



On the Road to Mary's House

TEXT
Luke 1:46-56

December 22, 2019 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

If you look at this passage in the pew Bible, you see that it is not formatted in paragraph form, but center justified. That's because this is a song. Through the generations, the church has called Mary's song the *Magnificat*. It's a song about what God will do — or actually, what God has done.

Learning that a child is on the way can cause us to think about the future with a different degree of discipline. It seems to have been that way for Mary. She sang of God's blessing in her life: *God has looked with favor upon the lowliness of his servant*. But her song isn't just about what she wants for Christmas. She sings about a new world. *He brings down the powerful from their thrones and lifts up the lowly; fills the hungry with good things and sends the rich away empty*. It's a new day.

Mary sings, and then Luke says she goes to her home. I find that a surprising detail: Mary went to her home. I'll come back to that. But first, let me do a little Bible study with you on this song.

The Christmas story is a musical. Read through Luke, and it reads like it was written by the family Von Trapp. Every time there is a significant plot

development, someone bursts out in song.

Mary gets the music started: *My soul magnifies the Lord*. ... Then Zechariah, after being speechless for Elizabeth's entire pregnancy, when his son John the Baptist is born, sings, *The tender mercy of our God will break upon us*. ... *He will guide our feet in the paths of peace*.

The night of Jesus' birth, the angels sing, *Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace*.

The concert concludes with the old man Simeon. Jesus is taken to the temple where Simeon sings, *Now let thy servant depart in peace for my eyes have seen your salvation*.

If you like Christmas carols, Luke is your guy. Here is what we have learned about this music. Luke's congregation did not learn these songs from the gospel; they already knew them. These were some favorite hymns. As they show up in the story, his congregation probably sang along.

Thirty years ago, I was in divinity school. It was Martin Luther King weekend, and Carol and I went to a largely African American congregation. The preacher was preaching. He was good. He was a wise man; I remember that. But then right in

the middle of his sermon, everyone started singing. I didn't sing. I didn't know the song. But the congregation, with one voice, stood and sang beautifully. This song they knew by heart: *God of our weary years, God of our silent tears, thou who has brought us thus far on the way. Thou who hast by thy might led us into the light, keep us forever in the path, we pray*.

They were singing *Lift Every Voice and Sing*. James Weldon Johnson authored this poem in 1900, and it was first sung by a 500-voice children's choir in Jacksonville, Florida, to celebrate Abraham Lincoln's birthday. From that time, it spread through the black community as an anthem of hope during the harsh times of racial oppression. It was sung in jail cells and in sanctuaries as folks gathered before marches. It was sung on Freedom Bus Rides and in cemeteries. And in that New Haven Church, they sang it by heart.

When you sing a song like that, you remember other times it has been sung. You remember the other times when we needed to remember that God has "brought us thus far on the way." Songs like this are thick with history. When you sing a song like that, you never sing it alone. You sing

it with all those who have sung it before. You hear their voices and you remember their courage.

Mary sings like that. It's not just her voice; it's a whole chorus of the saints. Raymond Brown, a brilliant scholar of the Gospels, believes these songs emerged from a Jewish Christian community known as the "Anawim." The Anawim were poor, forgotten folks in society. And in Jesus, they found hope.¹ Jesus was their way out of no way. That is what they sang about. They were songs thick with history.

The shooting in the Mother Emmanuel Church in Charleston, South Carolina, happened during Obama's Presidency. He went to that church. He spoke from that historic pulpit as he looked at the faces of those who have been battered by hatred for generations. And then he sang *Amazing Grace*. And when he did, it wasn't just his voice. It was the voices of that congregation, but not just them. That sanctuary was filled with the voices of everyone who has known that his grace has brought us safe thus far. It is a song thick with history.

That moment, that horrible and yet hope-filled moment, was filled with other moments. They sang *through many dangers, toils and snares, I have already come*. The dangers, toils and snares were real. They bore names and came on dark nights. They came sometimes clad in bed sheets with ropes and knives and guns. They sang because they knew about dangers, toils, and snares, but they also sang because they knew the grace that leads you home. Songs with history, like

the *Magnificat*, as you sing them, you hear the voices of the suffering saints who have gone before, and you also hear their courage. And it is their courage that makes you unafraid. It is their faith that gives you hope.

I know this might seem a bit abstract. But we need songs like this. Because you know what it is to be discouraged. You know what it is to be afraid. You know what it is to have leaders disappoint. You know the dangers that come when truth is ignored, and the toils that result when the poor are passed by. And you know that it is not of God. And it can discourage you.

But I think we have this text to teach us: Don't be discouraged, just remember the long march of the saints and the song they have taught us.

