

## Mary Rejoices

Winter Quarter 2022-2023: From Darkness to Light  
Unit 1: God's Preparation

Sunday School Lesson for the week of December 25, 2022  
By Jay Harris

Lesson Scripture: Luke 1:46-55

**Key Verse:** *And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior. (Luke 1:46-47)*

### Lessons Aims

- To set Mary's words in the context of her visit with her cousin Elizabeth
- To examine the literary form of Mary's words and appreciate the tradition that influenced it
- To make comparisons to Hannah's prayer to see what we learn
- To learn about the "Great Reversal" and its place in Luke's gospel
- To ponder where we locate ourselves in the scripture
- To allow the scripture to orient us, disorient us, and reorient us
- To connect Mary's words with what we know (or think we know) about Jesus

### The Song and Its Setting

The date for today's lesson is December 25, which is obviously Christmas Day. Although the scripture passage we're studying is not the Bethlehem nativity story itself, it is a great passage to explore because it anticipates both the birth of Jesus and his impact on the world. If your class, because of its Christmas Day schedule, is not meeting on this day, you will want to find some time or way to experience this lesson together. You soon discover that what makes this scripture unique is its literary form and structure and choice of words.

<sup>46</sup> **And Mary said,**  
**"My soul magnifies the Lord,**  
<sup>47</sup> **and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,**

The scripture that we are studying is a song. There is emotion in it. This begs the question, "What has led up to this outbreak of song?" We know that up until this point, Luke's gospel has unfolded in a series of dramatic, interrelated events.

First, the birth of the one who will be known as John the Baptist was announced by the angel Gabriel to the one who will become John's father, Zechariah. Zechariah was told that John will be the forerunner of the Messiah. Then, Zechariah's wife, Elizabeth, who was thought to be barren and past her child-bearing years, conceived John by Zechariah.

Meanwhile, the angel Gabriel announced to a young virgin named Mary that she would conceive in her womb and bear a son whom she was to name Jesus. She was told that she would conceive her child by the Holy Spirit so that Jesus will have a holy origin like none other. He will be called the Son of God. She was also told by Gabriel that her older relative, Elizabeth, in a miraculous turn of events, was six months pregnant.

So, Mary set out to visit Zechariah and Elizabeth. They were already related by blood, but now they would be related by so much more. They would share a bond by virtue of the joy they were both experiencing. They also shared the world's greatest secret. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, Elizabeth felt something in her womb, and she was filled with the Holy Spirit. What Elizabeth felt was her yet-to-be-born son, John, stirring in her womb. Elizabeth said, excitedly:

“Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me” For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”

We should not be so surprised that what flowed from Mary was a song of praise from the depths of her soul. The setting and its occasion prompted this song. The audience for the song was the Lord and Elizabeth. Mary's all-consuming desire at that moment was to rejoice and magnify the Lord. At that moment for Mary, we find that God was, more than anything else, her Savior.

Our Bibles tip us off that what Mary uttered was a song because of the versification. Notice that the indentions are that of a poem. We see this kind of versification throughout the Old Testament in the Hebrew poetry that is found in Job, Lamentations, the Psalms, the Old Testament prophets, and sprinkled throughout scripture (for instance, the songs of Moses, Miriam, Deborah, Barak, and Asaph). This form of writing is known for its passion and emotive power. Whatever emotional tone is needed is amplified by the literary power of metaphors, rhythm, repetition, and dramatic language.

We have already studied Zechariah's song in a previous lesson. We discovered then that the first two chapters of Luke's gospel contain four such songs, or canticles. These songs were identified by the Early Church and have been used in Christian worship from the beginning until the present day. These four canticles have been given names by the Church.

- The *Magnificat* (Luke 1:46-55) sung by Mary
- The *Benedictus* (Luke 1:67-79) sung by Zechariah
- The *Gloria in Excelsis* (Luke 2:14) sung to the shepherds on the night Jesus was born
- The *Nunc Dimittis* (Luke 2:29-32) sung by Simeon, an old man who could depart in peace because he witnessed the arrival of the long-awaited Messiah

These songs punctuate the nativity story in Luke in ways that elevate the story while adding movement and emotion. The content of these songs also bridges the Old and New Testaments in ways that celebrate the arc of salvation history from Abraham and Sarah to where it finds fulfillment in the incarnation (the Word made flesh).

