

## Luke 1 – Mary’s Song

AEMMC

At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah’s home and greeted Elizabeth.

When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed:

“Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!”

*Mary’s Song*  
And Mary said:

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

48 for he has been mindful  
of the humble state of his servant.  
From now on all generations will call me blessed,  
49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me—  
holy is his name.  
50 His mercy extends to those who fear him,  
from generation to generation.  
51 He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;  
he has scattered those who are proud in  
their inmost thoughts.  
52 He has brought down rulers from their thrones  
but has lifted up the humble.  
53 He has filled the hungry with good things  
but has sent the rich away empty.  
54 He has helped his servant Israel,  
remembering to be merciful  
55 to Abraham and his descendants forever,  
just as he promised our ancestors.”

Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home.

It's such a familiar scene.

We've seen it on TV. We hear it every year.

And not only have we seen it and read it, we have been told stories about it.

Maybe with flannel graphs.

Maybe we read it as children in a children's storybook.

It's so familiar, it reminds me of the words at the beginning of *The Fellowship of the Ring*.

*Story became myth – myth became legend..*

Not always a good thing.

And here at the beginning of Luke's gospel -- IMMEDIATELY

Right in the first chapter,

We are dropped into a world where natural and supernatural are mingled.

Angels, and miracles, divine announcements..

*Do we really affirm these things? Is this the real world we live in?*

*Do we have eyes to see and ears to hear?*

And that is more or less Luke's stance also, as we open these pages.

He is saying to us,

*Listen! The world is changing before your eyes!*

*Wake up!*

And so he drops us into this drama.

And what we don't know, but was so obvious to his readers,

Is that God has been silent for four hundred years.

It is four hundred years since the book of Malachi was penned.

For four hundred years, God has been silent in Israel..

And it's an obvious silence – a famine for God's word.

And then suddenly, like the sky turning black and the air going still just before a storm..

The clouds roll across the landscape and the lightning flashes and God speaks.

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We have three dramatic stories in this first chapter:

Zechariah, Mary, and Elizabeth.

And all three of these stories revolve around the birth of two babies.

The setting is the clash of two empires:

The kingdom of Caesar and the kingdom of God.

We know who ruled Judea in those days: Herod the Great.

And we know who ruled the Empire: Caesar Augustus.

So when this announcement comes down from above,  
the readers are following the story carefully.

A tale of two kingdoms: One king already rules – another king is born.

*What a setup for conflict!*

This is going to be good!

But it's not a *fair* setup at all.

There is Herod in his palace, with all the power of Rome behind him.

A huge war machine and legions of soldiers.

And here is a newborn baby in village in Israel. What chance can he have?

The reader doesn't know the end of the story. But it doesn't look good.

Except –

Except there is this wild, mysterious element ..

There are angels wings whirring..

There is a divine announcement...

And the readers know the part of the story that is vague to us.

They know about the Promises to David.

And they know the stories of little David – his victory over Goliath.

They know the stories of the kings and prophets and judges.

They know the story of the Exodus and the defeat of Pharaohs' army.

*And Mary knows these stories just as well.*

There is a God at work in history – one who sits on a throne, high and exalted.

There is a Promise of a coming Deliverer – a King of Peace.

And the Promise is that he will bring good news to the poor;

To Mary, to her family, to her nation,

All those who are tired of the oppression of Rome and her Caesars.

In the words of the prophet Isaiah,

*He will bind up the brokenhearted,  
Proclaim freedom to the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners.*

*He will proclaim the year of the Lord's favour,  
and comfort all who mourn.*

*The walls of Jerusalem will be called Salvation and her gates, Praise.*

These words are familiar to Mary and to Luke's audience.

And they also know the other story,  
Rome's story in this tale of two kings.

Just like we tune in the evening news, CBC or CNN,

Every evening around the well the village women collect the latest gossip.

What is happening in Jerusalem?  
What is that old fox Herod up to now?

Whose father, or brother, or cousin -- is going to prison because he can't afford his taxes.

They know all the stories, and they know about Caesar.

