

Magnificat

If you have ever worked a retail job during Advent, which of course is what everyone else refers to as “The Christmas Season,” you have no doubt had a certain experience. I worked at an Eddie Bauer store one year in college, and Christmas there is an experience I remember even now. I am not referring to overwrought customers. Nor do I reference the carnage that is a store after the last customer has left on Christmas Eve... seriously, that store was picked cleaner than the Thanksgiving turkey. Even the cologne was sold out, and it was basically bug-spray.

No, I am referring to the phenomenon that is *store radio*.

During the regular year, it wasn't so bad, there was even a little Cat Stevens from time to time.

But at Christmas? Oh, it was so, so bad. It's okay with me if in this life, I never again hear Mariah Carey sing *All I want for Christmas is you* (ooo-oooo-ooohhh).

There are certain songs that should Just. Be. Left. Alone.

Indeed, as I was thinking of this I asked a friend of mine, a professor at the Jacobs School of Music at Indiana University, if he could provide me with an example of a song that was so iconic that it should simply be retired and never recorded again because no one could possibly capture the quality of the original, but he countered by reminding me that Dolly Parton did awfully well letting an original be recorded by someone else.

That's what happened with Mary's song in Luke. You've probably heard it called *the Magnificat*. It's called that because that is the first word of the Latin translation of Mary's song. Indeed, the Magnificat is one of the earliest hymns of the church - such composers as Bach, Vivaldi, and Tallis all composed masterpieces inspired by Mary's words. The western church sings it at vespers and evensong, and the eastern church includes it in matins.

Mary's song gets a lot of play – but I wonder, do we often *listen* to it?

Indeed, outside of the liturgical traditions of the Catholics, Episcopalians and Orthodox, we don't hear Mary's words all that often.

All generations may indeed call Mary *blessed*, but we don't really *listen* to her very much, do we?

If we're honest, she's really not very original in her song. It's a cover of somebody else's music.

Mary lifted her words straight from the lips of Hannah. Not word for word, of course, but it's close enough that she would lose an intellectual property lawsuit.

Do you remember Hannah? She was the mother of Samuel in the Old Testament, and she was afflicted with barrenness. It is tough enough to want desperately to conceive and be unable to in any culture at any time, but in the time of Hannah it was made so much worse by the attitudes surrounding fertility. Women were *expected* to be able to bear children – not to be able

to do so was to be seen as just a little bit deficient in some way – and it seems that the understanding of biology was sufficiently sexist and patriarchal that nobody ever questioned whether a *man* might be an obstacle to pregnancy.

And so, when Hannah does finally conceive and bear a son the occasion is marked with song.

It is one of the great poetic hymns of the Hebrew Scriptures.

It is her words that Mary lifts to sing her Magnificat.

There is an interesting thing about Mary's song, though, and I want to share it with you: *It's all in the past tense!*

Mary is singing about God having done mighty and great things, and about all of the ways in which she is going to be remembered as blessed, and unless I've missed something big, none of them have as yet happened at this point in the story.

Maybe they are going to happen, but they haven't happened yet. It's all a bit early.

In fact, it's so early in the story, that one wonders whether Mary really meant them all or not.

Has the Lord done wonderful things for her, or is it a terrifying thing that the Lord has done for her?

Think of it, for persons of faith, don't we find comfort in hymns when we're scared? Or perhaps do we recite the psalms or the Lord's prayer?

I don't mean to be indelicate, but Mary was in a delicate situation. She had every reason to be afraid.

The music of the Magnificat in history is magnificent, but I have a hunch that at its first performance in Galilee it went something more like, "My soul doth magnify the Lord, my soul doth magnify the Lord, my soul doth magnify the Lord."

Again, it's just my hunch but Bach and Tallis, as talented as they were, couldn't capture the raw poignancy of Mary's feelings as she recited scripture to herself to tell herself it was going to be okay.

Mary didn't so much rip off Hannah's song as she went to back the songs of her childhood to seek comfort and strength to face what she knew was coming. It's like when we gather in the sanctuary when someone dies to sing the songs of faith to remind ourselves of the truth of God's promises. We sing things like *Our God Our Help in Ages Past* and *For All the Saints*, because we need to remember in the face of an uncertain future that God's promises are true. I seem to be preaching at a lot of funerals lately, and folks always ask for the same texts, have you ever noticed that? There are about ten different scriptures that folks turn to at the time of death, and I've noticed, they are all texts of *promise*.

