

“A Girl’s Upside-Down Song”

December 4, 2016

The First Christmas Songs series

Join me in singing if you know this song:

It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas

Ev'rywhere you go,

Take a look in the five-and-ten, it's glistening once again

With candy canes and silver lanes that glow.

It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas,

Toys in ev'ry store,

But the prettiest sight to see is the holly that will be

On your own front door.

“It’s beginning to look a lot like Christmas...” Maybe your home is decorated and the tree is up – or maybe not and your anxiety is up! I heard a few people comment that it does indeed feel like Christmas now as they enjoyed a wonderful Singing Christmas Tree at the Frauenthal. If the traffic by the Lakes Mall is any indication, there are more people out shopping, and lines are long. Christmas lights are on at night. I know Christmas is coming because we received our first card right after Thanksgiving from the family who always sends them first. Facebook is filled with pictures of kids with Santa and holiday parties.

So, yes, it’s beginning to look a lot like Christmas just like the song says, but I’d invite us today to consider a different song. You’ve heard a couple of versions this morning. I wonder if Mary could have sung so confidently had Elizabeth not greeted her and sung her song of blessing first.

For all of our ideas about Mary as a meek and mild virgin girl, I hope we’re challenged today. This young woman isn’t meek and mild at all, and neither is her song. Like all of Israel, she’s been waiting for God to show up, and she sings in response to the promise being fulfilled. God is here. God is moving, and God will act in a mighty way! God will turn the world upside-down; things are changing.

You may know that Mary was from Nazareth. It wasn’t anything to be excited about. No place special, and no one would’ve thought she was anything special. For a modern-day comparison: Mary’s last name wouldn’t be Kardashian or Trump or Clinton or anything else close to famous or infamous. No one would’ve known her. No one would’ve heard of her. Frankly, no one would’ve cared much about her at all. That’s why her song is so interesting, incredible, and even uncomfortable when we really look.

Its starts off okay. She's full of joy because of what God is doing in her life. She knows that God saves. She claims that she is blessed by God, and she lifts up God's holy name. She talks about God's mercy for those who fear God across generations. Sounds good, right?

By the way, there's a difference between grace and mercy. Both come from God. Grace is God's undeserved and unearned love for us. It's God's gift to us. But mercy is God not giving us what we do deserve. God gives us grace and withholds what we do deserve, showing us mercy.

After lifting up God's mercy, Mary starts in with something totally unexpected. She sings about God's power, and she goes for the gut right away. Mary has the audacity to talk about how God is powerful enough to confront and put the proud in their place. God is more powerful than the rulers of the day - even King Herod who called himself "Herod the Great" and was so threatened by anyone that he killed off his own family and - you remember - wanted to kill the Messiah who was born in Bethlehem.

And it's not just that God's power is great enough to take down the proud and those who rule. God also lifts up those who are humble - those who are literally closest to the dirt. God gives the hungry enough to be filled up, and here's another kicker - God sends the rich away with nothing.

We read this song every year during Advent - not as a reminder of who Mary is and what she says, but who this child is that she's carrying and what God is doing through him! But it's too easy for us to read it and leave it for next year. The truth is: it's hard to hear that Jesus will turn the social order upside-down because I'm pretty comfortable where I am.

If that's what Jesus does, and we want to follow him, then what? It's easy to think that Mary's is about other people - the proud, those in power, and the rich. But instead of thinking that Mary's song is about other people, maybe it's about you and me.

We struggle with pride - that notion that we're good on our own. We don't need God or anyone else. "I" and "me" is the center of everything. We want recognition and attention. Pride is a swelled head and a swelled heart, and we worship ourselves rather than God. We become too satisfied with ourselves. The opposite of pride is humility.

And if you're ready to get really uncomfortable, we can talk about being rich. Though we may not feel like it today, we're rich according to every standard in the world. The Pew Research Center says that many Americans who are classified as "poor" by the U.S. government would fall into a middle income category globally. Please don't think I'm downplaying that reality that many people are living in. Poverty is real, and we're called to respond in every way that we can. For the purposes of Mary's song,

though, perspective is everything. For you and me, Mary's song sings right to us and convicts us.

Mary's song is powerful enough that the public reading and display of it has been banned in some places: in Guatemala during the 1980's, in Argentina during the Dirty War when mothers whose children had gone missing posted the words for everyone to see, and even in India under British colonial rule. Her song has affected the theology of many around the world who have found themselves as the humble under someone else's rule.

Lutheran pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer preached these words in Advent 1933. He would be killed by the Nazis years later in 1945. This is his take on Mary's song: *"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. These are the tones of the women prophets of the Old Testament that now come to life in Mary's mouth."*

Will we allow Mary's song to break into this season amid all of the other songs we hear? Will we allow her words to challenge what we believe we're entitled to and what we deserve? Mary tells us that God holds a special place for those who are not powerful, not proud, or not prosperous. We hold different opinions about economic inequalities and how to address them most effectively. But Mary sings about what Jesus will do, and though I know that Jesus' power cannot be contained, I also know that Jesus calls you and me to do his work.

Are we willing to live this way? How will we participate in the Kingdom of God that Jesus is bringing? Mary says that God cares about those who are humble and the hungry. God cares about those who are oppressed. God cares, and we have a responsibility to care without judgment and with deep compassion and mercy.

And it goes against the way of the world, and it means that we make sacrifices for others and that we're courageous and convicted in why we love and serve - because we follow a Savior who reaches out to the least, last, and lost. And if we're honest, we're one of those whom Jesus has redeemed. He brings salvation that we cannot earn or get on our own.

And when we come to this table, we remember the deep love of Christ for us - and the truth of Mary's song. This meal isn't just for us to nurture our relationship with

God. It also puts us in community with the world that God loves. And with the most common things - bread and juice - we remember the holiness and power of God to bring hope, peace, love, and joy to the world.

Friends, I pray that Mary's song doesn't just come and go this year, but that we hear the words, find ourselves convicted and challenged, and move closer to God and God's will for our lives and the world.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.