**How can Elizabeth’s words and Mary’s spontaneous response in song inform the way we receive the message of the incarnation, the Word made flesh to dwell among us? How do we make sure that we receive the message with both head and heart? Does it make a difference for you that these are two women sharing this news and experiencing this world-changing event? While it is true that every day is an occasion to celebrate the birth of Christ, how could you be using the season of Advent to deepen your appreciation of the incarnation.**

### **Comparisons with Hannah and Her Prayer**

In our lesson two weeks ago, we took a moment to compare the situation of Elizabeth with the situation of an Old Testament character named Hannah. Just as Elizabeth had been unable to conceive and bear children, so had Hannah, a thousand years earlier. In biblical times, the inability to conceive and bear children carried with it a stigma. One need only to read about Hannah in the first two chapters of 1 Samuel. In that story, Hannah’s heartache of being unable to have children was compounded by the torment she had to endure from her husband’s other wife, her rival:

“Her rival used to provoke her severely, to irritate her, because the Lord had closed her womb. So it went on year by year; as often as she went up to the house of the Lord, she used to provoke her.” (1 Samuel 1:6-7)

We’re told that Hannah “was deeply distressed and prayed to the Lord, and wept bitterly.” (1 Samuel 1:10) When Hannah was praying in the temple for a child, she made a vow to the Lord that if she was given a son she would dedicate him to the Lord. She would raise him to live out the nazirite vows listed in the sixth chapter of the Book of Numbers. These vows included abstinence from drinking wine or other intoxicants.

Notice the parallel with what the angel Gabriel told Zechariah about John. Gabriel said that the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth must never drink wine or strong drink—“even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit.” (Luke 1:15) God had big plans for their son that required a life of self-denial and spiritual preparation. When the time came for Elizabeth to give birth to her son John, her community of women was gathered around her, and they noted that the Lord had shown great mercy to Elizabeth.

Going back to Hannah, imagine the great weight that was lifted from her when Hannah was able to conceive and bear her son, Samuel. The cause for the oppression she had suffered at the hands of her fierce rival was eliminated. Hannah would have identified with the feelings associated with being shown divine mercy. The word “mercy” also conveys the idea of favor. When God grants God’s favor, there is often a bigger picture that accompanies the divine action.

In the case of Hannah, God had big plans for her son Samuel. Samuel would be thought of as the last judge to rule before God allowed and anointed kings to lead God’s people. Then, Samuel would become a prophet and the chief advisor to Israel’s first two kings, including King David. In the case of Zechariah and Elizabeth, a thousand years later, Gabriel’s announcement informed

these parents that their son was to fulfill a grand purpose in God's plan. Their son John would be the forerunner to the Messiah.

Think of this connection in the similarities between Elizabeth and Hannah. Hannah's son, Samuel, granted to a formerly barren woman, would grow to be a judge, priest, and prophet, and anoint King David. Elizabeth's son, John, also granted to a formerly barren woman, would grow to be a prophet and forerunner to the Messiah. John would baptize Jesus, as the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus in the form of a dove, and the voice of God would proclaim Jesus to be God's Son. This was the anointing of Jesus as the promised Son of David, coming roughly a thousand years after David's anointing. Think of these astounding connections:

- **The Elizabeth—Hannah Connection:** two formerly barren mothers who would give birth to special sons
- **The John—Samuel Connection:** two sons who played a leading role in the anointing of two central figures in salvation history: Jesus and David
- **The David—Jesus Connection:** two kings, one who was King of Israel, recipient of a divine promise a thousand years before Christ, AND the One who was and is the Christ, the fulfillment of the promise to David and Israel, the promised Son of David, the return of the King.

We discover that the parallels between the story of Hannah and the Nativity story do not end here. Not only does Elizabeth share a connection with Hannah, but also Mary. The connection between Hannah and Mary begins with the fact that the prayer of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2:1-10 bears a strong resemblance to the song of Mary. Notice that they begin the same.

Hannah's Prayer

My heart exults in the Lord...  
because I rejoice in my victory.

Mary's Song

My soul magnifies the Lord,  
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior

When we compare the two songs, we hear in both of them the theme of God lifting up the humble. Hannah surely felt it when God lifted her up after all those years of being humbled by her circumstances. As Mary's song unfolds, it seems as if Mary was "channeling" Hannah in her song—either consciously or subconsciously.

