

## SHOW-STOPPER

Luke 1:46-56

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*A sermon preached for First Baptist Church of Amarillo, TX*

*December 20, 2020*

*The moment was my big debut. I was chosen for a prestigious solo right the middle of a musical masterpiece. Ok, that might be an overstatement. It was the church children's choir musical, and I couldn't have been a day older than 9. It wasn't a Christmas musical. It was the end of one of those camps where the kids work all week toward a presentation. The whole week had been building to this moment. As best I remember, the song was about Abraham and Lot.*

*The solo was in two parts. The first verse came at the beginning of the song after a long prelude. The moment came. The song before ended. I take my place at center stage. Check the microphone. Music starts. The pause comes when the singer is supposed to jump in, and I was **blank!***

*When a child comes up blank on the solo, it puts a whole new meaning to the term **show-stopper**. Oh, the show stops alright!*

Of course, I was aiming for the real kind of show-stopper. The word "showstopper" gets thrown around a little bit loosely. You might hear a Broadway song referred to as a showstopper merely because it gets an enthusiastic round of applause from the audience. Sometimes, though, a song reaches such heights that the lucky audience forgets where they are. Thoughts from the outside world are suspended as your complete attention is commanded by the performance on stage.

Sometimes in these moments, there is even a pause before the audience response begins, as if everyone just wants to linger in the moment a bit longer. Soon enough, the rest of the show will happen and then everyone will get on with their lives, but in the moment the audience feels such a connection to what's happened that they need to affirm it with unceasingly applause. Or maybe they feel a need to acknowledge the tragedy or lament a loss. These are the songs that the audience carries with them when they go, and actors clamor to sing them. A real *show-stopper*.

Scholars compare the way Luke uses songs in his gospel to "Broadway-style musical theater."<sup>i</sup> In fact, Luke's birth narrative almost reads like a musical of its own. Around every corner someone is bursting into song. We read Mary's song today, then Zechariah will have his own, the angel host in the sky, and Simeon later.

Sadly, we sometimes skip past these because we want to get to the plot development. Robert Tannehill compares them to an operatic aria.<sup>ii</sup> These are moments when the composer stops

the action so that a single poetic and musical development can transcend what's taking place and offer a deeper awareness of what is happening. Luke's use of these Hebrew hymns has that same effect.<sup>iii</sup>

The angel Gabriel has already visited Mary. Greatly troubled by this visit, she wondered deeply about what was behind all this. When she learns that she will give birth to a son, she rightfully wonders: "How can this be?" The angel announces to her about the Holy Spirit, the coming Son of God, and about her cousin Elizabeth who will also conceive in miraculous fashion.

*My three-year-old daughter was playing with a toy nativity set early one morning this week. She began to act out this part of the story, using wooden Mary and a little angel. We listened from across the house as the angel swooped in and shouted: "I'm Gabriel! You're going to have a baby! Now, I'm flying away!"*

It can feel like that, though. The angel drops life changing news on Mary and then just leaves her to sort it out. I wonder if you ever feel like that. God comes and gives demands or a task or a calling, maybe just the calling of Christian life, and then you're left to muddle through on your own. Sometimes it feels like the task in front of us or the hardship we're facing is more than we can handle, and God has moved on.

But, *God didn't leave*. Because God *never* leaves. He would be more present with Mary than any person in all of history. The angel's next words are that the Spirit of the living God will come over her and the shadow of the Most High will overshadow her. He overshadows you, also.

That's when Mary starts on the move. The journey to Judea would've been more than enough time to relive every second of her encounter with the divine. She pondered every word that Gabriel had uttered: **"...He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."**

Maybe, it was that journey from Nazareth to Judea that Mary began to pen the words. A song began to form in her mind. She was so overcome by God's story, so familiar with the Torah and the Prophets, with God's words to his people, that she began to whisper it to herself along the way. When she gets there Elizabeth is excited, Zechariah is excited, even the unborn John the Baptist is jumping for joy in her womb. Maybe, all this commotion and Elizabeth's praise was enough for Mary to come up with the whole song right on the spot. That would hardly be the most miraculous part of this whole number.