By the time Jesus was born, Augustus had already been monarch for a quarter of a century.

His title was – can you guess – “King of kings”

He ruled from Gibraltar to Jerusalem and from Britain to the Black Sea.

He had done what no one had done for two hundred years before him:

he had brought peace to the wider, Roman world—peace at a price.

A price paid in cash by subjects in far-off lands.

A price subsidized on the backs of slave labor – men, women and children.

One historian estimates nearly thirty thousand slaves in the first century.

The heavy taxes in Palestine, as in other conquered territories, paid for the Roman garrisons.

So yes -- as an ancient writer put it. Augustus "gave peace -- as long as it was consistent with the interests of the Empire and the myth of his own glory."

Yes, says Luke, and watch what happens now.

This man, this king, this absolute monarch, Caesar -- lifts his little finger in Rome,

and fifteen hundred miles away a young couple undertakes a hazardous journey, resulting in the birth of a child in a little town

that just happen to be the one mentioned in the ancient Hebrew prophecy about the coming of the Messiah.

The passage from Micah 5 is in Luke's mind:

*"But you, Bethlehem of Ephrathah, little among the clans of Judah— from you shall come forth the one who is to rule in Israel" (Micah 5:2).*

Verse 4 launches a project that ought to make Augustus anxious:

"He [the coming King] shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of YHWH, in the majesty of the name of YHWH his God;

and they shall live securely, for his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth... and he will be our peace.."

So there is the question: Whose kingdom and whose peace?

Yahweh – or Caesar?

After his death, Julius Caesar was declared to be a god.

When Augustus seized power, he was called a savior, because his coming to power ended bitter civil wars and created the *pax Romana* – the peace of Rome.

Rome called this the euangelion – "the gospel," the good news.

“Gospel” was not a word invented by Luke.

It was a word that was current in the first century,

and it had to do with Rome’s rule and the peace maintained by Rome.

Luke and his readers know all the back-story because they are living in it.

They understood justice and injustice -- as they paid taxes  
to maintain an army they did not want.

They understood very well that “good news” would never come apart from a just ruler.

They understood that the peace of Rome was all spin.

Simon and Garfunkel were singing and writing in the mid 60s,  
and this song made quite a splash with those who were protesting the spin from Caesar.

I haven’t altered the music track at all. They chose this track

For one channel from the evening news around 1966. The song is called

### **7 O’Clock NEWS / Silent Night**

The spin doctors were heavily at work making Vietnam, and later Desert Storm  
about democracy and America’s role in bringing peace and prosperity to the world.

The reality was something different.

And so it was in the first century under a different Caesar.

So here in Luke we have this young girl.. probably 13, maybe 14.

And we have this dramatic poetry – that’s what it is, Hebrew poetry.

*\*\*The ONLY way to bring such a message is in song – the POWER in words and music*

It’s all about the fall of the powerful ones, and the rise of the unlikely.

The rise of the David’s of the world.

The rise of the Daniels and the Jacobs.

It’s First Corinthians 1 and Matthew 5 – the wisdom of God is foolishness to men.

God is not impressed by human power or titles.

In fact, he delights in overthrowing the proud  
and lifting up those who humbly depend on him.

And Mary's song rehearses all this history.

*He has scattered those who are proud in their thoughts..*

*He has brought down rulers from their thrones.*

*He has filled the hungry with good things*

*But has sent the rich away empty.*

*He has helped his servant Israel. Just as he promised..*

But there is something odd here -- or a couple of things.

First, these three stories feature a man and two women,

But only the women are getting it right.

Zechariah heard God's word but questioned it.

The women heard God's word and received it.

Second, women in Israel were not legal witnesses.

But Luke treats them like the main actors.

Here in the first chapter of Luke's Gospel we hear the Gospel twice:

First from an angel, and second from a young girl.

And already we get a sense that the world is changing -- turning upside down.

And third, the content is wrong.

Mary states the future as if we are already there..

*He has brought down rulers from their thrones..*

Because in Jesus the future has arrived.

The Jews have waited for the Promised Messiah since the death of David.