<sup>48</sup> **for he has looked with favor on the lowly state of his servant.**

**Surely from now on all generations will call me blessed,**

<sup>49</sup> **for the Mighty One has done great things for me,  
and holy is his name;**

<sup>50</sup> **indeed, his mercy is for those who fear him  
from generation to generation.**

It was not lost on Mary that God's favor was falling upon the most unlikely sort of person, at least from the face of it. In this divine moment, Mary felt her lowly social status. It was remarkable to her that God would choose her. She knew however not to think God had made a

mistake. She saw and felt the stark contrast between her lowly state and the fact that all generations will call her blessed—not because she felt she was deserving of God’s selection of her and favor toward her. It was because of the great things the Mighty One was doing *for* her. By bringing attention to God’s favor toward her, she was not boasting at all, because she was very aware that this was God’s doing, not hers. Holy is *God’s* name in all of this!

The lowly, servant state of Mary’s position in Jewish society was something God intended to use. Her son Jesus would not be afforded the privileges and status of the upper class. This was all part and parcel to Jesus’ identity as the Savior of the world. He would be a different kind of Savior than perhaps what was expected by some of the Jews of the day. For Mary, when the angel Gabriel first told her what was about to happen to her, she said, “Behold, I am a handmaid of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word.” (Luke 1:38) In other words, she felt herself to be God’s humble and obedient servant in this unfolding story. She was just the sort of person to shoulder this huge responsibility.

It reminds me of the story of Frodo Baggins in J.R.R. Tolkien’s, *The Lord of the Rings*, trilogy. It was the lowly Hobbit among the members of the fellowship who was fit to carry the one ring of power. The humble, diminutive Hobbit would best be able to resist the insatiable hunger for power the Ring stirred up in individuals. Since the goal was to destroy the ring, the one to lead had to be the one who could best resist the lure of the Ring and give up possession of the Ring and its power.

The story of Frodo Baggins is fictional, of course. And the story of Jesus does not involve the destruction of an evil ring of power. Still, there was a lot at stake in who the mother would be who raised Jesus. You may be familiar with the phrase, "The hand that rocks the cradle is the hand that rules the world." It comes from a poem written by William Ross Wallace, first published in 1865. The poem praises motherhood as the preeminent force for change in the world. In the Christian story, Jesus is the preeminent force that changes the world, but he became that force by always putting others before himself. It is not hard to think of God using Mary and her humble disposition and character to form Jesus’ character.

In Mary’s song, we see evidence that Mary understood the far-reaching implications of God choosing someone like her. What God was up to was not just about her—far from it. She said, “indeed, his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.”

### **The Great Reversal in Luke**

What follows in Mary’s song lets us know that what God has done for Mary, as an individual, is a sign of God’s concern for all the lowly:

- <sup>51</sup> He has shown strength with his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.**
- <sup>52</sup> He has brought down the powerful from their thrones  
and lifted up the lowly;**
- <sup>53</sup> he has filled the hungry with good things  
and sent the rich away empty.**

Here again we should point to the similarities in the themes between Mary’s song and Hannah’s prayer. Mary’s song is like a condensed version of Hannah’s prayer.

Mary’s Song Luke 1:51-53	Hannah’s Prayer 1 Samuel 2:1-8
God has shown strength with his arm (vs. 51a)	There is no Rock like our God (vs. 2)
He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts (vs. 51b)	Talk no more so very proudly, let not arrogance come from your mouth (vs. 3)
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones (vs. 52a)	The bows of the mighty are broken (vs. 4)
And lifted up the lowly (vs. 52b)	But the feeble gird on strength (vs. 4) He raises up the poor from the dust; He lifts the needy from the ash heap, To make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor. (vs. 8)
He has filled the hungry with good things (vs. 53a)	Those who were hungry are fat with spoil (vs. 5)
And sent the rich away empty (vs. 53b)	Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread (vs. 5)

It is as if the similar situations of Hannah and Mary have given them both insight into God’s saving work. Moreover, Mary’s song foreshadows a theme that is a hallmark in Luke’s gospel. This theme has been called the Great Reversal. Through Jesus, the coming of the Kingdom of God will turn everything upside down. It will overturn our expectations and our experiences.

