

Two Marys

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When I was still a child, I loved the season of Advent. I especially loved it because we began singing Christmas music during Sunday worship—"Silent Night," "Joy to the World," "O Come O Come Emmanuel." These songs were the best songs the church had to offer, as far as I was concerned. They ushered limitless possibilities into my young imagination. They stirred up images of idyllic Christmas gatherings with family and friends, of long breaks from school with lots of new toys to enjoy, of big festive meals complete with my favorite sweets. They inspired future hopes in me and my siblings. (*All you old codgers can recall what I'm talking about, right? When such carols brought to mind all the joys this world had to offer!*)

Well, I still love to sing these old Christmas hymns. I still think they're some of the best songs the church has to offer. Yet, I feel this way for far different reasons than I did when I was younger. I no longer expect gatherings with family and friends to be ideal. In fact, I'm pretty happy when they come-off without any serious drama. I know how long toys and vacations last—that they can't bring anyone enduring joy. And, as far as festive meals and favorite sweets are concerned, they are now hazards to be managed if I want to sleep well at night and not need an entirely new wardrobe after the holidays are over.

The same songs, but two very different perspectives—two very different *mes*. And that makes all the difference. That changes everything.

Today we're going to consider the first Christmas carol, the song Mary sings when she visits her cousin Elizabeth. And, if we really want to understand this song, we need to consider the two very different perspectives represented—the two Marys who both sang it. Let's read the text and meet the two Marys.

Luke 1:39-56

³⁹ At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, ⁴⁰ where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. ⁴² In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! ⁴³ But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴ As soon as the sound of your greeting

reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!"

⁴⁶ And Mary said:

"My soul glorifies the Lord

⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

⁴⁸ for he has been mindful

of the humble state of his servant.

From now on all generations will call me blessed,

⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me—

holy is his name.

⁵⁰ His mercy extends to those who fear him,

from generation to generation.

⁵¹ He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;

he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

⁵² He has brought down rulers from their thrones

but has lifted up the humble.

⁵³ He has filled the hungry with good things

but has sent the rich away empty.

⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,

remembering to be merciful

⁵⁵ to Abraham and his descendants forever,

just as he promised our ancestors."

⁵⁶ Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home.

Now, I have said we have two Marys represented in this text. And, in a sense, I'm not just being provocative. There are two. There is the Mary who would have, with Elizabeth that day, sung this song originally. She is a young, betrothed woman. She is probably twelve or thirteen. That's our first Mary.

However, as I already pointed out two weeks ago, Luke is writing a history. He wrote his account in the early to mid-60s AD. He'd have encountered this story and its song through some of his interviews, perhaps even an interview with Mary during the final few years of her earthly life. In other words, in one way or another,

Luke would've received these events—Mary's stay with Elizabeth and her song—from the perspective of an older Mary, a woman who had lived to see what the song would really mean for her. That's our second Mary.

So, those are the two Marys singing—the young virgin and the old mother. And we can learn a lot by considering both of their perspectives as they sing.

1. Young Mary Sings.

This text begins with a prophetic word from Elizabeth. Mary no sooner walks into the room than she's greeted by this older family member with honor and praise. We know this is a prophetic word because Luke highlights that Elizabeth was "filled with the Holy Spirit" as she spoke (v. 41). This is what she says "loudly."

Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her (vv. 42-45)!

I remember being a high school freshman—so around the same age as Mary—and having a senior on the soccer team tell me that he thought I played really well. That affirmation was super meaningful to me. (*And he wasn't even inspired or filled with the Holy Spirit when he said it!*) I remember thinking more of myself as a player after he said it. It kindled confidence of good things to come, of possible successes, of a future in soccer. That's why I can still recall that encouragement.

So it is with Elizabeth's encouragement to Mary here. Here is an older woman, in a culture which honored and respected and venerated their elders, giving honor and respect and veneration to Mary. This is high praise for Mary. The kind of stuff which would kindle thoughts of a great future in her.

Just consider the content of this prophetic complement.

- Mary is "blessed among women" (v. 42). That's a pretty inclusive category.
- The son she bears is also "blessed" (v. 42). God's favor is upon them both.

- Not only is Mary's child blessed, but he is "Lord" (v. 43). With this, Elizabeth affirms that Jesus is Israel's promised Messiah.¹ Mary carries the great Savior for whom all Israel has long been waiting.

This is quite the complement. This is great prophetic praise for this young girl. And it brings an inspired song to her lips. Mary's Christmas carol is both specific and general. It is for Mary personally (vv. 47-49) as well as all those who are faithful in Israel (vv. 50-55). And all these things are things that this young mother celebrates and praises God for. In a sense, all of it applies to her. It's all her future.

Where would your thoughts be if you were Mary? If you were singing this—if you were in her shoes—how would you imagine the prophetic future in this song? Be honest about it. Channel your younger self.

