

# *Great Expectations*

## *Luke 1:39-55*

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Every year at this time, Mary comes into the spotlight in a way that she does only one other time, at the foot of the cross. Like a bookmark, her presence in the story signifies where the human story of Jesus begins and where it ends. As significant as it seems this time of year, the story of Jesus' birth is recorded only by two of the four gospel writers: Matthew and Luke.

In Matthew's birth story, Mary never says a word. She is mentioned five times during the story, but always identified as the wife of Joseph or the mother of Jesus. Matthew doesn't give us much of an opportunity to get to know her. Reading only Matthew's story, you could easily imagine that Mary is only a submissive and silent wife and a humble mother. But when you get to know Luke's Mary in today's story, you realize that Luke isn't having any of it. Luke gives Mary a major role in the birth narrative, mentioning her name twelve times.

While Matthew's angel comes to Joseph in a dream to announce the birth of the child, Luke's angel appears directly to Mary in the light of day. Mary and the angel have a conversation in which Mary receives and responds to the overwhelming news of her miraculous pregnancy. Having heard this news, Mary heads off to the Judean countryside to visit her cousin Elizabeth. Neither Joseph nor Zechariah, Elizabeth's husband, makes an appearance in this story, only Elizabeth and Mary. Once again, Mary enters the conversation, giving voice to her own thoughts and feelings.

Luke's Mary is no pawn. Not only does she serve as the bearer of the Christ-child, but she is God's messenger, giving voice to God's deepest desires for the world. In her song, she begins by praising God for bestowing her with favor and doing great things for her, a lowly servant. She is a young, unmarried woman with no status in the society in which she lives. "You couldn't get much lower in those days than to be a woman in a patriarchal society, a Jew under Roman occupation, and a peasant in a land of plenty."<sup>1</sup>

She magnifies the Lord because the same God who has shown her favor also lifts up the lowly and fills the hungry with good things. She rejoices in God her Savior because of God's intervention into the lives of those of no account. I can sing that tune. And oh how I long to join the choir in singing Pergolesi's setting of this well-known canticle that they will offer later in the service. But there's a part of me that, frankly, does not want to join them, not just because I haven't attended a single rehearsal, but because I do not know if I can make her song my own.

I mean, don't you get what she's saying? This is no sweet lullaby she is singing in anticipation of the birth of the baby Jesus. This is no quaint confession of a personal relationship with God. It's a downright revolutionary political statement about who God lifts up and who God brings down.

The same God whom Mary praises for lifting the lowly also brings down the powerful from their thrones and sends the rich away empty. "Mary sings not just

a solo aria about her own destiny, but a freedom song on behalf of all [who are young or poor or refugees] in the land. She sings a song of freedom for all who, in their poverty and their wretchedness, still believe that God will make a way where there is no way.”<sup>2</sup>

And frankly, I fear that I belong to the crowd that gets brought down. “Can Mary’s God truly be our Lord and our God -- the God who overturns the way the world works, who elects the least and the last to bring in the kingdom, whose judgment in every sense will save the poor, the wronged, and the oppressed? Can the God who is going to knock the powerful off their peacock thrones, their stock exchange seats, their professional chairs, and their benches of judgment really be our God? Can we really praise this God – Mary’s God?”<sup>3</sup>

Lest we think this song is some starry-eyed naïveté, some great big mixed-up expectation on the part of Mary, look at what God is already doing in the story of her visit with Elizabeth. Elizabeth is an old, barren woman, scorned for her inability to bear children. And Mary is an unmarried, pregnant teenager living in poverty and facing shame. What in the world is God doing here?

According to Luke, what God is doing is making known God’s vision for the world, not through someone accorded status in society, not through someone to whom people would actually listen, but through these two miraculously pregnant women who are themselves preparing to birth a revolution. Imagine that, if you can. “If Mary’s song is [the song of the season in which we wait for the coming of God in the flesh], then Mary’s God has a future, and her God will bring us the future. And this is the point of Advent -- indeed, this is the turning point -- not only for Mary, but for us all.”<sup>4</sup>

We know that God will bring us the future because God is already bringing in the future-- a revolutionary future where the long ago memories of failing minds are honored as if they were priceless gifts; where Jews and Muslims and Christians open their homes to one another instead of plotting the others’ destruction; where parents of murdered Amish children care for the family of the murderer instead of calling for his head; and where homeless men bring into their only shelter a medically-fragile man who has wandered away from his home in the dead of winter so they can bathe him, clothe him, and feed him.

See what future God is bringing to our lives, a future in which we can imagine ourselves. “So sing it again, Mary. Sing to us of your God. Sing on, Mary, sing on, till your song at last becomes ours. Sing, till all the world hears you and makes your lines its own. And when your Son returns with his angels in power, may we join them and you and the whole company of heaven in singing, ‘Glory to God in the highest!’ Glory to the God of Mary, the woman whose freeing Son, and whose freedom song, will yet be our own.”<sup>5</sup>

## Notes

1. Joyce Holladay, “Living the Word,” *Sojourners Magazine Online* (December 1994-January 1995).
2. James F. Kay, “Mary’s Song – And Ours,” *Christian Century* (December 10, 1997): 1157.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*

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