The story comes to a grinding halt. The lights dim down low. Each of the songs in Luke are worth hearing, but this one... This is the one with *show-stopping* quality. That's why for centuries, people have sung this song again and again.

Luke presents her song in the narrative as a total pause. The accounting of the events are set aside and their *meaning* is placed front and center, to make sure that we understand the

significance of what is happening to and *within* her.<sup>iv</sup> Other characters fade to the side and the young teenage girl steps forward to center stage:

**“My soul exalts the Lord,  
And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior.  
For He has had regard for the humble state of His servant;  
For behold, from this time on all generations will count me blessed.”**

The first thing we notice about her song is that **Mary sings like she knows who God is.**

The Magnificat: that’s the first word in Latin and the song’s popular name. “My soul magnifies the Lord.” In another translation: “Tell out... the greatness of God.” The message paraphrase: “I’m bursting with God-news; I’m dancing the song of my Savior God.”

She begins her song by rejoicing in God. She is overwhelmed and taken back by the reality that the favor and blessing of God has shown up in her, a lowly servant. She sits at the bottom of the totem pole in Israel. But she has encountered the author of great reversal, the Lord of the upside-down kingdom, and though she is lowly she will now become the most blessed among women.

In her grand declaration of a mighty God, she echoes other familiar songs. She sings a song like Moses and Miriam and Deborah. But more closely she recalls the song of Hannah as she celebrated the birth of Samuel and all that God was going to do through him. More than that, nearly every line of the song echoes phrases and concepts that fill the Old Testament. The song she sings has been called a “collage a Hebrew scripture.” Mary may be lowly and of humble origin, but she speaks the language of God’s word.

Beyond Hannah’s prayer in 1 Samuel 2, scholars count as many as 12 different Old Testament passages reflected in Mary’s song.<sup>v</sup> She knows the Law, the Prophets, and the Writing. She has so fervently memorized the words of the scriptures that they leap out of her in joy the moment God announces what he’s doing next. It’s all there: Genesis, Exodus, Deuteronomy, 1 & 2 Samuel, Job, Psalms, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Habakkuk, Micah, and Zephaniah. This might be a New Testament hymn, but she sings it with an Old Testament melody.

Mary sings like she knows who God is. Second, **Mary sings like she knows what He will do.**

<sup>49</sup> **“For the Mighty One has done great things for me;  
And holy is His name.**

<sup>50</sup> **“And His mercy is upon generation after generation  
Toward those who fear Him.**

Mary begins her song singing about what great things God has done for her, but in the second half of the song the focus shifts to Israel. She knows that what God has done for her he can do

for all her people. The blessing and mercy of God that is poured on her will also extend for all generations.

Her language shifts in verse 50 from the personal to the corporate, from the individual to the historic. Not just her life, but all of history will hinge on these moments. God's great mercy, the love of this Advent season, extends beyond Mary and to generation after generation.

**<sup>51</sup> "He has done mighty deeds with His arm;  
He has scattered *those who were* proud in the thoughts of their heart.**

**<sup>52</sup> "He has brought down rulers from *their* thrones,  
And has exalted those who were humble.**

**<sup>53</sup> "He has filled the hungry with good things;  
And sent away the rich empty-handed.**

She sings about God overcoming evil. She holds together the merciful God who is faithful to his covenant with the Divine warrior is going to lift his arm and strike down his enemies. He'll do it by bringing a baby in lowly Bethlehem, by giving favor to the weak, love to lowly, privilege to the powerless, death on a cross.

The proud are too busy looking down on others to look up to God. They have no need for the divine as they work to make glory for themselves. The ones obsessed with lifting themselves up are the very ones who must be humbled. In pursuit of being self-sufficient, they have no need of salvation. It is those who are aware of their true lowliness who will be lifted up.

