



# A God Who Knows Their Name

TEXT  
Luke 1:46–56

December 18, 2016 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

If you were here last Sunday, you will remember we noticed the early verses of Mary’s song. *My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior. He knows my name.* She sings because grace has changed her. She sings because love has found her. She sings joy because the creator of the heavens and the earth, the creator of 300 sextillion stars, has pushed his way through all of those stars to a little village in Galilee and found her and calls her by name.

But Mary’s song doesn’t end there. She keeps singing. And as she does, she does something that is rather amazing. Mary sings not just of the way grace changes her, but of the way grace changes the world. Her faith is strong.

She sings not only because God knows her name, but she sings because God knows your name, God knows their name. God knows us all by name.

She sings that God not only finds us and claims us where we are, but that the love of God transforms us.

She sings: *He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with*

*good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy.*

In other words, she sings of how the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ has set the world right, has brought redemption and healed the broken places.

It is one thing to sing of how the Lord has “looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.” But the more Mary sings, the more questions arise. In what sense has the Lord “scattered the proud” or “brought down the powerful” or “filled the hungry” and “sent the rich away empty”?

It would be one thing if Mary sang in the future tense. I suppose you can sing anything in the future tense. But verbs are all past tense. She sings this as accomplished fact.

So, you no doubt have already thought this is more than a little idealistic. In what sense has the grace revealed in Jesus Christ made things right? The lowly are still trampled. Too many are still hungry. How can we sing this with a straight face? You are not alone in thinking that. Scholars also try to make sense of this.

New Testament scholar Raymond Brown says, “Since

it takes considerable imagination to think that the embryo in Mary’s womb has already put down the mighty from their thrones, it has been suggested that ... Mary is predicting what will come about through the child to be born.<sup>1</sup> Read it “future tense.”

Fred Craddock does not interpret the Magnificat as speaking of the past at all: “So sure is [Mary] that God will do what is promised that it is proclaimed as accomplished fact.”<sup>2</sup>

In this sense, the Magnificat serves as an expression of the depth of Mary’s faith that God will bring salvation to the world. I think Mary was a person of profound faith.

I appreciate the effort to make sense of this, but I think there is more here. I am helped by theologian David Ford: “This truth is inevitably self-involving. It cannot be adequately taken in unless we begin to be transformed by it. ... It has the urgency of the most relevant news — like someone shouting, “Fire!” or whispering “Will you marry me?”<sup>3</sup>

Self-involving ... what does that mean? In some way Mary found her name written in the divine purpose, and she understood herself differently

— but not just that. She understood anew what was real and true and right in the world. It had always been real and true and right, but only now was she seeing it. She sings because love has found the world, and grace has changed the world.

Mary's song is not idealistic, but brutally honest, and it calls into question what we assume is reality. To say this is idealistic is to say this is not the way the world works. We know better. We are wise about the ways of the world — more wise than the creator of the world. We know the truth.

We have become masters of justifying the brokenness of the world and proclaiming that it is just the way of things. Sometimes claiming to be “realistic” is just cover for being spiritually lazy.

I saw it in my grandparents — who professed that they hated the racism of American culture, and they wished that things were different because they weren't racists. (I have learned that no one is ever a racist. I have never met someone who admits to being racist, never.) They wanted things to be different, but this was just the way things are. That's not realism; it's spiritual laziness.

We see it as we justify poverty as just the way capitalism works. This is not realism; it's spiritual laziness.

Mary sings of what is true and holy and real. And this truth is self-involving. It is not a promise that we can reason out in a church school class so that everyone will see that it

makes sense. No, to sing like this requires spiritual imagination; it requires spiritual maturity.

See if this helps. I am remembering what Garrison Keillor called the “Ohhh Dad” years. “Ohhh Dad” has to be voiced as a cross between a groan and a sigh, and these years are named such because it is the only thing children can say to their handicapped parents. Some of you have weathered this storm. Some of you are in the midst of this storm. Some of you are thinking, “My children will never talk to me like that.” Enjoy that thought.

