

# Mary on the Radio

CHRIST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, CHESTERLAND, OH

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LUKE 1:46B-55

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I don't know about your count, but by mine the Christmas music has been playing now for 48 days. A radio station in Kansas City starts festivities on November 1. Does it start that early here? As ghosts, witches and candy corn disappear from the shelves, candy canes, stockings and Santa hats slide in to take their place. Radio and stores ring with sleigh bells and mommy's midnight tryst with Santa. A friend of mine posted on Facebook last week: "And there it is. I have had to trigger the automatic Starbucks departure rule: When 'Santa Baby' plays, Brian no longer stays."

I don't begrudge this deluge of mostly secular Christmastide that comes down longer than Noah's 40 days of rain. I've become like an elementary school cafeteria worker for whom a hundred fevered voices is auditory wallpaper: I don't hear it much anymore. The holiday music doesn't bug me or thrill me. It's just there—the soundtrack to North America's 55 days of Christmas.

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I wonder if I'd notice if Mary sang? It's a glaring omission, that Mary's Christmas carol doesn't get airtime. It might be history's greatest carol, sung longer and more often than "O Come, All Ye Faithful," "Silent Night," and "Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer" combined.

A vision of what her baby's birth would mean for the world stirred the heart of a pregnant teenage girl and she poured out a song: "My soul magnifies the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God..." A song about God's mighty deeds, bringing rulers down and lifting up the humble; filling the hungry with good things and sending the rich away empty. This song about the justice and faithfulness of God.

But I'm not sure you get a recording contract for a song like this. Probably not for a pop Christmas album. It doesn't fit the mold for the holiday stations. I wonder how this song would have

sounded at the Lindsey Elementary holiday concert last Thursday? Sandwiched between Deck the Halls and Hawaiian Christmas it might have seemed out of place with its scattering of the proud, humbling of the mighty, and leaving the rich out in the cold.

Christmas is a singing season. Christmas gives the church some of the best music. Each year the church of my childhood put on a big concert called "The Living Christmas Tree." In the front of the sanctuary we put up six tiers of scaffolding in the shape of a tree and decked it out in green and red. The choir filled each scaffold and a sole soprano at the very top wore a ring tinsel on her head.

As a pastor I recognize now the trouble it took to put on those Christmas shows. I don't think there would have been energy to do something that big for Lent or even Easter. There's just something about Christmas carols. During the closing song, "Hark! The Herald," the basses' faces turned red and veins bulged in their foreheads as they brought home the final verse. Only a stirring of the heart makes one sing like that.

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I think Mary's heart raced as she sang. She probably hadn't recovered from the angel's visit three days back when Gabriel told her she would bear a son by other than natural means. Pregnancy is always big news, but the headline for this one wasn't just the conception, but the purpose behind it all: this baby who would be purely of God would rule over Israel forever. It turns out wasn't just a child but a kingdom that was going to be borne to the world.

Between this weighty word that Mary believed and her spur-of-the-moment, three-day hike out to highlands in Judea Mary's heart worked overtime both in pumping and in faith. She found Elizabeth pregnant, just as she'd been

told. When they met, the child who would be John the Baptist leapt in Elizabeth's womb a song jumped from Mary's heart.

It was a moment of miracle—two women improbably pregnant, enraptured with God's place in their lives. God was pulling of something big, they believed, and not just for them. There was gravity, something almost cosmic in what these pregnancies meant. Mary's carol hit its climactic note with lyrics announcing God is always faithful to the promises God made to Abraham and all who came after him through the years. You can almost feel Mary's chills blowing off the page.

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This song of Mary is chilling, although exactly how might depend on one's circumstances in hearing. There is disruption in this carol of God's mercy, strength and favor. God's blessing is breaking upon the earth, it says, but to look at those to whom it comes—the lowly, the hungry, those who need mercy, one doesn't get images of cozy fires in homes and Christmas trees heaped with gifts at the base.

