



“Mary’s Song”

Second Impressions Sermon Series: Mary, the Mother of Jesus

Scripture – Luke 1:26-38; 46-55

Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson

Sunday, July 14, 2019

When I was a little girl, my mom would stand over my bed each night and sing me to sleep:

*Jesus, tender shepherd, hear me.
Bless your little lamb tonight.
Through the darkness, be thou near me.
Keep me safe 'til morning light.*

With this soothing melody echoing in my ears, I would fall asleep comforted in the assurance that God was with me in the darkness. Sometimes, when I’d wake in the middle of the night — my mind disturbed by unsettling images from the news — Mom would sit on the edge of the bed and sing this lullaby to me again, until I was calm enough to drift off to sleep once more.

As I grew — too old now for bedtime lullabies, too old for my mom to tuck me at night — this song stuck with me. Even now, when I’m feeling anxious or homesick or perplexed, I sometimes find myself humming this lullaby as I will my racing mind to quiet itself and slip into sleep. I cannot remember a time before I knew these words: *Jesus, tender shepherd, hear me. Bless your little lamb tonight.* By the time I found myself in worship as a preschooler; by the time I could recite the Lord’s Prayer; by the time I received my first Bible in third grade, this simple song had already taken up permanent residence in my heart. So, even before I knew how to write my own name, I knew Jesus as a loving shepherd who cared deeply for his sheep, including me.

This lullaby, which lulled me to sleep night after night, shaped my understanding of the God who leads us beside still waters and walks with us through the darkest valley — the God who is always close at hand. Yes, songs shape us. The lyrics, the tunes, the memories they evoke. That’s why I now sing this lullaby to my own little girl as I lay her in her crib at day’s end and commend her to God’s tender care:

*Through the darkness, be thou near me;
keep me safe 'til morning light.*

We all have songs that shape us: Some of them are the lullabies of our childhoods; some are the classic hits that blasted from tinny car speakers on family road trips. Or the anthems we learned in elementary school, or the songs we sang around the campfire. Of course for many of us it is the hymns of the church — those sacred songs that

form faith and leave indelible imprints on our hearts ... so much so that they anchor us in moments of crisis or despair, their lyrics the words that slip from our lips in an unbidden prayer.

Yes, songs have power. And so it is with Mary's song — that jubilant canticle that echoes from the pages of Scripture: *My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior!* It is a song we sing often enough during Advent and Christmas, when Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus take center stage. But, then — when the manger is restored to its place in the attic — Mary's voice falls silent, along with most references to the one who bore Jesus into this world.

Of course, we see Mary all around us. On bumper stickers and window decals. On necklaces that adorn our friends' necks. On the lawn of the local Catholic church. My neighbor has a statue of Mary in his garden, so I see her every morning when I walk out my front door. With the exception of Jesus, himself, Mary is the figure who has featured most prominently in religious art and paraphernalia throughout the centuries. But we Presbyterians don't give her much thought. You see Mary was a casualty, so-to-speak, of the Protestant Reformation, when reformers like Martin Luther and John Calvin took issue with her role as a mediator between the faithful and God.¹ So they stripped our churches of her image and our practices of her influence. And while I agree with the reformers that we need no mediator but Christ, I mourn that Mary has lost her place in our tradition. For the most part, we've forgotten her and the role she played in our faith story.

But I cannot forget her song. That magnificent song that still has power to shape us. That radical song that — I imagine — might even have shaped her son, Jesus. It is a wonder to me that an unwed, teenaged girl — as Mary was when the angel, Gabriel, visited her — should respond to the news of an unplanned pregnancy with a song of resounding praise. Of course, *we* know how this story turns out; *we* know that the birth of Jesus is extremely good news. But, for Mary, who could have been cast out of the community or killed for turning up pregnant, this news must have been nothing short of terrifying. So I marvel that the words, *My soul magnifies the Lord*, should so quickly rise to her lips.

Most biblical scholars will tell you that the Song of Mary echoes the Song of Hannah, recorded in the Old Testament book of First Samuel. So, I wonder: Was *this* the hymn that shaped Mary's faith and left an indelible imprint on her heart? Had she heard her mother singing Hannah's Song as she bent over her mending? Did Mary grow up singing this song as her family made the pilgrimage from Nazareth to Jerusalem? Perhaps this hymn is the one that anchored her as she wavered between panic at the prospect of telling Joseph she was with child and wonder at the workings of God. Maybe these are the words that steadied her heart when she worried over the responsibilities of motherhood, the words she clung to when nothing else made sense. So, in a moment of hope-filled exuberance, she opened her mouth to sing: *My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior!*

And, perhaps, she kept singing. Maybe she hummed this beloved tune throughout her pregnancy, so when Jesus first heard his mother's voice through the waters of her womb, it was none-other than the sound of her voice raised in thanksgiving and praise. Maybe this song was the lullaby Mary whispered as she tucked Jesus into bed each night. And the one she used to soothe her son when a bad dream woke him in the wee hours of the morning. So that — by the time he was old enough to join the neighborhood kids in a game of tag — these words had already taken up residence in his heart. From his mother's song, he had already come to know the might and mercy of God.