Those who are on the bottom or on the margins of society will find themselves at the top and the center. What Mary’s song offers is a preview of the Beatitudes of Jesus in Luke’s Gospel, which contain not only blessings (Luke 6:20-23), but also woes (Luke 6:24-26).

#### **Blessings**

*Blessed are you who are poor,  
for yours is the kingdom of God.*

#### **Woes**

*But woe to you who are rich,  
for you have received your consolation.*

*Blessed are you who are hungry now,  
for you will be filled.  
Blessed are you who weep now,  
for you will laugh.  
Blessed are you when people hate you and  
when they exclude you, revile you, and  
defame you on account of the Son of Man.  
Rejoice on that day and leap for joy, for  
surely your reward is great in heaven, for that  
is how their ancestors treated the prophets.*

*Woe to you who are full now,  
for you will be hungry.  
Woe to you who are laughing now,  
for you will mourn and weep.  
Woe to you when all speak well of you, for  
that is how their ancestors treated the false  
prophets.*

For the oppressed of the earth, there is no greater news than to know that your fortunes are reversed in the kingdom of God. In the end, the invitation to the reign of God that Jesus offers separates the willing and the unwilling and changes the pecking order. The poor, the hungry, the broken-hearted, and the outcast end up getting blessed in the reign of God, because they have nothing to lose and are therefore more receptive to Jesus' invitation to live according to the relational demands of God's loving reign. Sadly, those who are at the top of the social order are often too heavily invested in the way things are instead of being open to the new and redemptive nature of God's in-breaking kingdom. When people are too satisfied with the status quo, with the status and temporary pleasures they receive from the world, they leave no room for what is of eternal value.

### **Recalling the Promise to God's People**

God's choosing of Mary reminded her not only of God's concern for the lowly of the world in general, but also for God's people Israel specifically.

**<sup>54</sup> He has come to the aid of his child Israel,  
in remembrance of his mercy,  
<sup>55</sup> according to the promise he made to our ancestors,  
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”**

I have made references several times to the arc of salvation history. I did not make this concept up, of course. One of the characteristics of the Bible is the numerous places throughout scripture where Israel recalls and recites its own history of God's saving work—beginning with God's promise to bless Abraham and Sarah so they and their descendants could be a blessing to others and draw others to God's blessings through a relationship with God. That covenant was renewed with each generation. During the dark centuries of enslavement in Egypt, when the covenant was wiped from the collective memory of God's people, we learn that God had not forgotten the covenant. God renewed the covenant under Moses and led his people Israel out of their bondage. God renewed the covenant with David and promised that there would always be a king on the throne of David.

Notice in Mary's song, how she says that God “has come to the aid of his child Israel.” There is an intimate relationship being recalled. God's “child” was in a most vulnerable state in the year 4

B.C. Israel was not a sovereign nation at all, but a region ruled by the Roman empire along with many other conquered nations. Even before being under Roman rule, they had been under Greek rule before that, Persian rule before that, Babylonian rule before that, and Assyrian rule before that. At the time in human history that Mary sang her song, God's people Israel was just a people striving to hang onto their spiritual identity. But Mary's song recounts that God was coming to the aid of his child Israel in remembrance of his mercy and his centuries-old promise.

The question should be asked, "Why did God choose this people?" Why did God choose Mary, a daughter of Israel? The Book of Deuteronomy gives us a clue why:

*"For you are a people holy to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession. **It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the LORD set his heart on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples.** It was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath that he swore to your ancestors that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt."* (Deuteronomy 7:6-8)

God chooses the lowly who are able and willing to make themselves vulnerable enough to rely completely on God. This is what it comes down to. Just as God had not forgotten God's people during their time in bondage in Egypt, and just as God had not forgotten his people during their time in Babylonian exile, God had not forgotten his people who were being oppressed by Roman occupation.

What do we make of the Savior that Mary's son became? I love how this question is answered in the hymn, "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing," by Charles Wesley. It says,

"Mild he lays his glory by,  
born that we no more may die,  
born to raise us from the earth,  
born to give us second birth."