Mary had every reason to be terrified.

And what was coming?

An uncertain future, to be sure.

Luke doesn't really tell us how the conversation with Joseph went, for those details we go to Matthew. All we know is that Mary, on hearing her predicament from Gabriel, set out to her cousin's house a few counties away *with haste*.

Down south we called that going to take care of an elderly aunt.

We know she's pregnant, we know she's living with her cousin, and yet she's singing about all the good things God has done for her.

Right.

There was a practice in those days when speaking of what God is going to do – of what one *wanted* God to do – to put it in the past tense.

It's in the past tense so as to say, "I'm so sure of God's power, and God's ability to pull this thing off that I'm going to put it in the past tense as if it has already happened. That's how sure I am that it is going to work out this way."

Although perhaps a more accurate assessment is, "That's how badly I need to it to work out this way... God helped Hannah, maybe God can help me.

I need it to work out so that all generations call me blessed, because I don't want them to call me something else.

I need it to work out so that my fiancé isn't going to dump me because he knows it's not his.

I don't want to be powerless and afraid and poor and at everyone's mercy.

I need this to work out differently."

My soul doth magnify the Lord...

Sure, the original sometimes captures something that the later performances miss. Hannah sang her song from the place of her desperation being relieved – but every once in a while, a true artist sings the someone else's song in a way that captures the haunting reality of what made the music in the first place, and adds even more.

There's something about the *way* Mary sings Hannah's song that just catches you, the same words, two very different situations.

It's beautiful. But do *listen* to Mary's song? Do we really *hear* what she says?

It's pretty specific.

"He hath shewed strength with his arm: he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.

He hath put down the mighty from their seat and hath exalted the humble and meek.

He hath filled the hungry with good things: and the rich he hath sent empty away."

It's pretty specific, and let's be honest, it's pretty political.

Mary has some clear ideas about what God ought to do with the world, since God is using her.

I wonder what the Magnificat would sound like if you or I were writing it?

I wonder what the Magnificat would sound like if child on our border were singing it?

I wonder what the Magnificat would sound like if under a bridge when the mercury drops – or really under a bridge at any time?

I wonder how the Magnificat sounds to someone facing foreclosure, or to someone deciding between food and medicine?

“He hath shewed strength with his arm: he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.

He hath put down the mighty from their seat and hath exalted the humble and meek.

He hath filled the hungry with good things: and the rich he hath sent empty away.”

I wonder how the Magnificat sounds to us?

Oh, there are definitely some songs that should just be left alone.

But there are other songs that *need* to be sung – that *have* to be sung until they really are in the past tense.

That’s the thing about faith this time of year – I know we’re all struggling with the same things – we’re struggling to keep a sense of the holy amidst all of the competing pressures to get things done. And I know we’re struggling to keep a sense of faith amidst the tasks of acquiring and wrapping gifts. And I know that we’re struggling to know how to *be* about the season when the season is interrupted with constant reports of gun violence. We know there’s some way to do it – to give witness to our faith and yet to give normalcy, comfort and joy to our children and to those around us.

I know that’s a struggle. And it’s a struggle at any time, to be honest. Nobody wants to be a scold or a killjoy. Even the prophets got tired of speaking God’s word to power some of the time.

And yet, we have a deep need to be faithful to Mary’s words.

And so, we *must* keep on singing. We keep giving voice to the claims of faith with the words of our carols. We sing for those whose voice is silenced until the songs really are in the *past tense*.

I remember a chapel service at Princeton Seminary many years back. Pat Miller was preaching. He asked us all a question; one I’ve never forgotten. He asked, “What do you suppose all of the folks who are walking around stores hearing Christmas carols piped in think about them?”

I had a pretty good idea – they’re thinking of what they have to get done, not about the words of the text.

But it’s a good question – what do you suppose people think of when they’re pawing through the markdown rack at Brooks Brothers or waiting in the line around the corner for whatever the newest, greatest offering from Apple will be and they hear strains of *Greensleeves* over the loudspeakers and hear the words, “What Child is this, who laid to rest on Mary’s lap is sleeping?”

Dr. Miller went on to say, "I think, deep down, what the people think, whether they know it or not, whether they can give voice to it or not, is this: 'I hope those Christians are right.'"

I hope those Christians are right.

And so we keep on singing our carols and our *magnificats* until the day comes when they are finally, truly, in the past tense.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.