

Mary's Magnificat Luke 1:39-55

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Did you know that today's portion of scripture from the Gospel of Luke has its own name? Throughout history it has been known as **Mary's song**, or, based on Mary's first words in reply to aunt Elizabeth, '**My soul magnifies the Lord**, as the **Magnificat**.

Some other portions of Scripture can also claim a distinct name, like the Sermon on the Mount, or the Beatitudes, the Shema, the Decalogue, and the Love Chapter, but here is a portion of scripture, neither quoting God, nor Jesus, nor an Apostle nor a prophet – yet it has earned its own name.

The Magnificat – is a song of praise. More appropriately it might even be called the first Christmas Carol, because it was composed by Mary soon after she had been told that she was going to bear our Savior. And every Christmas, this first Christmas carol comes up somewhere in the scripture readings – but as we focus on the birth of Jesus, we seldom give Mary or her carol much thought.

Oh we see her in a few scenes ... hearing the angel, then very pregnant riding on a donkey, and finally holding the baby. But have you noticed, we don't ever think of her as speaking, or playing any other central role in the life of Jesus?

Yet, here is a bit of interesting information. Dr. Luke, Paul's traveling companion, stated that he had researched his gospel account by personally interviewing primary sources. **And the only source he would have had for his first two chapters** documenting all the events surrounding the birth of Jesus and cousin John, including the angelic messengers and visiting shepherds, the prophecies of Simeon and Anna, and Jesus' Jerusalem adventure at the age of twelve.....**was Mary**. So, what do you think about Mary now?

We Presbyterians often recite in the Apostles Creed, declaring that Jesus was "**born of the Virgin Mary**" and along with both Catholics and Orthodox, we do honor Mary as the mother of our Lord Christ Jesus. But we do not worship her as Catholics do, since such worship is due to God alone. And also because we disagree with certain Catholic beliefs about Mary that do not have Biblical support.

- like her perpetual virginity, which is hard to believe since Matthew's gospel account names his four brothers: *James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas*, along with an unspecified number of sisters (Matt. 13:55-56)
- Or, her freedom from actual and original sin, since she was just an ordinary human being like everyone else (*doctrine of Immaculate Conception, 1854*).
- And the idea that she did not die but was taken directly to heaven. (*Bodily Assumption, 1950*).
- We also reject Catholic theology that declares Mary as **Mediatrice**, as a co-redeemer with Jesus of humanity.

- Or that she is the one you need to pray to and through if you want your requests to get to God.

Nevertheless, you might argue that – just like her son – no woman has influenced western history and culture more than **Mary**. So perhaps she deserves a bit more attention from us than we usually give her... lest we be guilty of throwing the mother of the baby out with the bathwater.

How then should we Protestants think about and honor Mary?

Today's Scripture gives us a good starting point.

First off - Mary was a woman of exemplary faith.

Other than her Davidic lineage, Mary was an ordinary peasant girl, perhaps only fourteen or fifteen years of age, from a working class neighborhood in **Nazareth**; a village so insignificant that it is not mentioned in the Old Testament, or by the historian Josephus, or in the Jewish Talmud. In fact, Nazareth had such a low-class reputation, that when Philip came looking for his brother Nathanael, to tell him that they had perhaps found the Messiah – Jesus of Nazareth, Nathanael's reply was "*Can anything good come from Nazareth?*" (John 1:46).

Also, that Mary's angelic encounter took place in an ordinary house up there in the backcountry of Palestine, not the temple; and that she was quite alone at the time – so there was no one even to back up her story. But When the angel Gabriel foretold the birth of her son Jesus, Mary immediately responded in words of faith that have echoed through the centuries: "*Henaini*" **'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.'**

Afterwards, hearing that her cousin Elizabeth was six months along in an equally miraculous pregnancy – and probably desperately in need of someone to believe her story and help her figure out what to do next – Mary then travels a long four-day's walk down to Zachariah and Elizabeth's home in the hill country of Judah.

When Mary arrives, Elizabeth's unborn son John senses Jesus' presence – both of them still in the womb – and he leaps for joy startling Elizabeth, who then, filled with the Holy Spirit, exclaims with a loud cry, "***blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. Why is this granted that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ... And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.***" (Luke 1:42, 45). So, Mary stayed with Elizabeth until John was born, then herself now three-months pregnant, walked back home to face her family and Joseph her betrothed.

Yes Mary was a woman of great faith.