*Mild he lays his glory by...* God's Son, who was with God, and was God, from before the foundation of the world, from eternity past, **set aside his glory**, to be born as a meek and mild infant, in an animal stable and laid in a manger, surrounded by his young, peasant mother, his stand-in father, and some shepherds. Did he grow to become a warrior and overthrow the Roman Empire? No, he was born that we no more may die by giving his life for us on a cross in an unjust act of Roman execution. He was born to raise us from the earth just as his dead body was laid in a tomb and then resurrected on the third day. He was born to give us second birth—in other words, to give us the power to be born again as children of God.

The plan had always been for Israel to be blessed in order to be a blessing to all the families of the earth. It was God's choice from the beginning for God's people Israel to play a central role in God's offer of salvation to the world. We see, in the manner in which the Savior was born, the fulfillment of God's promise.

## **Where Do We Locate Ourselves in the Scripture?**

I was blessed on the second Sunday of Advent to experience music for Advent and Christmas at Mulberry Street United Methodist Church in Macon by the Ainsworth Choir and Orchestra. One of the selections that moved me the most was a treatment of the Magnificat composed by Terre Johnson, the choir director. The musical setting in which the words of Mary's Song were placed was so beautiful. There was so much emotion. Certain phrases were repeated allowing the music beneath the words to soar. I felt transported by the experience. The text of the Magnificat was printed in the program so I could follow along. I absorbed it. It was so timely since I was already beginning to prepare mentally for writing this Sunday School lesson. I came away from this experience with the desire to appreciate more than ever the "music" of what Mary said.

If I locate myself in the scripture in the place of Mary and the place of God's people Israel, I easily hear the music beneath the words. What beautiful words to hear when we place ourselves in the position of Mary who realizes how surprising and lovely it is that God would choose someone in her position to carry in her womb the Savior of the world. The words are also magnificent when we place ourselves in the position of God's people Israel to whom God was lovingly delivering aid in remembrance of his mercy. In light of the oppression that was being experienced by God's people Israel in the time of Mary, we can understand the good news about the proud being scattered in the imaginations of their hearts and the powerful being brought down from their thrones.

It can be somewhat disconcerting however to hear in Mary's song about the rich being sent away empty. Compared to the rest of the world, most of us live in relative affluence. Where should we locate ourselves in relation these words in our scripture? Consider these questions:

**How might we personalize this song for us? How might we voluntarily take the position needed to receive the good gifts this song offers? How might we voluntarily take on the lowly state of a servant? How might we prepare to recall great things the Mighty One has done for us and proclaim God's name to be holy? How might we use all the means of grace available to us that we might belong to the present day's generation of those who fear him?**

I am looking at a blessing that I have taped up in front of me so I can be reminded of it when I see it. Bishop Bryan emailed it to members of the conference staff on the day he began his retirement. He said that with all the thinking he had been doing about his plans and ideas for the weeks and months ahead, there was a blessing he was claiming. He was claiming this blessing to challenge him and to serve as a breath of fresh air for him. It was a blessing someone had given Henri Nouwen. It reads:

"Lord Christ,  
May all of my expectations be frustrated.  
May all of my plans be thwarted.  
May all of my desires be withered into nothingness,  
That I may experience the powerlessness and poverty of a child,  
And sing and dance and pray utterly in the love of God

the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. Amen.”

Would you have the courage to claim the challenge in such a blessing? Could you see it possibly, as Bishop Bryan did, to be a breath of fresh air for you?

Applying this same thinking to Mary’s Song, I wonder how beneficial it is for me to try to deny my pride, or downplay my power, my position, and my well-fed and full existence. It is easy to give into sentimentality, especially when reflecting upon the Nativity Story. As I try to locate myself in Mary’s song, I want to challenge myself by not putting myself in the position of Mary or God’s child Israel. Instead, I want to put myself in the position of the powers of this world, and then ask the Lord to speak to me through the scripture a challenging word.

**I invite you to do the same and reflect upon it:**

**Lord, flex your arm and show your strength in my life to cause me to question myself.**

**Disorient my proud heart.**

**Scatter the imagination of my heart.**

**Take me down a notch or two in terms of the power I think I have.**

**Take me down from the throne that I keep putting myself on.**

**Deprive me of that which makes me full and satisfied that is not of you.**

**Make me hungry.**

**Send me away empty.**

**Take away my supports,**

**that I may experience the lowly state of a servant,**

**and long to be fed and lifted up only by you. Amen.**

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