- Mary "glorifies the Lord" and "rejoices in God" as her "Savior" (vv. 47-48). As she does this, what is she thinking about? What would you be thinking of: Many future prophetic honors like the one she just received from Elizabeth? A rise from "the humble state" she's in currently to a more prominent place? No more backwater town living! *That's where my thoughts would go.*
- Mary sings that "all generations will call [her] blessed" (v. 48). In what way? What do you think about when you think about being blessed in the future: Great wealth? Great successes? Great appreciation? *That's what I think about when I think about being blessed.* People are going to wish they were me!

Friends, we could go through this song and pretty accurately fill in the hopes and dreams Mary would have likely had as she sang it in her youth. Dreams of glory. Dreams of prominence. Dreams of honor. Dreams of fame. Dreams of conquests. Dreams of wealth. Dreams we'd all have had. You see, these are not Mary dreams. They are human dreams. We all naturally dream of blessings and glories in this way. In fact, as Jesus carries out his earthly ministry as God's promised Messiah to Israel, these are the kinds of dreaming expectations he constantly had to put to death.

The Messiah will be a conquering king. *No...* he will be the Prince of Peace. The Messiah will unite Israel and be exalted by people. *No...* he will divide people

¹ Leon Morris, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Luke*, 75.

and be mocked by them. The Messiah will live and be blessed and be served by all. No... he will die and be cursed as the Suffering Servant of all.

Friends, what does being blessed by God look like for you? Being successful at work? Making a lot of money? Having children who go to an Ivy League school? Retiring to Florida or California or Colorado at 50? What does it look like for you? And is it possible that Mary's life might challenge that vision?

Let's see by examining our second Mary.

2. Old Mary Sings.

So, imagine you're Luke, and you just arranged the interview of all interviews for your research project. You have talked to a number of people who knew Jesus. That was good. You even talked with a number of the apostles. That was very good. But now you have arranged an interview with Mary...THE MOTHER OF JESUS!!! This is the best possible source. You're going to get a from birth to ascension history of the Christ from his mom. You'd be super excited if you were Luke.

Now imagine you're Mary. What would you want to share with this historian? Or, more specifically, would you want to share this song? And if you would—why? What would this song communicate after all that's happened?

After Mary leaves Elizabeth's house, she will begin to learn what the salvation and blessing of God entails. She will find herself very pregnant riding upon a donkey to a faraway town simply because a foreign emperor has decided to conduct a census. She'll find herself giving birth in a stable since that same small town is overcrowded, and there's no room in any inn. Later, as they take Jesus to the temple to present him to the Lord, she will find herself amazed by the prophetic adoration her child receives from Simeon; however, his prophecy will speak of division and pain and suffering for many because of her child—and, specifically, all those for Mary too (Luke 2:35). Oh, she learns about salvation and blessing.

- Mary will learn that being mother to the Christ will always bring her virtue into question. Was Joseph really his father (Matthew 1:19; Mark 6:3²)?

² To call Jesus the son of Mary, as opposed to the son of Joseph, was highly irregular and likely an insult intended to call Mary's virtue into question.

- Mary will learn that her firstborn son must not first and foremost be her son, but her Lord and her Savior (John 2:4; Matthew 12:46-50).
- Mary will learn that salvation because of sin (not just the sin of other people but her sin as well) will demand her son's crucifixion—which she will witness with her own eyes (John 19:26-27).

Friends, this has been Mary's story since the day she first sang that song!

So, let me ask. Would you still feel that this first Christmas carol was true? Would you still believe you were blessed? Would you think you had been honored by the Lord after all of that? Would you have shared this song with Luke?

Friends, why did Mary share it? Why did she still feel that it applied to her? Why did she still sing it?

The answer is because it did still apply. The answer is because she now knows that her dreams of blessing, honor, and glory were *too small, too weak, too limited!* Mary hasn't simply seen the death of **her** son but also the resurrection of **the** Son! Mary hasn't merely witnessed the Christ **descending**—in a miraculous virgin birth—but also **ascending**—as King of all the earth, of all creation.

Brothers and sisters, Mary still sings because God is the God of redemptions, redemptions which erase pain and suffering and hardship. Friends, Mary still sings because she knows God's redemption—because she now knows God the Redeemer, Christ Jesus himself.

And that is what it means to be blessed! That is salvation! That is true glory! One pastor states it this way.

Jesus lost all his glory so that we could be clothed in it. He was shut out so we could get access. He was bound, nailed, so that we could be free. He was cast out so we could approach. And Jesus took away the only kind of suffering that can really destroy you: that is being cast away from God. He took that so that now all suffering that comes into your life will only make you great. ...the suffering of a person in Christ only turns you into somebody gorgeous.³

³ Tim Keller, *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering*, 180-181.

Mary's song has only become more gorgeous over the course of her calling as the mother of the Christ. I would have loved to have been there when she sang it for Luke—as she sang it with the deep wisdom which only years of faithful service through hardship and loss can bring. Can you hear her still?

My soul glorifies the Lord / and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, / for he has been mindful / of the humble state of his servant. / From now on all generations will call me blessed, / for the Mighty One has done great things for me— / holy is his name (vv. 46-49).