**<sup>54</sup> "He has given help to Israel His servant,  
In remembrance of His mercy,  
<sup>55</sup> As He spoke to our fathers,  
To Abraham and his <sup>[am]</sup>descendants forever."**

You start reading Mary's song and you realize this is no quaint Christmas carol. This is not the stuff of Bing Crosby or Hallmark.<sup>vi</sup> They won't be making a Lifetime movie themed on this. This is why centuries of readers have heard the song of Mary and found it to be utterly revolutionary. In the past century, there were at least three separate instances of governments banning the public recitation of the Magnificat.<sup>vii</sup>

During the British rule of India, the Magnificat was prohibited from being sung in church. William Temple, the Archbishop of Canterbury, instructed his missionaries to India never to read the Magnificat in public when unbelievers were present.

In the 1980's, the government of Guatemala banned this song. It was too subversive, too politically dangerous. The authorities were worried that it might incite a riot. It might inspire the oppressed and poor to rise up and revolt, to believe that change was indeed possible.<sup>viii</sup>

In the late 1970's, Argentina's struggle for power, known as the Dirty War, led to the kidnapping and disappearance of some 500 children of political leaders. When an activist group began placing the text of Mary's song on posters throughout the capital plaza, the military committee of Argentina outlawed any public display of Mary's song.

These are revolutionary words!

German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, martyred under the Nazi regime, proclaimed in 1933:

*"The song of Mary is the oldest Advent hymn. It is at once the most passionate, the wildest, one might even say the most revolutionary Advent hymn ever sung. This is not the gentle, tender, dreamy Mary whom we sometimes see in paintings; this is the passionate, surrendered, proud, enthusiastic Mary who speaks out here. This song has none of the sweet, nostalgic, or even playful tones of some of our Christmas carols. It is instead a hard, strong, inexorable song about collapsing thrones and humbled lords of this world, about the power of God and the powerlessness of humankind."* (Advent Sermon, 1933)

E. Stanley Jones called it "the most revolutionary document in the history of the world."

Now Mary may not intend to incite political revolt (Maybe, at times she would.) She's certainly not interested in having the weak and lowly rise up only to subject the world to the same dilemma as before. She has a bigger movement in mind. God, not man, is the subject of every action in the text. She is proclaiming a revolution in the truest sense of the word: a turning in one direction all the way to the other. The great reversal!

What was once all important, is no longer important. What we once regarded as blessed will be brought down, and those who know the depths of the need and despair will be lifted up. Those who grasp for power will be cast down, and the humble will be raised. The hungry will receive what they've been denied, and those who have done the denying, those who have withheld, will be withheld from.

In Mary's breathtaking song we find out that the world has gotten things pretty much exactly wrong. She sings these powerful words because she now sees what the whole story of Israel was awaiting. She carries in her the clue to the entire puzzle. The life in her womb is the key to the entire mystery of the Old Testament. The "hopes and fears of all the years" are met here.

This is not about a revolution of particular time and place but a revolution for all of history. God's revealing of himself in flesh will unveil who he is and tell us the truth about who we are. We're finding out the truth about God and about ourselves.

*You know my solo in the children's musical. I did come through. The pause was painful. The moment was awkward, but then I blurted the words that flooded back to my mind. Except, halfway through I realized I was singing the second verse! And all I could think about as I was completing verse one of the song about Abraham and Lot was: "What in the world am I going to sing when verse two comes around." When the moment came, I was singing it all out of order.*

The third thing we discover about Mary's song is that **She sings like it has already happened.**

Have you noticed what a strange thing Mary does here? She sings about the future as if it's the past. 6 times she uses past tense verbs to describe future events:

*He has done*

*He has scattered*

*He has brought down*

*He has lifted up*

*He has filled*

*He has sent away.*

Barbara Brown Taylor calls this "singing ahead of time." She says, "*It was all happening inside of Mary, and she was so sure of it that she was singing about it ahead of time—not in the future tense but in the past, as if the promise had already come true... The only thing that is absolutely sure in this scenario is that we have a partner who is with us and for us and who wants us to have life. Mary's trust in that fact is really all she has. What she does not have is a sonogram or a husband, or an affidavit from the Holy Spirit that says, "The child really is mine. Now leave the poor girl alone."* All she has is her unreasonable willingness to believe that the God who has chosen her will be part of whatever happens next—and that apparently, is enough to make her burst into song. She does not wait to see how things will turn out first. ***She sings ahead of time, and all the angels with her.***