Catholics also remind us of another "Marian" truth that is easy to overlook but nevertheless stupendous. In some mysterious way the incarnation resulted not only from the work of God the Father, but also **from the will (the willingness) of the Mother, Mary**. Numerous church fathers have marveled at Mary's active cooperation in the history of salvation. According to Thomas Aquinas, **human redemption depended upon the consent of a pregnant teenager**. (Summa, III:30)

Surely she recognized the consequences of this pregnancy.

- At worst – stoning to death,
- Most likely a divorce from her betrothed – who was a respectable man.
- Certainly, the humiliation and shame that would be heaped upon her and her husband-to-be; conversations just loud enough to be overheard, about Mary's "condition."
- At best a change in all her plans and hopes for the future.

She did not ask to bear the Son of God, nor was she compelled to do so. She might have said no, or like Zechariah, responded to Gabriel's staggering annunciation in disbelief. But she did not shrink from God's call on her life, and instead enriched all humanity by her willing participation.

For these reasons Catholics honor Mary with the title of **Co-Redemptrix**, referring to her subordinate but essential participation in the redemption of humanity, by her willingness to give birth to Jesus and then share in His life, suffering, and death.

Surely, having heard Uncle Zechariah's prophecy over Jesus' cousin, along with those given by Simeon and Anna during His Temple dedication; then with the visit of the Magi and their flight to Egypt, horror struck at the news of babies being slaughtered in an attempt to eliminate hers....

don't you think that Mary would have become a careful student of the Scriptures thereafter – to see what the prophets had declared was the future for her

son – and what Simeon meant about how Jesus would one day *"like a sword, pierce her own soul?"*

I wonder what Mary thought of the Isaiah passages, about the Messiah being rejected, beaten, broken, killed in behalf of our sins? Mary had to be a woman of great faith and willingness to raise and protect this child – knowing the future that He faced and she faced with Him.

But Mary was more than just a woman of great faith, she also a woman of prophetic pronouncement. Her "Magnificat" moves from the deeply personal to the explicitly political.

Speaking about herself, Mary proclaims, ***"God my Savior, has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me."***

This peasant girl, who nine months later would bear the Son of God then goes on to praise God Almighty for ***"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."*** (Luke 1:48–49, 52–53).

I wonder what King Herod or Caesar Augustus would have thought had they heard her words? Because with the birthing of her son, of the Son of God, Mary boldly announced the inversion of conventional wisdom; dethroning political power, plundering rich people, and redistributing food supplies. The coming of this child signaled a new age and order.

Yes, knowing what she knew, Mary was faithful, willing, prophetic, and even grateful for the ministry that God her Savior now asked of her.

Finally, as Eastern Orthodox believers emphasize, the son of Mary would be the Son of God, **God made flesh**; and so they honor her with the title, **Theotokos** ("bearer of God").

In his poem, *The Annunciation*, John Donne marvels:

Salvation to all that will is nigh;
That All, which always is all everywhere,
Which cannot sin, and yet all sins must bear,
Which cannot die, yet cannot choose but die,

Lo, faithful virgin, yields Himself to lie

In prison, in thy womb; and though He there
Can take no sin, nor thou give, yet He will wear,
Taken from thence, flesh, which death's force may try.

Ere by the spheres time was created, thou
Wast in His mind, who is thy Son and Brother;
Whom thou conceivst, conceived; yea thou art now
Thy Maker's maker, and thy Father's mother;
Thou hast light in dark, and shutst in little room,
Immensity cloistered in thy dear womb.

Thus the term **theotokos** bestowed upon Mary by church fathers since the third century acknowledges her special role in redemption; she is nothing less than the "Mother of God." Using her name as an Anagram, George Herbert remarked, *how well her name an ARMY doth present, in whom the Lord of Hosts did pitch His tent.*

FAITHFUL, WILLING, PROPHETIC, POETIC. And If you wonder why Catholics and the Orthodox refer to Mary as the "**Blessed Virgin**," think again on the words of today's scripture.

*"Elizabeth said, **Blessed** are you among women and **blessed** is the fruit of your womb. And **blessed** is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.*

To which Mary responds, *"From now on all generations shall call me **blessed**,"*

Mary was truly blessed from her participation in the birth, life, painful death, and triumphant victory of her son, Jesus the Christ. And we are blessed in her sharing of these memories with us. So, honoring the Mother of God, leads to exaltation of the Son of God, which is precisely the message of Christmas.

Today as we come once again to the communion table to remember Christ's life given in redemption of ours, Let us join with Mary in declaring, *"My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.*