



Mary's Best Song
Isaiah 61:7-11; Luke 1:46-55
Reverend Giuseppe Mattei (August 8, 2021)

“Let It Be” is one of the Beatles’ best known songs. They have based their lyrics on Mary’s Magnificat.

Much of what is said about Mary, the Mother of our Lord, comes from the gospel according to Luke. Her first appearance is at the Annunciation, where she spoke in the name of humanity and gave her solemn “Yes, let it be” (“*Fiat*” in Latin) to God's desire to dwell among us. Her fiat to Gabriel’s announcement of God’s incarnational intent opens the way for a new eruption of grace into the world. Ever since, that event has been written about and represented in world famous paintings.

Luke’s gospel informs us that she trusted the words of the angel about her cousin, Elizabeth’s, pregnancy, and she began the down-to-earth activity of preparing for what would happen. Mary started her four-day perilous hill-side trekking to the house of Elizabeth, an older and barren woman who, together with her husband, Zachariah, had been praying all along that the Lord would bless them with a child and lift the shame of childlessness. Now, the angel Gabriel tells Mary, Elizabeth is in her sixth month. How evident it is that nothing is impossible with God. God truly has a sense of humor and just as God came through for Sarah and Abraham in their old age with the birth of Isaac, son of laughter, God has blessed Elizabeth and Zechariah with the pregnancy they had been praying about. God is the fulfiller of promises no matter how ridiculous or frustrating we think God’s timing is. Elizabeth did not show any resentment that her best years had now gone, and her energy level had declined considerably.

Upon hearing Mary’s greeting, Elizabeth’s baby, who would later be called John, leapt in her womb. It was then that Elizabeth, empowered by the Spirit, had no doubts nor fear, and exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.” How remarkable that Elizabeth did not feel any jealousy towards Mary who had been granted a baby at that early age while she had struggled her whole life to remain pregnant. Elizabeth’s humility is also noteworthy as she recognized her lower status before Mary, mother of her (and our) Lord. These words, together with the words of the angel, gave shape to the “Hail Mary,” a prayer that the believers have been praying since the 11th century.

There is a strong proclamation of faith in Elizabeth’s words. She calls Mary the mother of her Lord. This which she said, was extremely outrageous. Spoken by a Jewish woman, this was blasphemy to the ears of an orthodox Jew. The word translated into English as “Lord” was the ancient Hebrew word Elohim for God. How could a teenager be the mother of God, the eternal Almighty, the Being above all beings and Creator of the universe? And by proclaiming Mary mother of her Lord, she was putting herself and Mary in political jeopardy as Palestine at the time was an occupied territory of the Romans who considered the emperor the only and true “Lord.” She could incur into persecution and even death were she overheard by a spy of Rome.



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The title “Bearer of God” or “Mother of God” (in Greek, theotokos) is a summary description of the entire saving work of Christ. The Council of Ephesus in 431 codified theotokos as a Christian dogma, insisting that anyone who fails to affirm Mary as the Mother of God commits a heresy, namely that of denying that the one who gestated in Mary’s womb is God. She is the mother of Jesus, after all, and Jesus is God. There isn’t a human Jesus and a Divine Jesus. There is one Jesus. She is His mother. To claim that God is enfleshed, that God has a birth and death date, that God is Jewish, is the scandal of particularity to which Christian faith is committed. If God can come that close to a people, becoming so involved in human history, embracing a cultural heritage, and participating in the human struggle of liberation from all that ails us means that God is capable and willing to be involved with all suffering people of all colonized and oppressed regions of the Earth.

Claims about Mary are ways to keep from smoothing out the scandal. As Luther said, “Mary suckled God, rocked God to sleep, prepared broth and soup for God.” She also taught him the songs, stories, and practices of the Jewish people whose messiah he would later claim to be.¹

In telling of that visit, Luke portrays Mary singing a song of praise based in the memory of the Hebrew Scriptures and prefiguring the essence of what her Son would preach. When taken out of its biblical context, people might mistake that hymn for a subversive or even socialist manifesto. Mary’s Magnificat both announces and foreshadows the world upset that is the coming kingdom of God. God overthrows thrones in the gospel of Luke just as easily as Jesus overthrows the moneychangers’ tables in the other gospels.²

Mary of the Magnificat has no pretenses. She has already referred to herself as the servant of the Lord in her interaction with Gabriel (Lk 1:38), resonating with the same word that describes Jesus in Philippians 2:7. Here in the Magnificat, she acknowledges her “lowliness” (v.48) and hangs on to it without letting her election go to her head. Except for proclaiming God's goodness to her, the focus of Mary's song is not on herself. She is not blessed because she is going to be the physical mother of Jesus, but because she believed God’s word.

Her song is a proclamation of faith, a practical creed praising God's fulfillment of the promise of world salvation spoken through the prophets arching back all the way to Abraham’s blessing. Ambrose, fourth century theologian and bishop of Milan, remarks that all should aspire to “the spirit of Mary, so that they may rejoice in the Lord.”³ Ambrose, along with Luke, reflecting on Mary, brings to mind the words of Psalm 1: “Blessed are those...who delight in the ways of the Lord.”

¹ John 4:26 for instance.

² Matthew 21:12–17; Mark 11:15–19; John 2:13-16 but also Luke 19:45–48

³ Ambrose, Exposition of Luke.



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The first article of Mary's creed proclaims that those who stand in awe of God's majesty (fear of the Lord) will learn how God's mercy outshines even the splendor of all creation. Bonaventure, thirteenth century bishop and doctor of the Church, offers his own reflection in his commentary on the Magnificat, "Her canticle shows that the fulfillment of all promised blessings has come about, and therefore brings about the fulfillment of all praise and canticles and even of the [entire] Scriptures."