They have waited while Rome has ruled and their fathers and brothers have died.

They have waited while their sacred places have been violated.

And now Jesus has arrived.

And Mary knows exactly what this means.

*God fulfils his promises!*

This Son of David will sit on his Father's throne..

*And his kingdom will not end!*

Every year we sing the lines that are right out of this story,

Or out of John 1.

*"He rules the world with truth and grace.."*

But what is confusing about these words is that his rule is not obvious.

There are no offices in downtown Aylmer for God's ambassadors.

Or – maybe there are.

Maybe they are just labelled differently than we would expect.

Maybe they have your house number and your address.

Maybe the official ambassadors have faces like yours and mine.

Because what is confusing is that the kingdom of Caesar still exists..

Right alongside the kingdom of God.

The kingdom is like leaven in a lump..

Like a mustard seed..

Like salt we spread around..

It has influence that is not obvious. *It takes new eyes to see it.*

But God's kingdom arrives in Jesus and grows among us..

At the same time as the kingdoms of this world continue.

And God's kingdom is hidden and small --.

It doesn't overthrow Caesar by the use of the sword or with violence.

Instead, we learn the power of love.

And we live with a paradox in this beautiful mess.

And the first paradox is that you and I – broken people –

carry this glory in pots of clay.

God gave to us this ministry of reconciliation.

*Is he crazy?*

Paul asked that question, and he came up with a beautiful answer:

Simply this:

*The wisdom of God is wiser than men,*

*And the weakness of God is stronger than men.*

Paul writes in 2 Cor. 4,

*But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.*

*We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.*

*We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body.*

So we stumble along, trying to be faithful to the God who is faithful to us.

And our brokenness does not limit the goodness of God.

In his song anthem, Leonard Cohen sings.

*There's a crack in everything – that's how the light gets in.*

On his blog this last week Mike Breen wrote,

There is something inherently *attractive* about a group of people coming together to worship their Father and King once they are actively engaged in mission.

In other words, the gathered church, coming in from being scattered, is unbelievably attractive.

Why? Because it is the power of *the reconciled community*.

When a scattered church gathers, when we tell stories of mission to each other, engage in the sacred act of communion, worship as hundreds and thousands of people,

hear from the scriptures and respond,

look around and see every tribe and tongue  
|and we do all of this in the presence of the Holy Spirit...

this is wildly attractive to a great number of people.

This act of gathering the scattered church  
is something akin to what Newbiggin talks about

when saying the church community should be a SIGN and a FORETASTE  
of the Kingdom of God.

It points to a future reality and provides a taste of that reality.”

This, in its simple form, is where we live in the reality of God’s kingdom.

It was one of the most beautiful things about our Metro experience –

And maybe that is why God loved to hang out with us.

We were not rich and poor, causacian and native when we gathered...

*We were the body of Christ.*

It was super-natural. And it was attractive.

As Gerhard Lohfink puts it,

It can only be that God begins in a small way, at one single place in the world.

There must be a place.. Visible, tangible..where the salvation of the world may begin: that is,  
where the world becomes what it is supposed to be according to God’s plan.

Beginning at that place, the new thing can spread abroad.  
All must have the chance to behold and test this new thing.

Then, if they want to, they can allow themselves to be drawn  
into the story of salvation God is creating.  
Only in that way is freedom preserved.

I love the interest I am hearing from so many to think about a church plant in St. Thomas.

Not in the parts of town where there are already churches.

Not where it is so easy to attract people who are looking for religious services.

But in the part of town the churches have abandoned.

Among people who are needy and hungry.

Without this demonstration of the reality of the gospel,

Our words will have very little weight out there.

So we pray, “Thy kingdom come – on earth..” and we go out to become that prayer.

In Luke 4 when Jesus announces his ministry,

He not only talks about good news and God’s just rule..

He makes it real – by bringing light into the darkness,

Healing to the sick.

Deliverance to captives.

Jesus comes on the scene bringing shalom...

\*\* pray for the sick.

\*\* See Isa 40 and Isa 9

\*\* Steve Bell song to close

Venite adoramus “Come and worship”