

“The First Christmas Song”

Luke 1:39-56

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX
Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • December 22, 2019

I have to tell you, I really like Christmas music. For the entire month of December it's pretty much all I listen to. I don't think I'm alone. One of the local radio stations changes their programming entirely to Christmas music this time of year. Their slogan is, "Corpus Christi's Christmas Station." And so they play all of your favorite Christmas songs over and over. So after listening to that station for the past few weeks I think I've figured out what is essential in order to celebrate Christmas properly: it's snow. It seems that Christmas is a holiday celebrating freezing cold temperatures and snow. Throw in a warm fire, some chestnuts roasting, cross-country travel, and of course some jingling bells and you should have everything you need for a perfect Christmas, right? Well, except for one thing: the reason for Christmas! It's no wonder that our culture now calls this "Winter Holiday" instead of Christmas.

Don't get me wrong. I still like the songs about snow. In fact, I like singing about snow better than shoveling it. But that's not what Christmas is all about. Thankfully we have lots of other songs that DO help us learn and celebrate the real reason for Christmas – God coming here in person. At our Christmas Eve service on Tuesday evening we will sing lots of songs about the birth of our Savior. And then next Sunday we will sing even more when we gather to worship in Kleberg Hall.

But did you know that the first Christmas songs were sung before Jesus was even born? In Luke's gospel, as part of the story of Jesus' birth, we have four songs recorded for us. The first, which we are studying this morning, is my Mary when she visits Elizabeth. The second is by Zechariah when his son John the Baptist is born. The third is by the angels when they visit the shepherds, and the fourth is by the old man Simeon when Jesus is dedicated at the Temple.

So let's look at Mary's song, the very first Christmas song ever. Mary was visited by the angel Gabriel and told that she had found favor with God and had been chosen to be the mother of the Messiah, the Son of God. The angel also told her that her older relative Elizabeth, who had never been able to have children, was pregnant. Mary took that as a hint that she should go visit Elizabeth and so Luke tells us that she went in a hurry.

I want you to think about that trip for a moment. Mary is a teenager, maybe 15 years old, and she's pregnant. Yet she travels by herself over a hundred miles from Nazareth in northern Israel to somewhere in the hill country of Judea, in southern Israel, south of Jerusalem. You begin to get a sense of how much faith she has that God is in control.

When Mary arrives and speaks, Elizabeth's baby jumps for joy in her womb. We're told that Elizabeth was about six months pregnant, so it's not unusual for her to feel her baby moving around. But she can tell this is somehow different. When the angel appeared to Zechariah, he said that this baby, who would be John the Baptist, would be filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb. Sure enough, what we find is that by the inward witness of the Holy Spirit, the unborn John the Baptist, who would end up being the greatest prophet of the old covenant, recognizes the Messiah, the one who is bringing the new covenant. And neither one of them is born yet!

Let me pause right here to point out that pre-born babies matter. They matter to God and so they should matter to us. Clearly an infant in the womb is a human being created in the image of God and as we see here they are capable of emotions. As followers of Jesus we need to speak for the babies who cannot speak for themselves and we need to work to protect the lives of the unborn.

Back to Mary and Elizabeth. Just as the Holy Spirit caused John to leap for joy, that same inward witness caused Elizabeth to shout for joy. Luke writes, “Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she exclaimed with a loud cry, ‘Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?’” Elizabeth discovered that she was in the presence of the Messiah and she couldn’t contain her excitement. Then she said, “And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.” I don’t know if she meant to do this but it points out the different responses to the angel of Zechariah and Mary. Zechariah doubted the angel but Mary believed.

The rest of this passage is Mary’s song, the first Christmas song. We don’t know how long she worked on it or if she sang it right away or later. She stayed with them for three months. In any case her song is a beautiful, biblical masterpiece. The song is often called the Magnificat, which is Latin magnify, because it begins, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.”

Mary’s song demonstrates a love for God’s Word. It has quotes or allusions to verses from Genesis, Deuteronomy, 1 & 2 Samuel, Job, Psalms, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Micah, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah. Mary demonstrates Psalm 119, which says, “I have stored up your word in my heart, that I may not sin.”

The song basically has two themes. First is that God exalts the humble and second God humbles the exalted. Jesus went around saying the same thing: “everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” He also said, “the first shall be last and the last first.” Humility is one of the defining characteristics of authentic followers of Jesus because it describes Jesus himself. As Philippians 2:8 says, “being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming

obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”

Our culture doesn’t really value humility. *Forbes Magazine* regularly publishes a list of the world’s most powerful people. They base it on four criteria: how many people the person has power over, the financial resources controlled by each person, whether the person has influence in more than one area, and finally how actively they wield their power. Mary, on the other hand, didn’t rank in any of those categories. She was about as humble and lowly as they come. She was a nobody from nowhere with next to nothing. But she was highly favored by God. Clearly God doesn’t use the same grading scale as *Forbes*.

Humility, though, is the key to living a godly life. It’s humility that helps you see your true condition before God as a sinner in need of a Savior. If you don’t realize that you need a savior, you won’t really understand what Christmas is all about. So humility is putting God first in your life, before anything else. Jesus said it’s loving God with *all* your heart, mind, soul, and strength. But humility also means putting other people’s needs ahead of your own. As Philippians 2:3 says, “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.” This is what Jesus meant when he said to love your neighbor as yourself. Love is always sacrificing your own desires for someone else.

From this first Christmas song we see that Mary loved God deeply. She believed the angel. She rejoiced, even though things weren’t going the way she had planned. She risked her life to serve Elizabeth. Most of all, like Elizabeth and Zechariah, she realized her own sin and understood her need for the Savior and praised God for using her to bring about his plan of redemption.

Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.” To magnify means to make something larger and more visible. Mary’s soul made God more

visible to others. The only way to make God more visible to others is with humility. As we celebrate Christmas, what does *your* soul magnify?

Amen.