Yes, Mary's canticle sums up all the promises of God and their fulfillment, all the aspirations of God's people of all generations, the calming of all sorrow, the soothing of all lament, the drying up of all tears, and the completion of all joy. Mary sings: "The Lord has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; God has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty."⁴ In a few lines, Mary recounts the one-thousand-year story of God's favor towards the poor and oppressed. I wonder how often Jesus must have heard Mary go over that story with him: Has she shared her faith in God while she was spoon-feeding him? Has she told him of God's faithfulness as she was putting Jesus to bed? Has she reassured him with dreams of a new justice-centered world?

Mary passed on to Jesus the faith of her Jewish people with a song of joy. Her attitude of humility ("Let it be with me according to your word") will reflect Jesus' own surrender to God in the Gethsemane: "Not my will but yours be done."⁵ Her prophetic and affirming song must have set the basis for Jesus' first sermon in the synagogue at Nazareth. Luke, in fact, tells us that it was there that Jesus read from the scroll of Isaiah:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." It was then that Jesus assures them that "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."⁶ But his own villagers were not ready to receive him. On the contrary, they felt so offended (or exposed) that they drew him out of the village and were ready to throw him over the brow of the hill.

Mennonite pastor, Isaac Villegas, reflects that political power is about having a voice and being listened to. Here, at the beginning of Luke's gospel, we listen to Mary's voice.⁷

What she goes on to sing is an explanation of God's mercy, of how God upends all worldly values and expectations. What she sings about is a total transformation of the world, a structural overhaul of society. The powerful will be brought down from their thrones, the lowly lifted up,

⁴ Luke 1:52-53

⁵ Luke 1:38 and 22:42

⁶ Luke 4:16-21

⁷ [Mary's song, the Magnificat, reveals her politics of mercy \(christiancentury.org\)](http://christiancentury.org)



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and the proud lose their way. The hungry, who know how to share, enjoy fulfillment while those who count on their own wealth will never be satisfied.

Mary's song urges us to recognize God's activity in the everydayness of our world. She points to where we can find God working among us. Mary's creed prophesies a new political arrangement, which will involve the abolition of the old systems of power. Everything about this vision urges us to appreciate God's commitment to the wellbeing of all creation. She sings her song "in remembrance of God's mercy" (v. 54), which shatters the institutions of injustice that threaten, oppress, and imprison. Are our social structures organized around the principle of wellbeing and respect for all life? How are our social relations to be transformed to reflect God's mercy?

Mary's assent to the angel's announcement and her joyful song in the presence of Elizabeth are not simply a passive acknowledgment of God's salvific intentions for the world. A reflection on God's ways requires a personal and active response. Mary, and all people before her, were aware that God coming to us would set in motion an intentional course of life, trigger a series of events, some of which may be very unpleasant and even deadly, and require a believing trajectory over which we have little control. When we are drawn to Jesus and made aware of the divine dream, also called the kingdom of God (or of heaven) and also translated by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., as the Beloved Community, how quick are we to follow Mary's attitude and example of deep listening, pondering, and faithful labor?

Mary's was not an unwanted pregnancy and she was not forced into it. She believed the angel's words and accepted to be part of God's salvific plan fully aware of the shame and dishonor of a husbandless pregnancy. To her, the oncoming kingdom of God was more precious than her own reputation and safety. She probably did not know of her heart being broken one day when her child will be falsely accused, tortured, and murdered.⁸ In her "*Fiat*" ("Yes, let it be") to the Lord, she was willing to apply her faith to the daily opportunities to be part of the coming kingdom. Mary prophesies about the joy of a reconstructed society, a world where she and her people will be released from oppression, freed from an abusive regime, free to worship God with undivided attention.

New Testament professor, Mark Allen Powell, thinks that in the third gospel, Mary becomes the model for Christian discipleship, the person who all people, men and women alike should emulate, especially if they wish to follow her son. In fact, in Luke, Mary is the most Christ-like human being in the story: she models for us what we call the priesthood of all believers. She is present at a wedding at Cana in Galilee and solicits Jesus' first miracle. She is rightly rebuked by Jesus and reminded that faith and doing the will of God is what distinguishes Jesus' family and not blood ties. She and other women are present at the cross, when the male disciples flee. She is requested to consider John (a symbol of all disciples) as her son now just as John (i.e., all

⁸ Luke 2:34



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disciples) is called to take Mary in as his mother. “In this and other scenes she is depicted as an image of the church, the mother of believers, and one to whose care Jesus is devoted to his dying breath.”⁹

Depending on how one reads the resurrection narratives, she is present there, too. Later on, Mary is the only woman mentioned with the disciples in the upper room at the time of the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 1:14). Mary’s appearances in scripture are limited, but they are tied to crucial moments in salvation history, and those moments are formative of the Church.

As Reformed theologian and Yale professor Willie Jennings says, “Salvation begins with Mary’s yes.” And Presbyterian theologian Cynthia Rigby continues the Church’s argument that describes Mary as the archetypical Christian, the mother of believers. “We too are ‘virgins’ who are incapable of bearing God,” until God deigns to be born in our ordinariness as in Mary’s.

Lutheran theologian David Yeago suggests observing the other mariological feasts of the ancient church, such as the Annunciation on March 25 (nine months before Christmas) and her saint day on August 15. He also suggests we sing the Magnificat as often as possible in our personal and corporate prayer.

May the communion we have with Mary and all the saints lead us to a closer walk with Jesus.
Amen.

⁹ [What about Mary? Protestants and Marian devotion | The Christian Century](#)