

# “Songs in the Air”

Luke 1:39-56

## **Who would not sing at the birth of their Savior?**

Last week, it was meals. This week, we turn to songs, another essential part of every Advent and Christmas. To begin, we turn to Luke’s story and learn that he was in no hurry to get to the story of Jesus’ birth. Luke began his story with a befuddled and skeptical Zechariah struggling to use sign language to



tell others the remarkable news of the angel Gabriel’s visitation and the announcement that Elizabeth, Zechariah’s long childless wife, would give birth. When Elizabeth was about six months pregnant, Gabriel made another visit. This time he visited Elizabeth’s young, poor, and unmarried cousin, Mary. Mary was engaged to marry Joseph, and she was understandably perplexed by the angel’s visit. Despite Mary’s virginity, Gabriel told her that God’s Holy Spirit would come upon her. She would conceive and give birth to a child to be named Jesus and called the Son of God. Her son would be given the throne of David and a kingdom that would have no end. To all this Mary would simply reply, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” (See Luke 1:26-38 for the announcement of Jesus’ birth.)

So, sometime thereafter Mary went to visit Elizabeth in her home. One woman is old, but now pregnant long after giving up hope. The other is young and unmarried, but now pregnant and carrying the hope of Israel. Joy floods the room. At the mere sound of Mary’s greeting, Elizabeth’s baby leaps in her womb. Elizabeth herself is nearly overcome with the power of it all . . . she knows that Mary is the mother of her Lord. This story invites us to look back on our own lives and find those moments when we were flooded by joy and excitement that seemed to overwhelm, that seemed impossible to contain. Surely, Elizabeth and Mary experience that and more. So, of course Mary bursts out into song, a song of a world to be made new.

### **Mary’s Song**

Mary’s song in verses 46 to 55 is often referred to as the Magnificat, after the first word in the early Latin translation of the Bible (the “Vulgate”<sup>1</sup>). In the Vulgate, the opening of the song (verse 46b) is *Magnificat anima mea, Dominum* in the Latin, or “My soul doth magnify the Lord” in the King James English. The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) preserves the word “magnify” in its translation of the couplet that opens the song. Other translations use words like “proclaims...exalts...praises...glorifies.” Mary knows that this is magnificent!

Over the centuries, Mary’s Magnificat has been set to music by many, but certainly the most well-known piece is Johann Sebastian Bach’s choral masterpiece, the *Magnificat*. One of the few times that he used a Latin text, Bach’s *Magnificat* debuted on Christmas Day, 1723, at the Church of St. Nicholas (really!) in Leipzig, Germany.

Fred Craddock notes that there are a couple of things about Mary’s song that deserve special attention:

- God is praised in terms of what he has already done. All the verbs dealing with the establishment of justice and mercy are past tense. Recall that the promises from Isaiah about a child being born, a Son given, were all in present tense. As Craddock puts it, “the language expresses what is timelessly true:

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<sup>1</sup> In about 400 AD, a Christian Bishop, Jerome, translated portions of the Bible into Latin. His work and that of others developed into the standard Latin version of the Bible, known as the *Vulgate*. This Latin Bible was the dominant Bible for centuries. At the time of the Protestant Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church designated the *Vulgate* as their only official Bible. It may surprise you to learn that it was called the *Vulgate* because in AD 400 Latin was the common or “vulgar” language.

past, present, and future without differentiation.”<sup>2</sup> It is a way of expressing confidence in God and the certainty of his promises.

- Verses 52 & 53 are the most intense images in the song. They are a classic statement of God’s purposes. God turns the world upside down. He brings down the powerful and lifts up the weak. He feeds the hungry and sends away the rich. Though these can be hard words for us to hear, compare them to Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). From his first choosing of Israel, God had always been the protector of the weak and the champion of the oppressed, and he expected no less from his own people. Mary was oppressed (a woman in a patriarchal culture) and poor and inconsequential – she knew that she needed a Savior (v. 47). The difficulty for the rich and powerful has always been that their seeming self-sufficiency blinds them to their own need for a Savior. Unless we recognize and embrace our need to be saved, the Christmas proclamation will never be anything more to us than a nice story about a pregnant teenager, a baby in a manger, and some gift-giving.

## HANNAH’S SONG

More than 1000 years before Elizabeth’s visit with Mary, another Jewish woman struggled with barrenness, for “the LORD had closed her womb” (1 Samuel 1:6). Hannah was the first and favorite wife of Elkanah but, like Elizabeth, she carried the shame of childlessness. In order to have heirs, Elkanah took a second wife, Peninnah, who had many children by Elkanah and made Hannah’s life miserable.

After many years of this, on a visit to the priests at Shiloh, Hannah prayed fervently for a child, promising God that she would dedicate the child to the Lord’s service. As the NRSV puts it, “the LORD remembered her,” and Hannah gave birth to a son, Samuel. While he was still young, Hannah took him to Shiloh and dedicated him to God. Samuel grew to be a judge of the Israelites and a great prophet of God. Samuel anointed both Saul, the first king of Israel, and David, the second.

When Hannah came to Shiloh with her young son, she prayed a song beginning, “My heart exults in the LORD; my strength is exalted in my God” (1 Samuel 2:1). There are numerous parallels between Mary’s song, the *Magnificat*, and Hannah’s song. Both songs focus on God’s turning the world upside down – he “raises up the poor from the dust . . . he lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes” (1 Samuel 2:8).

### Daily Bible Readings *More on biblical songs*

<b>Monday</b>	<b>Exodus 15</b>	Moses’ song of victory after the Exodus
<b>Tuesday</b>	<b>1 Samuel 2:1-10</b>	Hannah’s song of prayer
<b>Wednesday</b>	<b>2 Samuel 22</b>	One of David’s songs of thanksgiving
<b>Thursday</b>	<b>Psalms 121</b>	The song Jews prayed as they ascended the steps of the Temple Mount
<b>Friday</b>	<b>Revelation 4 and 5</b>	Songs of praise in heaven
<b>Saturday</b>	<b>Revelation 19:1-8</b>	More songs of praise and victory

<sup>2</sup> from Fred Craddock’s commentary on Luke in the *Interpretation* series, John Knox Press, 1990.