

We are in a series called, "Picture Perfect Christmas." We all have ideas of what is a perfect Christmas: music, trees, and lights; or quality time with family or friends. But we also feel the not-so-perfect elements of the season. Stress, busyness, and disappointment reach their peak during the Christmas season. We are reminded life isn't as perfect as we hoped it would be.

We're looking at the lives of people at the first Christmas and how the arrival ("advent") of Jesus changed how they lived. Today, we're going to take another look at Mary's story.

Last week, Mark showed us Mary's experience of hearing from the angel of God that she would be the mother of Jesus. The encounter ends with Mary's statement, "I am the Lord's servant." It is a statement of obedience and humility, but it also represents a massive life change for Mary. Her life changed course because of the purpose of God. If you place yourself in her story, the question resonates, what would be my answer to the angel's news?

Today, we're going to read the next part of Mary's experience: a song or poem that she declared to God. Often called "The Magnificent" from the Latin translation of the first line, this song represents Mary's process of her decision to put her life in the hands of God. She was willing to trust that God is good and God has good for her.

And Mary said:

**"My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me - holy is his name.  
Luke 1:46-49**

What's interesting about Mary's words is the format. This is interesting for two reasons. First, songs are the language of the soul and spirit. Lyrics express what words alone can not. Bono, the iconic lead singer of U2, said this about songwriting, "Music is the language of the spirit. I think ideas and words are our excuse as songwriters to allow our heart or our spirit to run free."

Not only is music the language of the spirit, but, second, music is a vehicle for the spirit to declare truth. Good music speaks truth. It is not a one-time act, but lyrics lead us to speak over and over. Music helps us to sing what we know is true even when we wrestle with it. For example, in the Psalmist, the songwriter would speak to his soul, speaking truth to himself (and his listeners).

This is what Mary did. She expressed something about her "soul" and "spirit." They were different words, but perhaps may be best understood as parallelism - using similar phrases to say one thing. The soul and the spirit are what one scholar, Marvin Richardson Vincent, has called, "the highest, deepest, noblest part of our humanity." It is the spirituality of you that interacts with God. It is the authenticity of you.

The noblest part of Mary's humanity celebrated God. Why? Because God was doing good in the world, and good for her. You can see it in the phrase "...the Mighty One has done great things for me." Or as another translation puts it, "He who is mighty has done great things for me" (NET).

So, this song was Mary's declaration of soul and spirit. It was Mary's decision to entrust her life to the character of God. He is mighty and who God is, has transformed her life for good.

**His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors." vv.50-55**

What did Mary see about God that captured her attention? These next verses are soaked in Old Testament imagery, but Mary chose to trust that God is merciful, just, and faithful.

First, mercy heals the misery of mistakes. Someone once put it this way: "grace takes away the fault, mercy the misery" (quoted by Vincent). The mercy of God means God deeply cares that people get a new start. Second, Mary believes God is just. In this context, that means God puts right what the world gets wrong. The proud - those who cling to power at the expense of others - may find themselves on the outside. The humble - those who the world looks down upon, who have been cast aside - may be the recipient of God's favor. Third, Mary saw that God is faithful. Humanity has been a mess since Adam and Eve. We ruin relationships, we turn our own lives upside down, and we struggle to listen to the call of God leading us to something better. We stumble towards grace. Thankfully, as Mary put it, God "remembers to be merciful" - not that He is in danger of forgetting to extend mercy, but that we are in regular need of it.

This is the God whom Mary chose to trust. In the midst of her changing world, she spoke words of the soul and spirit. She took a risk to trust that God, who is unseen, is not done working in the world for His glory and our good. And when she did this - when she put her life in the pathway of a good God, her song was joy.

For centuries, Jesus' followers throughout the world have chosen themes to highlight each week of December through the lighting of a candle. This week, the theme is joy. Joy seems like an abstract, distant idea, or an elusive, ethereal goal. But maybe, like Mary showed, joy is more accessible than we realize. Joy is birthed when we put our soul and spirit, deepest, noblest part of ourselves, in the hands of God.

The apostle Paul described Jesus and the transformation of people in this way,

**“For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God’s glory displayed in the face of Christ.” II Cor. 4:6**

In Jesus, the creative power of God is re-creating people today. As William Barclay once said, “Christ enables us to see ourselves.” What does this mean for you? I encourage you to create space this Christmas season to be honest with God and make a choice to trust your life to the hands of God. What I want for you to do this Christmas season is to entrust yourself to the character of God. Take a risk and be honest with God. May your wrestling and your declarations lead you to places of greater joy.

One last piece as we close. Truth of who God is resonates despite where the declaration begins. That is embodied by the story behind the Christmas song, “O Holy Night.”

In 1847, in a small village north of Avignon, France, a local priest asked a poet to write a poem for Christmas Mass. The poet was happy to help. Using the Gospel of Luke, he imagined what it would have been like to be there the night of Jesus' birth. The poet asked a friend and well-known composer to put the poem to music. “Cantique de Noel” was created.

The song quickly gained popularity in the Church - until people learned the background of the writers. The poet was not a church person, and the musical composer was Jewish. Neither man had a belief that Jesus was Messiah, and the church denounced the song.

A decade later (around the time of the Civil War) an American, John Sullivan Dwight, introduced the song to America. An abolitionist, Dwight was compelled by the line, “Chains shall he

break, for the slave is our brother; and in his name all oppression shall cease.” Fast forward to Christmas Eve 1906, and the song was part of a historical event. A former chemist under Thomas Edison made the first spoken word broadcast over the radio. He read from the gospel of Luke. He then picked up his violin and played a song. What was the song? “O Holy Night.”

“O Holy Night” was the first song ever played over the radio. What started in a small village by two men who didn't believe but sensed that something grand happened two thousand years early, now is sung all over the world. It is the continuation of Mary's song: God is good, and working good in the world for people through the coming of Jesus.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC South. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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Catalog No.1436-2Sz