Mary sang of God's promised day. But Mary sings not of a day that will come; she sings of it in the past tense. She sings as if God has already accomplished all of this. I don't think she is saying that the world as we know it now is God's promised day. No, if I understand the text, what she is saying is that God has always been — and will always be — the God who feeds the hungry and lifts up the lowly and humbles the arrogant. And whenever you see that happen, you see the presence of God.

That's why, from the early days of the church and from the first days of this church, the church has been committed to mission. Because sometimes in mission, we see most clearly what Mary sings about. I think this is a song from home

that guides the mission of the faithful.

Village Church has been a church of mission from her beginning. Can I tell you a bit of that mission story?

In the early years, if you spoke of mission at Village, you were speaking of work we did overseas. Did you know that? In the early years, our mission was almost exclusively international mission. Dr. Bob even served as a temporary missionary for six months in the Philippines. And when he returned home, he offered a series of programs on mission work across the globe; and it is said that 15,000 people attended these programs. That's more than we have here today — even with two sanctuaries.

In 1960, Maitree Chartburut, a native of Thailand and a graduate of Princeton Theological Seminary, joined the Village staff as a mission fraternal worker. Do you know what that is? It's a missionary. We had a missionary from Thailand on staff at Village, and his work was to increase global mission support in this congregation.

In our earliest days, if you spoke of mission at Village, most folks assumed you were talking about global work. But then something happened that changed all of that. The civil rights struggle occurred, and we realized need was closer to home. We realized that the things Mary was singing about were not just needs in distant lands, but right here in Kansas City.

In 1971, Village formed a Community Relations Committee, which later was called the

Community Concern Committee, which now is called the Mission Committee. And today we are all in with the Food Pantry, and Front Porch Alliance, and Signature Mission, and Habitat, and Operation Breakthrough. I could go on — because the day that Mary sings about hasn't happened yet. But through our mission, we are living toward that day.

Later, Village recognized that the work of mission was not just a work of social justice, for the church herself was struggling. Several of you, in recent weeks, have emailed me copies of articles from the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Times*, *USA Today* and others — all referencing the Pew Research report that I spoke of a few weeks ago. In short, it's one more story to say the church is not as strong as she once was.

When Village was founded 70 years ago, it was reasonable to assume that almost everyone in this community would go to church somewhere. But you can't assume that today. A hundred years ago, we were trying to start congregations in distant lands. Now that work is right here at home. That's why you helped to launch the Covenant Network, and then later NEXT Church and more recently Antioch. It's why we support young adults like Hannah Ratliff and Molly Ramsey who have gone to seminary and will bring leadership to the next generation of the church. Who knows what our next calling will be.

One thing is clear: The mission of the church has grown in scope, and it is as important

today as it has ever been. And I think that this commitment to mission is a way we sing the song that Mary taught us.

She sang of hope that rests in the saving work of God. And then Luke says she went to her home. I said I would come back to that. It's an odd detail, I think. Here's why: It would have been a strange thing for an unwed, pregnant teenager in those days to have a home. We might expect it to say she went to her father's home — or maybe to Joseph's home. But it says she went to *her* home.

So, here's what I think. I don't think Luke is speaking of an address; I think he is talking about the song. I think the song is home. It's a picture of home — not only hers, but ours too.

That's why it's important to know it and to sing it, because it teaches us what home looks like.

These are hard days. For some of you, that's a personal thing because it's Christmas and someone you love is not here. And that's so hard.

Or because there's sickness, and you put up a brave front, but you are scared.

Or because things aren't right in your marriage, and you are weary. Or you are losing sleep over your kids.

Or maybe it's personal in a different way, because you are losing sleep over this country that you love, and you worry that commitment to do what's right is confused.

Or maybe you worry because the planet is warming and the constant news stories of floods in Missouri and fires in Califor-

nia and hurricanes in Florida or Houston have you unnerved.

These are stressful times. And some say a good 401k will fix all that; or find the right entertainment, and you can distract yourself; or curate your desired self online and you will make it through.

But we need something deeper. This season is not just about lights and chocolate and checking the list twice. It's about finding our way home.

In a poetic way, what we need is to learn the songs we don't sing by ourselves. Learn the songs the saints have given to us, so that we can sing them with all those who have gone before.

As you sing songs with history, like the *Magnificat*, you hear the voices of the suffering saints who have gone before, and you also hear their courage. And it is their courage that makes you unafraid. It is their faith that gives you hope.

We have work to do; as the people of God, we have a lot of work to do. We need to sing the songs the saints have given us, for they tell us where to see God at work today, and they will help us find our way home.

¹Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, p. 351

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>.