

## SWEET MYSTERY OF LIFE

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I used to think I grew up in a typical American household. There was a mom, a dad, 2 kids and a dog. Our house wasn't huge, but it was big enough. We had a car of our own, and my dad drove a company car, and every night at 6:00, we'd sit down together to a dinner which consisted of some kind of meat, a starch, a vegetable, a salad and a cookie or a scoop of ice cream. Yep, pretty typical, I thought, except for one thing. Every once in a while, out of the blue and for no apparent reason, my mom would, at the top of her lungs, belt out this particular song, "Ah, sweet mystery of life, at last I found you!"

If you knew my mother, I think it would surprise you to know this about her, because generally she is pretty quiet and reserved. She thinks of herself as shy. So why these sudden outbursts? I think there were times when Mom simply could not contain her joy.

The same thing happened to Mary. She found out through an angel that she had been chosen by God to bear a child, and not just any child. her boy was going to be special—not special in the way that all mothers think their children are special, but special in the way that was to be world-changing.

Most women in Mary's situation would be devastated by the news of an unintended pregnancy. It would mean rejection and loss and the end of all hopes and dreams for the future. Such news would be unwelcomed and cause for anything but rejoicing. But Mary accepted the news. "Let it be," she said. And then she sought support from her older cousin, Elizabeth, in the hills of Judea for a three-month stay—Elizabeth, who was expecting a miracle baby of her own.

*This is worth noting because scenes featuring women as protagonists with no men present are rare in the Bible. Luke strikingly bookends the life of Jesus with two such scenes: at the end, the discovery of the empty tomb*

*by a group of women, and here at the beginning, Mary, pregnant with God, visits Elizabeth. In this sense, Luke turns the marginalization of women on its head: at both of these crucial points in the action - birth and death, womb and tomb - it's women at the center of the story.*

Elizabeth greeted Mary and her news with joy. She said, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. <sup>43</sup> And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? <sup>44</sup> For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. <sup>45</sup> And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

The significance of what was happening to her hit home with Mary. Her heart was filled to overflowing to the point that she burst into song. Mary sings:

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

Happiness and joy are two different things. Happiness comes from circumstances and sometimes attitude, but it can be difficult to feel happy if we are in a dark place—If we are frightened or unsure of our future. It seems reasonable that Mary would be both frightened and unsure, given her circumstances, until she was overcome with joy, which may not seem reasonable at all.

*Henri Nouwen said: while happiness usually depends on circumstances, joy runs deeper. "Joy," he writes, "is the experience of knowing that you are unconditionally loved and that nothing - sickness, failure, emotional distress, oppression, war, or even death - can take that love away." Thus joy and sorrow can not only coexist; joy can even be found in the midst of sorrowful circumstances. By all outward appearances, Mary's situation was difficult and vulnerable, but her sparkling song of joy flows from a wellspring deeper than the surface of things.*

Her outburst is reminiscent of the song of Hannah, found in 1 Samuel. After decades of barrenness and ridicule, Hannah's prayers are finally answered in the birth of her son. She sings a song of gratitude—a song of divine majesty and power, painting a picture of God as a master of reversals. It goes something like this:

“My heart exults in the LORD;  
my strength is exalted in my God.<sup>[a]</sup>  
My mouth derides my enemies,  
because I rejoice in my<sup>[b]</sup> victory...

“There is no Holy One like the LORD,  
no one besides you;  
there is no Rock like our God....

The bows of the mighty are broken,  
but the feeble gird on strength.

<sup>5</sup> Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread,  
but those who were hungry are fat with spoil.

The barren has borne seven,  
but she who has many children is forlorn.

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.<sup>[c]</sup>

For the pillars of the earth are the LORD's,  
and on them he has set the world.

Notice the similarities in both women's exclamations. Both Hannah's and Mary's songs have to do with unusual conceptions and births of sons dedicated to serving God. Both are thankful expressions of great joy. And both mention the equalization of society as a foundational principal in the Kingdom of God—the poor will be raised up and the mighty will be brought down so that all may share equally in God's Realm.

Hmmm...As a person living in one of the wealthiest nations in the world (we're number 11, by the way, based on gross domestic product per capita. The U.S., on the other hand, has the largest economy in the world, according to ceoworld.biz). So, as a person living comfortably in a rich country, I don't know if I like the sound of that. I don't think I want to be "brought down." When we really listen to Mary's song, it can make us quite uncomfortable. We aren't the only ones.

During the British rule of India, the *Magnificat* was prohibited from being sung in church. In the 1980s, Guatemala's government discovered Mary's

words about God's preferential love for the poor to be too dangerous and revolutionary. The song had been creating quite the stirring amongst Guatemala's impoverished masses. Mary's words were inspiring the Guatemalan poor to believe that change was indeed possible. Thus their government banned any public recitation of Mary's words. Similarly, after the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo—whose children all disappeared during the Dirty War—placed the *Magnificat's* words on posters throughout the capital plaza, the military junta of Argentina outlawed any public display of Mary's song.

Rather than banning Mary's song completely, some choose to spiritualize it in a way that steals its power. Susan Connelly, of the Sisters of St. Joseph writes:

*What we sometimes do is give (the Magnificat) a totally 'spiritual' meaning, and thus we cut it off at the knees. The tendency to spiritualize earthly problems is the constant temptation faced by religious people. It is actually a way of not having to deal with them. It is ever so easy to say prayers for the poor and then to head for a warm bed on a full stomach. It is also easy to write and deliver talks on the ills of the world and not be prepared to put one's effort into addressing the issues. The Magnificat is a whole world-view. It is the perception of a person who is thoroughly steeped in God, and if its message escapes us, or fails to ignite us, then that says a great deal about us.*

The Magnificat is thoroughly traditional in its expression of the Jewish faith in a God who hears the cry of the poor, the God who exalts the lowly, the God who brings life out of sterility. It is also thoroughly traditional in the Christian sense in its expression of the Resurrection faith in the God of Reversal, in its announcing in a nutshell the program of Jesus.

A superficial reading of the Magnificat finds that it is contrary to experience completely. When you look around the world today, we can't say that God has filled the hungry with good things and has sent the rich away empty. Or that the princes have been pulled from their thrones. They're there all right, planning all the time to work it so that they remain in power. But a closer look reveals Mary's faith in the reality of God's love for her which impels her to declare to the hungry and the powerless what she herself knows from her own experience: that the status of being a nobody, a woman in an

oppressed society, is the very cause of her being favoured by God, and hence of her sense of being filled, fulfilled and fruitful. She tells us unequivocally, as Jesus did, that God's favourites are the despised and the exploited and she asserts, again as Jesus did, that God will always have the last word. God does take sides. Mary is convinced of God's power of reversal. The last are first, the weak are strong, the Crucified is Risen. Knowing that she will play a key role in God's plan fills her with joy to the point of overflowing.

Joy is greater than circumstance. Our joy, like that of Mary, comes from knowing that God loves us enough to come here to tell us exactly that—to disrupt the life of a young woman engaged but not yet married, to live an exemplary life, to go to extreme measures to prove his love for us, even to the cross, to bring justice to a world sorely in need of peace. This joy gets us through the tough times and fills us to the point that sometimes, we have to burst out in song.

“Ah, sweet mystery of life, at last we've found you!”

Amen.