

12-17-17 Sermon: “He is Coming...But Why?” – Luke 1:39-56

I love Christmas music, and I’ve been listening to it a lot recently. But there’s one song that I always find myself skipping over on Spotify, or turning off when it comes on the radio. That song, unfortunately, is a well-loved tune that’s been covered by everyone from Kenny Rogers to Cee Lo Green to the Pentatonix. It’s a song called “Mary, Did You Know?”

It’s a beautiful song, don’t get me wrong. It’s got a lovely, haunting melody; it’s been set to beautiful arrangements. It may be one of your favorites, and I don’t fault you for it. But here’s the thing: It irks me when so-called Christian songwriters write these beautiful pieces of music but forget to read their Bibles!

The song asks, “Mary, did you know that your baby boy would one day walk on water? Mary did you know that your baby boy would save our sons and daughters?” Um...yeah. Yeah, I think she knew. I think she was actually the *first* to know. She literally just sang a whole song about it! Like, Mark Lowry, what makes you think you need to mansplain the Magnificat to the Mother of God?

I know I shouldn’t just pick on the song. Really, it’s just one more example of the way we Christians tend to mis-cast Mary. We describe her as a gentle virgin, meek and mild. She’s humble and lovely and sweet as can be, sitting quietly by the manger, rocking the baby Jesus. How charming.

Except, of course, that this Mary looks *nothing* like the Mary we just met in Luke’s Gospel. Far from meek and mild, the Mary in the Bible is a strong, feisty woman who is willing to put her life on the line to give birth to the Savior!

I mean, think about it. Mary is engaged to Joseph, but she’s also pregnant, and we all know that baby’s not his. Mary knows as well as anybody that this out-of-wedlock pregnancy could be grounds for the authorities to have her stoned for adultery. Best case scenario, Joseph calls off the wedding quietly and Mary is left to raise this mysterious baby alone. All things considered, I can see why Mary might want to be meek and mild, to fade into the background and out of the story.

But that is not what she does! The Angel Gabriel appears to Mary and tells her that she will give birth to the child who will be called the Son of God, Emmanuel. And instead of fading meekly into the background, Mary says “Yes. Here I Am. Let’s do this.”

And then she goes to see her cousin Elizabeth, to share the good news, because Mary is bursting with a joy that she can hardly contain. A joy that finally overflows into song.

And oh, what a song it is! Mary’s song, often called the Magnificat, has been set to thousands of tunes and musical arrangements throughout Christian history. Mary started singing this song over 2,000 years ago, and the Church literally hasn’t stopped singing it since.

And just like Mary herself, the song she sings is neither meek nor mild. Quite the contrary, it’s a song to make kings and queens and politicians shake in their shoes. “God has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly,” sings Mary. “He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.” Mary sings about how the child in her womb will change the world, and save the world, and turn the whole world upside down.

Mary’s song is joyful, and it is radical. It is personal, and it is political. It is a song of joy, and a song justice. Because in the Kingdom of God, the two cannot be separated – there is no joy without justice, and no justice without joy. Mary sings and sings, and through the ages other

voices have joined in. So much so that, if we are looking for the marks of the Church today, I would suggest that the Church can be found anywhere that people are singing Mary's song.

I want to tell y'all a story about some friends of mine who have been singing Mary's song recently.

My friend Denise is a Presbyterian pastor and one of the two Co-Moderators of our Presbyterian denomination. And Denise has been singing Mary's song so loudly these days that she nearly got arrested for it! Two weeks ago, Denise and several other Christian and Jewish leaders were escorted off the premises of the US Capitol and threatened with arrest because they were praying, praying for the poor.

They were on Capitol Hill to launch an interfaith movement called "The Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival." This movement was started fifty years ago by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., but lost momentum after his assassination. And now a new generation is taking up this work under the leadership of a Disciples of Christ pastor, Rev. William Barber.

Rev. Barber has been singing Mary's song on behalf of the *40.6 million people*¹ in the United States of America who live in poverty. Rev. Barber sings, "We believe that people should not live in or die from poverty in the richest nation ever to exist."² And Mary sings along, "God has filled up the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty."

Denise and Rev. Barber have been singing Mary's song, and thousands of people of faith across the country have started to join in. They are singing Mary's song by listening to, and learning from, and getting to know people who are poor. They are singing Mary's song by praying publicly for people who don't make enough money to feed, clothe, and house their children. They are singing Mary's song by advocating for the poor, and raising their voices in our nation's halls of power.

They are singing Mary's song because they, too, know there is no joy without justice, and no justice without joy. They are singing Mary's song because know that Jesus comes to bring good news of great joy for all people, and that that news is not just personal, but also political.

There's that word again – political. That's a hard word for us, isn't it? When we hear the world 'political', we think of bitter partisanship, of Democrats and Republicans, left and right. But that's not the kind of 'political' that Mary sings about, nor is it the kind of 'political' that is driving the Moral Revival of the Poor People's Campaign.

Rev. Barber puts it this way: "Our movement," he says, "is not conservative or liberal, not left or right. Am I a liberal? Sure, I'm a liberal: I want to share the love of Jesus Christ as *liberally* as I possibly can! Am I a conservative? Of course, I'm a conservative! I want to *conserve* the teachings of Jesus Christ, who taught us to love our neighbors and to give what we have to the poor."

Mary, and Denise, and Rev. Barber remind us that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is a political Gospel, but they're not talking tweets or talking heads. Rather, when we confess that our Gospel is political, we are saying that our faith as disciples of Jesus Christ must show forth in our whole lives. That we are called to be Christians in public. That the way we live should be shaped by those teachings of Jesus that we want to *conserve*, and that we should spread the love we have received in Jesus Christ as *liberally* as we possibly can. That every day, at work or at school, with our friends or our family or with total strangers, we should be singing Mary's song so joyfully that the people around us can't help but join in!

Friends there are many ways for us to sing Mary's song. We can feed people who are hungry. We can get to know, and spend time with people who are homeless. We can take up the cause of people who are poor.

In just a few minutes, our Mission Committee will share with us a new way that we can sing Mary's song together, as a church. They will tell us how they've heard God's call for this congregation to adopt Enos García Elementary School and the Las Cumbres Nurture Center. They'll invite us to join in this holy work of showing up for children and families in our community. They'll invite us to join them in singing Mary's song.

So, friends, as we wait for the coming of our Lord, what do you think: Will we sing along?

¹ <https://poorpeoplescampaign.org/index.php/audit/>

² <https://poorpeoplescampaign.org/index.php/fundamental-principles/>