There are a number of words that fit the place out of which Mary sings. "Humble state," said our translation today. "Lowliness," "low status," "low estate" is how other translations put it. Peasant Mary is not the only lowly one in the song. There are the starving poor who long to be filled; the victims whose faces have been pressed down in the mud. You get the impression that this is a carol sung in shantytowns and projects. Maybe sung by people who decide, "How should we spend our money this month. Should we buy medicine or should we buy food?"

What kind of voice fits Mary's song? Something like Billie Holiday's, a rough life voice that sounds like it just got up from the gutter? Or like Mahalia Jackson's singing before a civil rights

march? Or just the plain spoken voice of one opening the morning paper and saying, “How much longer is our world going to go on like this?”

Some of you must have noticed last Sunday’s Plain Dealer article about letters to Santa Claus. It suggested Santa has the Kleenex out as he reads this year’s letters from the post office in Cleveland:

Dear Santa, Please send rent money.

Santa, My grandma died. I want her back.

Dear Santa, What I want for Christmas is my family to have a house.

Dear Santa, You don’t have to bring me any little toys or any clothes. Just bring me happiness.

Dear Santa, This year for Christmas I want a Xbox and an iPod touch. But most of all I want my mom and dad to stop fighting and get along for once.

These sound less like letters to Santa and more like prayers from the heart, prayers for the world, a plea for the world to change voiced in pencil and crayon.

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The world has changed, Mary sang  
Everything will change:

“God has shown strength with his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the  
thoughts of their hearts.

God has brought rulers down from their  
thrones, but has lifted up the humble.

God has filled the hungry with good  
things, but has sent the rich away empty.”

Is this Christmas, or is this revolution?  
New Testament scholar Scot McKnight  
notes in the 1980s the government of  
Guatemala banned the singing of Mary’s  
song. It was okay to sing “Away in the  
Manger” and “The First Noel,” but not  
the Magnificat. That government must  
have truly heard it. This prayer is  
subversive, political, a harold’s call that a  
new government is coming in.

“His kingdom will have no end,” the  
angel said to Mary. Christmas isn’t just a  
birthday party. It’s the celebration of a

kingdom. Mary’s song has the tune of  
Jesus’ ministry.

Jesus came into a world that said: You’re  
blessed if you’re rich and beautiful.  
You’re blessed if you are successful.  
You’re blessed if you have people under  
you. You’re blessed if you are secure.

Mary sang of God turning all that upside  
down. Mary’s song flowed straight from  
the heart of God. In just a few months  
she would literally have God’s beating  
within her. But even before it was fully  
formed in that child developing n her  
womb, her song showed God’s heart was  
already in her, pumping strong.

Mary’s child would grow up and say,  
“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours  
is the kingdom of God.” “Blessed are you  
who hunger, are poor, who weep, who are  
rejected. You will have reward in  
heaven.” He would sing, “Woe to you  
who are rich, well fed, who laugh, who  
are well spoken of.”

Where did Jesus learn that God’s heart  
breaks for the down and out, for the left  
behind, for people that others write off?

Where did Jesus come to know that God’s  
heart burns against injustice in which the  
poor go hungry and people with plenty  
won’t lift a finger to help?

From whom did Jesus first come to know  
that God will not stand idly by forever as  
the powerful push around the weak?

How did Jesus develop faith that the  
might of God’s arm could be flexed in  
the weakness of the cross?

It would seem Jesus was not just his  
Father’s son, but his mother’s as well. I  
wonder what song Mary sang to Jesus as  
she rocked him to sleep? Did it begin,  
“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my  
Spirit rejoices in God my Savior. The  
Mighty One has done great things for  
me—holy is his name...?”

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What would it mean for us to sing this?  
What would it look like if our lives were  
to broadcast this song? What would it  
look like to include Jesus among those to  
whom we gave gifts?

What if we gave him our eyes, that we  
might see the world as God does, as Mary  
does in her song?

What if we gave him our heart, that it  
might be stirred by the same concerns as  
God?

What if we gave him our faith, our joy  
over how God is setting this world to  
rights until Mary’s song is on the lips of  
all the redeemed in heaven?

What if we let go of whatever station we  
think we are in and went to the bottom of  
the pile to sing along with Mary—with  
Mary and her baby. Amen.

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