

# *How Can I Keep From Singing?*

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First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Glen Ellyn, Illinois

Scripture: Luke 1:46-55, The Magnificat

Hymn 426, New Century Hymnal, “My Life Flows in on Endless Song”

This sermon moves back and forth between the words of the preacher and the voice of a soprano soloist, singing one verse at a time of the hymn “My Life Flows on in Endless Song.”

(A soprano soloist sings verse 1)

My life flows on in endless song; above earth's lamentations, I hear the sweet, though far off hymn that hails a new creation. Through all the tumult and the strife, I hear the music ringing. It finds an echo in my soul. How can I keep from singing?

In a true story from the Chicago Tribune, a bride to be whose wedding was planned for September 9 found out on July 28 that her fiancé was carrying on with another woman. The evidence was irrefutable, and the wedding was less than two weeks away. The bride, Kyle Paxman, called off her wedding.

But not the reception. The bride and her mother found that while they could cancel the band, the florist, and the photographer, they would still be responsible for the whopping bill for a four course dinner for 125 people. So the bride decided, in her own words, “to turn this into something positive.” She rearranged the guest list slightly, removing all the men. Can you blame her? Then she turned this women's only party into a benefit for two charities, one to help poor children in her home state of Vermont and another to empower women in developing countries. Instead of bringing wedding gifts, the guests wrote checks.

And Mary said,  
“My soul magnifies the Lord,  
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
He has shown strength with his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.  
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;  
he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty.”

For yes, those wedding guests who had expected a grand and luxurious wedding did leave with their purses a little emptier, but I doubt they left with empty hearts, for in their emptiness, the hungry could be filled with good things. This is a bride who didn't get to wear her wedding dress, didn't get to feed her husband the wedding cake, and didn't get to throw her bouquet. She did, however, go on her honeymoon in Tahiti. She took her mom.

When I read this story in the Tribune, I loved this woman. She reminded me of

Mary, faced with a radical change in plans, but unwilling to be undone by it. When her own situation might have overwhelmed her, she turned her attention to the poor and hungry and to a hurting world. By turning disappointment into an occasion for generosity, this bride was a woman who could not keep from singing.

(Soloist sings verse 2)

What though my joys and comforts die? My Savior still is living. What though the shadows gather round? A new son Christ is giving. No storm can shake my in-most calm, while to that Rock I'm clinging. Since Love commands both heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing?

This beautiful hymn is called "My Life Flows on in Endless Song," and in various 19th century hymnals, it was attributed to different poets, including Anna Warner. We don't know very much about it. We just know that it speaks to the power of the human spirit when it is centered on God. But the one verse we do know more about is the third verse, which was written in the 1950's and added on. While this hymn appears in Methodist, Unitarian, Universalist, and Disciples hymnals, the United Church of Christ hymnal includes the third verse that was written later and became famous outside of the world of church music.

The song went on to be recorded by Pete Seeger. Bruce Springsteen recorded it in his 2006 cover album "We Shall Overcome – the Seeger Sessions." And now, a hymn that had been forgotten by the 1950's is one of our favorites once again, all because of that new third verse. It was written by poet Doris Plenn, when her friends were imprisoned during the McCarthy era. At this time in American history, citizens lost their jobs, their friends, even their freedom, for being (or simply being accused of being) communists or communist sympathizers. Cartoonists like Walt Kelly, entertainers like Zero Mostel, pastors like the Methodist Bishop G. Bromley Oxnam, and Boston Community Church's Don Lothrop, and yes, this poet Doris Plenn stood up publicly against this persecution of friends and strangers.<sup>1</sup>

Whatever you may think of communism as political ideology, historians look back on the McCarthy era as a time when we fell far short of our nation's promise. This country, founded as a haven for those seeking religious and political liberty, lost sight of that purpose in a time of fear. We became the thing we hated, a land where people could be persecuted for their political beliefs. That is a history worth remembering because, at any time we could find ourselves living it again. And when that day comes, or if it has come already today, let us pray that we have the saints and poets to raise a protest song.

So what gave a poet like Doris Plenn the courage to stand against the imprisonment of artists and thinkers? Raised in North Carolina, she had learned this song from her Quaker grandmother who told her, "Honey, this is my favorite song, and I want you to always remember it. It was made up years ago when people like us were being thrown in jail for their beliefs." For people who are persecuted for their religious beliefs or for their political beliefs, Doris Plenn added this verse because she could not keep from singing.

(Soloist sings verse 3)

When tyrants tremble, sick with fear, and hear their death knells ringing; when

friends rejoice both far and near, how can I keep from singing? In prison cell and dungeon vile our thoughts to them are winging. When friends by shame are unde-filed, how can I keep from singing?

Mary, a young teenager, had almost nothing to her name except the security that came with being engaged. Her fiancé Joseph had probably come into her life through the economic arrangements made between one poor working family and another. Yet Joseph would be Mary's ticket to safety, for without a home ahead of her, she would be absolutely vulnerable in a society that still viewed women as property.

There would be no grand wedding with a four course dinner for 125 people, but instead a long journey to Bethlehem for the couple to be registered. Mary lived in an age of political repression that would make the McCarthy era here look gentle and tame. Their country, Israel, was occupied by the super power of the day, the Roman Empire. And when the emperor called you to register yourself, for the purposes of taxation without representation, you did it because you had no choice.

And so, to a young woman who had few choices, appeared an angel, who said, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High...."

Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' An angelic announcement was how Mary discovered she was pregnant. An unwed, pregnant teenager, Mary was in a situation where now she had even fewer options. Could she tell Joseph that she was pregnant with the child of God and appear to be insane? Or would it be better to offer a more logical explanation that would mark her as unfaithful?

She decided to tell the truth, as strange as it was. Mary, betrothed, at least for now, and off to register in strange land, chose to do more than accept her fate. She rejoiced in it. In fact, we are told, she sang a song based upon the scriptures that had come before, a song we now call the "Magnificat," which begins with the extraordinary words, "My soul magnifies the Lord."

You know how this story goes, and you know how it ends. Mary tells Joseph the truth, he stands by her side, and her child is born and later chased by Herod, a bloodthirsty king. The little family flees to Egypt. You know how this story goes and the hardships that follow, but you also know this: Mary was about to give birth to a force of love that would forever change the world.

So in her pain, her fear, and her lack of choices in life, she realized that she did have one choice. She could cry, or she could sing. And such was Mary's blessing to us: she couldn't keep from singing.

(Soloist sings verse 4)

I lift my eyes; the cloud grows thin; I see the blue above it. And day by day, this pathway smoothes, since first I learned to love it. The peace of Christ makes fresh my heart, a fountain ever springing. All things are mine, since I am Christ's – how can I keep from singing?

Note

1. Carl Scovel, *Never Far from Home: Stories from the Radio Pulpit* ( Skinner House Books, 2004), 78f.