*If there are any big changes going on with you right now—if something is underway you cannot predict the end of, and your stomach is rolling with your own version of morning sickness—then you might try following Mary's lead. Who knows? While it would certainly be nice to have some details about how it will all turn out, that is not really necessary, is it?"<sup>ix</sup>*

**You know who God is.**

**You know what he will do.**

**And because he is with you now, you can sing like its already happened!**

Thirty weeks before the manger and 30 years before the cross, Mary takes center stage and offers a show-stopping advent hymn. It draws us in to hear how her story is my story is Israel's story is the world's story. At the manger we meet the Mighty One who has done great things for us!

He comes in a great reversal and shows us what life is. And as we hear her song end, we ought to be in so deep that we can't help but stand up and say, "Stop the show. Hold it here. I want to sing this one too!"

That is exactly what Mary's child will do when only a few years later he walk into the synagogue takes the scroll, stands up, and reads: "*The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the*

*prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*" James must've heard Mary singing it around the house, too. Have you read James 5?

These revolutionary words come to remind us that the same God who rescued Israel from captivity in Egypt has come set us free. He comes to root out injustice in all its forms. He comes to transform his people into those who are fit for his kingdom. Mary announces that the God we know in history is acting now on our behalf, and no power stand in his way.

She was right! And we better listen, because God did and is doing exactly what she said.

Caesar Augustus reigned over Rome at the time. In fact, at Jesus death the crowd shouted, "We have no king but Ceasar!" In AD 14, Augustus is rumored to have been poisoned by his wife. Herod the Great, that awful despot who sent troops out to kill innocent children, died with rotting flesh and worm infestation. He died screaming in pain. Pontius Pilate, who washed his hands, was deposed and sent away to Europe. You can go to Switzerland today to Mount Pilatus, where His existence was so miserable that he took his own life by jumping into Lake Lucerne.<sup>x</sup>

*They're all gone!* And the same can be said for every would-be-king and so-called ruler who ever came next. *They're all gone!* But Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God, is still here! Every power that ever stood or will stand against the kingdom of God is defeated.

But, not Mary's baby. He's still here!

He has done everything she said, and because He is here, you can *know him* too. You can know who he is. You can know what he will do. And you can sing – and live - as if its already happened, too!

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<sup>i</sup> James W. Watts, *Psalm and Story: Inset Hymns in Hebrew Narrative* (JSOT, 1992), 187.; Garland, 88.

<sup>ii</sup> Robert C. Tannehill, "The Magnificat as Poem," *JBL* 93 (1974): 265.

<sup>iii</sup> David Garland, *Luke: Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, 87.

<sup>iv</sup> Joel Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (NICOT), 97.

<sup>v</sup> R. Alan Culpepper, *New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, Vol VIII: Luke-John*, 64.

<sup>vi</sup> John Ortberg, "Mary's Carol: Luke 1:39-45," *The Christian Century*, 15 Dec 2009.

<sup>vii</sup> Jason Porterfield, "The Subversive Magnificat: What Mary Expected The Messiah To Be Like."  
<http://enemylove.com/subversive-magnificat-mary-expected-messiah-to-be-like/>

<sup>viii</sup> Scot McKnight, *The Real Mary: Why Evangelical Christians Can Embrace the Mother of Jesus* (Brewster, Mass: Paraclete Press, 2007), 7.

<sup>ix</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, "Singing Ahead of Time," *Home By Another Way* (Boston, Mass: Cowley Publications, 1999), 15.

<sup>x</sup> Ralph Douglas West, "The Magnificat, Luke 1:46-56," 24 Dec 2016.