

## Song of the Poor<sup>1</sup>

And Mary said,  
'My soul magnifies the Lord,  
<sup>47</sup> and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,  
<sup>48</sup> for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.  
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;  
<sup>49</sup> for the Mighty One has done great things for me,  
and holy is his name.  
<sup>50</sup> His mercy is for those who fear him  
from generation to generation.  
<sup>51</sup> He has shown strength with his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.  
<sup>52</sup> He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;  
<sup>53</sup> he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty.  
<sup>54</sup> He has helped his servant Israel,  
in remembrance of his mercy,  
<sup>55</sup> according to the promise he made to our ancestors,  
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.'

Once upon a time I was a student associate minister and high school coordinator with responsibility for Sunday School for teens. Those were the days when youth were listening to Andrew Lloyd Webber's "Jesus Christ Superstar." I came up with the idea that we'd study the songs in that musical. Well, on one Sunday we listened to the memorable, "I Don't Know How to Love Him." Remember that one? It's sung by the Mary Magdalene character who clearly has confusing romantic feelings for Jesus.

I don't know how to love him  
What to do, how to move him  
I've been changed, yes, really changed  
In these past few days when I've seen myself  
I seem like someone else.

So, as the teacher I set about to analyze the song. Analyze, you know, identify the structure and literary features of the

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<sup>1</sup>Douglas DeCelle preached this sermon on December 20, 2009 at the First Presbyterian Church in LaGrange, GA 30240

lyrics. Well, the teenage girls in the class had no sense that they needed any further insight. They were having no trouble at all identifying with Mary's emotions and frustrations.

Everything I had to say struck them as incredibly pedestrian and funny. The class dissolved in peals of laughter.

Now here's why I told that story. Music has the power to open big vistas of meaning and feeling. Nothing else rivals that. Those teenage girls just weren't going to stand for their seminary student to take them back to ideas and principles or whatever. We sing "Here I Am Lord" at the end of a funeral and beyond all logic are powerfully lifted and moved. How does that work? We don't know. The music gets us there.

This is why the great 20<sup>th</sup> century theologian Karl Barth would listen half an hour to Mozart before retiring to his study to write theology. Music—and in this case great music—took him to great places in the realm of God's truth. Even Karl Barth needed that in order to write about it.

It's fitting today—five days before Christmas—that we don't analyze or talk, but instead that we listen to a song. The song, of course, is Mary's Song of Praise sung in joy over being pregnant with Jesus.

What do we hear in Mary's song? Well, above all, we hear the triumph of the world set right. Think about this for a second. Mary is early in her pregnancy. She's visiting her

relatives. She has had the private experience of encountering the angel. And she is awakening to a momentous realization. If I can be pregnant with this wonderful baby, the world can be pregnant with God's love and justice. As long as this baby was coming, Mary knew things were going to be fine.

What's going to be fine? Again the song points the way. The proud—the ones running the world—will be dispersed and dethroned. Hard-living people will finally get a break. The untouchable rich, will at long last, not be the big winners.

Have you ever noticed that whenever people struggle to be free and at peace there's a music that rises up from their situation? I have an affection for the revolutionary anthem in the musical Les Miz, the musical based on Victor Hugo's novel, Les Miserables.

Do you hear the people sing  
Singing the song of angry men  
It is the music of a people  
Who will not be slaves again

We hear the same kind of triumph song offered by an early Mary—Miriam—in the Book of Exodus. After the Hebrew people have safely passed through the waters of the Red Sea, Miriam and the women break out the tambourines and burst out singing and dancing.

Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously  
The horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.

By the way, notice that the Egyptian army has no song. The bad guys don't sing. African Americans have had spirituals and then later they have the blues. The slave owners or the segregationists or the discriminators. There's no music there. Christians have a song. The new atheists? No song there. You can buy countless CD's with Christmas music or Christian music. But there's no singing in atheism.

Mary's got a song. Mary lifts up a triumph song even before the triumph has happened.

He has shown strength with his arm,  
He has scattered the proud in the imagination of  
their hearts,  
He has put down the mighty from their thrones,  
And exalted those of low degree;  
He has filled the hungry with good things  
And the rich he has sent empty away.

At last, everyone will get his due; it's not always going to be a struggle, the tyrants will one day be no more. I hope I remember that the next time I get gloomy about where history is headed--the daunting, intractable problems we see in the world--recession, ecological disruption, abusive leaders, systematic unfairness. If Mary is to be believed, these have already been dethroned. Their doom, as the hymn puts it, is sure. Christmas sounds that chord loudly.

Now, there's a yet higher note sounded in Mary's song. It is that she herself, ordinary person that she was, has been lifted up through God's work in her life. What does she sing?

"He who is mighty has done great things for me. Henceforth, all generations will call me blessed."

What is Mary seeing here? Let's go back to her circumstances of carrying the baby Jesus. Instead of feeling burdened and embarrassed and inconvenienced by being pregnant, Mary realizes that carrying Jesus brings breathtaking significance into her life. His coming down, means she's lifted up. Indeed, we're all lifted up.

And we need to be lifted up. One of my complaints about contemporary life is that it is increasingly soulless. We end up living lesser lives than creatures made in the image of God should live. And we need to be lifted up. You and I fit like cogs into a pre-determined existence. We are consumers, told what we desire and that we need to spend. We're workers in a vast economy. We're fed entertainments, life styles, virtual electronic experiences.

When Jesus Christ calls us by name and bids us to follow and serve, we're suddenly caught up in a real adventure, of real significance. By having him in our lives, you and I, like Mary become part of God's mission to this created world. That matters! It matters because it is God who has enlisted us to participate in the work that he himself gave himself completely to accomplish.

I was reading, several years ago, a biography of Saint Teresa of Avila—the medieval Spanish nun and saint. As I waded through the pages, I paused to reflect that this woman lived a splendidly intelligent, purposeful life. Then it hit me. That's a quality that belongs to every Christian biography, every disciple's life story. There is something about apprenticing in life with Jesus that makes an ordinary human being a wonderfully substantial, interesting, image-of-God human being!

I'm catching strains of this truth in Mary's song. "He who is mighty has done great things for me." Can't we all sing that refrain? Mary sees it. She's just a girl. Just starting her discipleship. But she sees what is true for every Christian. There is a blessedness a substance and depth to life that comes when we know Jesus Christ.

Well...we know the Christmas story with Mary, Joseph, the shepherds and Magi. It's the Christmas music—Mary's music-- that I'm interested in. Because in this song it dawns on us that this baby's coming marks a fault line in history. Darkness isn't going to win. Unfairness isn't going to win. Oppression isn't going to win. God is changing that with a little baby. And that distant triumph is audible in the song Mary sings. And doesn't that sound darn good in our own time of mega problems and uncertainty.

Then there's that second strain in Mary's music that I'd we also hear. As God sets the world aright in Jesus, so also will he lift us up in the process. God himself was the pattern by which we were formed. In Christ, that image-of-God potential is made real and visible. No wonder Christmas feels so good. Mary felt it early, and lifted her voice. And we've been singing ever since.