Maybe Mary sang this hymn time and again as she and Joseph took their family on the yearly pilgrimage to Jerusalem. So that — at twelve years old, when Jesus sat among the teachers in the temple — he had the

¹ Brittany E. Wilson, "Mary and Her Interpreters," in *Women's Bible Commentary*, edited by Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe and Jacqueline E. Lapsley (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 515.

confidence to speak of faith, for he knew deep in his bones the truth his mother sung: *the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is God's name*. I like to imagine that — during the thirty years Jesus spent at home before beginning his ministry — he overheard Mary singing as she tended her garden and kneaded dough and set the table ... So often that Jesus would find himself humming the familiar melody as he played with his siblings and walked to the synagogue and worked in his father's carpentry shop.

And maybe, just maybe — as he set out to summon those first disciples and heal the sick and proclaim the kingdom of God — Jesus kept humming his mother's song. Perhaps her song of praise became the soundtrack of his ministry: As he multiplied five loaves and two fish into a feast to feed thousands, he recalled the words, *God has filled the hungry with good things*. And, when he overturned the tables in the temple, Jesus sang to himself, *God has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly*. And, as he spun a story of a forgiving father welcoming a prodigal son home, he proclaimed, *God's mercy extends from generation to generation*.

And, even as Jesus embraced his mother's song — walking in step with its rhythms; giving witness to its words with every parable he told — Mary kept on singing. After all, this hymn was sealed upon her heart ... there, always, in the recesses of her mind to assure her of God's steadfast love. So perhaps this is the song that anchored her shattered heart when her firstborn son hung upon a cross ... its lyrics slipping from her lips, giving voice to a prayer sighed within her soul. Perhaps this hymn was the rock she clung to until the stone was rolled away and she was able to rejoice once more: *Our Rescuer has come to the help of Israel ... in remembrance of the bond of faithful love spoken to our ancestors*.

Yes, songs have power. I imagine that Mary's song had the power to shape Jesus' ministry. And I think it has the power to shape ours as well. Mary does not show up a lot in the Gospel of Luke. After Jesus sets out to "bring good news to the poor [and] proclaim release to the captives," his mother fades into the background (Luke 4:18). But when Jesus' earthly ministry is done, after he has risen from the grave and ascended into heaven, we do meet Mary once more. According to the book of Acts (which is the sequel to Luke's Gospel), she is there on the day of Pentecost, when God pours out the Spirit to equip the disciples to continue Christ's work (Acts 1:14).

And I wonder, as Mary sat in that upper room with Peter and John, James and Andrew, was she singing? Did that canticle of praise, once again, rise to her lips? *My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior! For the Creator has looked with favor on the lowliness of [these servants]*. Did her song, which certainly underscored Jesus' ministry, now give shape to the church's ministry, as well?

Centuries later Mary's song still echoes from the pages of Scripture. It fills our sacred spaces; it takes up residence in our hearts. And it can still give shape to our witness and work. We walk in its rhythms every time we gather at table with our friends from Family Promise or Friendship House and proclaim through bread broken and shared that, yes, *God fills the hungry with good things*. We hum its melody whenever we demand justice for neighbors who might look differently or pray differently, for we know in our hearts that, *God lifts up the lowly*. We embrace its hope whenever we welcome those who are hurting, those who are lonely, those who seek forgiveness or belonging or peace, for mother Mary has taught us: *God's mercy extends from generation to generation*.

And when we do these things, I think — maybe, just maybe— Mary keeps on singing: *My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior!* Friends, may our hearts join in her song.

Prayers of the People* ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

O God our Savior —

Our hearts are startled by the magnitude of your blessing, and our spirits rejoice in your mercy. With both whispered hopes and shouts of joy, we echo Mary's song as we praise you, Mighty and Merciful One, and bring our prayers before you.

In your mercy, **Lord, hear our prayer.**

We pray for that day when your light illumines our weary world, a day when all people will be treated with dignity and compassion. We lift before you all those who are feared as strangers, who are mocked for their difference, who find no welcome among us. (*Silence*)

In your mercy, **Lord, hear our prayer.**

We pray for that day when your love grows in our weary world — a day when hunger is no more, when food is accessible to all, when no child's dream is squelched because of a poverty of resources or imagination. We lift before you those whose hopes are routinely trampled, whose opportunities are limited by systems that are unresponsive to either need or possibility. (*Silence*)

In your mercy, **Lord, hear our prayer.**

We pray for that day when hope blooms again for a world wearied by human appetites, a day when creation is renewed and stewardship is understood as a divine trust. We lift before you the plight of ecosystems stressed by climate change, and the challenges of environments exploited. (*Silence*)

In your mercy, **Lord, hear our prayer.**

We pray for that day, O Lord, when joy will take deep root, and all of creation will join in Mary's song, a day when all know the justice, abundance, and wholeness of your *shalom*. We lift before you all who yearn for justice, who know want, who suffer illness or brokenness. (*Silence*)

In your mercy, **Lord, hear our prayer.**

God of surprise, God of promise—you turn the world upside down and invite us to be agents of your change. Move us away from complicity with the proud and the powerful; move us toward a joyful and faith-filled “yes” to your vision of wholeness.

This we pray in the name of Mary's Son, Jesus the Christ, who gave us words to pray: **Our Father ...**

**The structure and imagery of this prayer borrows heavily from the text of “Light Dawns on a Weary World” by Mary Louise Bringle (2001), published in Glory to God (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013).*