



December 19, 2021
Rev. Dr. Thomas Evans
Luke 1:39-55



Christmas Notes:
The Voice of the People is the Voice of God

There are hymns we sing in quiet contemplation that grow from deep reflection. And then there are the spontaneous notes that burst forth from good news that takes us off guard.

When the soldier surprises his family by appearing as Santa at Christmastime, “Hallelujah!” Mom shouts.

When you received that promotion you worked so hard for, “Glory to God!” bursts forth.

Or when the baby you expected turned out to be twins, “My Lord, what a morning!” Dad proclaims.

Mary was expecting a child and it brought this kind of ecstatic joy! The text we read this morning is known as the *Magnificat*. This title comes from the Latin for “magnify”, since this was Mary’s song of joy, magnifying the Lord for the great work of redemption that would be wrought through her.

The surprise she received was historic, and as a result, it has been one of the most composed texts in the history of the world, at least from the 1400’s! For Presbyterians, we encounter this text and song once a year, but in other traditions, it is a weekly occurrence. As a result, many of the greats have set the *Magnificat*: Bach, Tallis, Tchaikovsky, Charles Gounod, César Frank, Ralph Vaughan Williams, and so many more.

In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, rather than the *Magnificat*, they sing *The Ode of the Theotokos*, a song about Mary’s role as the mother of God. It is a chant with a lone voice lining out the root text of Mary’s words, inviting others to join in the refrain, “More honorable than the cherubim and more glorious beyond compare than the Seraphim, thou who without stain barest God, the Word and art truly Theotokos, we magnify thee.”

These are words Presbyterians would not normally sing, for we assert no one is without sin, not even mother Mary, except for Jesus himself. “Theotokos” meaning “God-bearer”, refers to Mary’s station as not only the bearer of the human Jesus, but the divine Jesus as well. This title has been hotly debated throughout history, leading reformers like John Calvin to offer scathing critiques.

In my mind, more importantly in the midst of all these ancient traditions and theological debates, it is easy to forget that at the root of the story is a very real, very young girl who is filled with hope. This means whatever our theology concludes, we all have something to learn from Mary.

Her older cousin, Elizabeth, is instantly moved when Mary arrives – or rather, the child in her womb is. She senses something powerful within this young girl. Not only the power of the one who was growing within her, but the power

of a young girl and her voice to speak hope to the downtrodden and the hopeless.

Mary is given a piece of good news, a child to be born. And what makes her remarkable, at least from this Presbyterian's perspective, is not a lofty sinlessness, but a very early-rooted selflessness. Amidst all the glorious, ethereal, and angelic music, it can be too easy to forget the revolutionary character of this song. Though she sings for all humanity, her song speaks most directly to displaced populations and those who go to bed hungry at night. Thus her words, "...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;" and, "...he has filled the hungry with good things..."

And so this story grows wider; it begins with a young girl and an angel, then her cousin, then shepherds, then Wisemen, and so on. Small beginnings can become a great work of the Lord. Thus, like the *Magnificat's* musical settings, the true story builds and builds and builds. Because what was good news for one person, the blessing of a life, she turned beyond herself to see its potential for others.

According to author and scholar, Daisy Machado, of Union Seminary, this text has special significance for Latino/a communities that is also the story of the Latino Protestant community in this country.

...Ours is story of victory, of overcoming, of beating the odds. Our story echoes the song of that young woman of yesteryear who faced the scandal of being a single mother to the glory of God! It is my prayer that we can

62 East 92nd Street • New York, NY 10128 • (212) 289-4400 • www.brickchurch.org

all join in singing "Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord, rejoice, rejoice, my spirit, in God my Savior". Many Latinos have come here in loss; of their home, of family connections and more, but have come to America with hope in their hearts; to find a place for the poor and dispossessed. This is who Mary is singing for.

In light of Dr. Machado's insights, our Advent preparations can find an additional focus. To be informed by Mary's song means we should be preparing the world for Christ's birth by ensuring more and more that the poor have good news brought to them and that the hungry are filled with good things.

You and I may not be musical composers but we can compose a world that will be cause for songs and souls to magnify the Lord. Think of the ways our young children did so with their reverse offering from a few weeks ago. One donated the money to help the vaccine to get to more families on the margins and two children donated their money to the hospital where they were born, to help more children.

The good news brought to Mary led her not to a self-centered song, but one that brings her joy for her people. It makes me wonder, what is that song for our country? What song of hope would bring our voices to sound as one?

There have been so many ways that God has blessed me, but unlike Mary, my first instinct is not how the blessings I have received can multiply blessings for others. This is where I seek to grow and hope you too will compose your own song of hope for the world out of thanks to the Christ child.

In some ways, we are perhaps too isolated from the backbreaking hardships of the people for whom Mary sang. Yet, when I hear their stories and see their courage, I am in awe. In awe of the people for whom Mary sang, who still find hope in their heart, hope in our Lord. People with no power in this world, but who wield the mighty instrument of righteousness, who through God's grace, like Mary, find their voice.

On the Saturday of Thanksgiving, on the way to my mother's, I was picked up at the train station by a familiar driver, Milson, a Haitian cab driver. On the short drive he talked about his Haiti heartbreak. He mentioned the many internal problems – one's like Israel had so long ago: corrupt rulers, famine and more – but even more, he underscored the history of exploitation that brought them to this place. He knew of my several trips there, but this time he seemed more ardent, more passionate, more determined. He spoke proudly of Haiti being the first country of recent history to fight for independence and to win it, but also how they continue to pay for the hard fought freedom.

I cannot imagine with everything Haiti has encountered, like earthquakes, presidential assassinations, and more, how Milson can possibly hope, but he is still working hard on building a business – a motel in Port Au Prince. He proudly showed me pictures. "It will have everything. Luxury! Just like in America." Listening to his story brought to mind a Haitian saying, "vwa pep la se vwa Bondye", "The voice of the people is the voice of God."

And then I thought again about Mary's song, and how that saying fits, "The voice of the

people is the voice of God". As we hear this song, or read the text, Mary's hope comes across as the will of God. But I wonder if it is even something more, perhaps it is even bolder that only a fifteen-year-old girl's would have the gumption to sing! So long ago, Mary set the pattern for that voice, and when that voice is bold enough, perhaps it even gets God to thinking! Moses convinced God to not release wrath on Israel, Jacob extracted a blessing in a divine wrestling match, and remember, Mary was the one who insisted Jesus turn water into wine.

Parents will often wait for a child to voice a concern or hope before actualizing it as a means to train the child into maturity. An act of love is more powerful when the idea comes from the child than the parent. Mary's song was the spur to lead God to spread that hope in all our hearts.

And perhaps her song was her unsubtle way of bargaining with God, "You want me to carry this child, then you be sure he fills the hungry with good things."

And feed them he did, 5,000, 4,000 and more.

May we all have the gumption of a 15-year-old girl, Mary, to sing a song of hope not for ourselves, but all those struggling, hungry and alone. Amen.