas Letters from Those That Were There (Upper Room Books, 2024), p.100-101.

Helpful insight. And these words help us see Mary as a real person and situate her lived experience alongside other biblical characters.

The last two Sundays, we've talked a lot about God choosing John. John the less than qualified. John the Prophet. John the eccentric wilderness preacher.

And, now we find God has chosen Mary. Mary the young woman, likely a teenager. Mary the one engaged to be married to Joseph. Mary the one who had lived a very low profile life up until now.

Now, Mary is the one who consents. The one who is pregnant and wise beyond her years.

The one who responds by magnifying God. Mary glorifies God for what God is doing through her and for all that God will do through her and through the son she will bear and name Jesus.

Her song isn't a fun Christmas carol. It isn't a catchy secular holiday tune. It's a robust, honest, and forthright look at how the world will change through her, through her son.

In fact, it was and is so radical that it has been banned. In our time we think of banning books, but we need to be aware that the Magnificat has been banned too. It was banned for fear of people hearing about God's preferential love for the poor. The bans happened during the British rule of India and then again more recently in Argentina in the 1970s and in Guatemala in the 1980s.

This morning is the fourth Sunday of Advent. It is the Sunday we light the candle of love reminding us that we are preparing for the arrival of Mary's baby, the one who will embody love in new ways and who will invite his followers to be known by their love.

As we continue our Advent journey, we give thanks for Mary and commit to listening anew to her song – an unexpected song on our seasonal playlist. Amen.