These are the years when parents appear to take a nose dive in intelligence. They fall from almost being omniscient to knowing nothing. This happens in a matter of weeks. As my brother told my daughter several years ago, “Your father has always been this dumb; you are only now realizing it.”

I remember the incredibly difficult journey I made through the “Ohhh Dad” years. My father would say something ... and all I could say was “Ohhh, Dad.” He would do something ... “Ohhh Dad.” He would pick me up at youth group. “Don't get out of the car; don't get out of the car. I have people here. Ohhh Dad.”

Danny Martin, Frank Chambless and I were playing basketball in the driveway. Dad noticed we only had three, so he came to join us to balance things out. He came out of the house wearing a T-shirt. It was not a Celtics or Piston's shirt;

it was the Fruit of the Loom V-neck. He had on Bermuda shorts that should never have been allowed to leave Bermuda. His legs looked like they had not seen the sun or bright lights for a decade. He was walking on florescent light tubes which settled into black socks and wingtips. “You guys wanna play some hoops???” Ohhh Dad.

Of course, over time he got better. The legs are the same and so is the apparel. But that doesn't matter like it did at one time.

The real point of transformation came the first time I heard the word myself. When such a simple word is spoken to you — “Dad” — there is something that happens that cannot fully be explained. The word claims you. It's not simply that you understand yourself differently, which you do. But you understand the world differently.

When my own Sarah said in her small voice, “Daddy,” something of who I am surfaced that I had not known before. It had always been there, I guess. It was not a truth I could explain as much as celebrate. And it speaks something that is already and always true.

Mary sings what is true. We have constructed myriad other ways to understand the world, but she sings of justice and grace and humanity. And that is true.

I have been learning about the White Helmets.<sup>4</sup> They are Syrians with spiritual imagination. They are teachers, tai-

lors and firefighters. As they watch their country destroyed and their people attacked, they practice grace. When the bombs drop, leaving destruction and civilians buried in rubble, they run toward the chaos and pull from shallow graves civilians barely alive — children, women, men.

They carry no guns. They carry no weapons. They pose no threat, although their quarters have been targeted and bombed. They are armed only with a verse from the Quran: “Whoever saves one life saves all of humanity.”

Several months ago, we saw Omran Daqneesh sitting in the back of an ambulance; you remember the little 5-year-old boy. He had been pulled from the rubble by the White Helmets. There are 3,000 of them, and they have saved as many as 70,000 Syrians.

I know that they are Muslim, but I am confident that Jesus is pleased. For they are singing a song in protest of the way things are because they trust God not only knows me, but God knows all.

Mary sang, “He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.”

I don’t know how to talk about the hungry being fed, except to say that when I have been part of it, it has seemed right. It holds a “rightness” that has been true forever. I don’t know how to describe when God will lift up the lowly and

scatter the proud, but in those moments when the marginalized have been included, it has seemed eternally right. When Martin Luther King preached of black children and white children playing together, it was a word that was already and always true.

In a world of violence, when Assad and Putin and ISIS spew their destruction, I see people waging peace, and it is clear to me what is already and always true.

Mary sings of that which is true past, present, future. What is left for the people of God is to join the song, to find our name written in the redemptive work of God and recognize that that work is for the whole world. And don’t worry so much about how it’s true or when it became true. Just sing it. God will reveal the truth of this word; it will come to you.

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<sup>1</sup>Raymond Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (1977), pp. 362–363

<sup>2</sup>Fred Craddock, *Luke: Interpretation* (1990), p. 30

<sup>3</sup>David Ford, *The Shape of Living* (1997), p. 10. Ford’s comment is about the resurrection, but seems to me it fits the incarnation as well.

<sup>4</sup>Jared Malsin, “The White Helmets of Syria,” *Time*, October 17, 2016

**This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.**

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church’s website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.