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Speaker: Paul McIlwraith, Teaching Pastor
Scripture: A song of Trust-Mary - Luke 1: 46-55

It happened to me again last week. I was sitting in my car, listening to the radio and a familiar riff began and then the words,

*Just a small town girl
Livin' in a lonely world
She took the midnight train goin' anywhere*

*Don't stop believin'
Hold on to the feelin'
Streetlights, people*

In that moment it was like I shut out everything else around me and I was transported back in time. Back to my high school auditorium and a school dance with the strobe light glittering over the darkened floor. It was Journey's *Don't Stop Believin'* released almost 40 years ago but I can still bring back most of the words.

Has that ever happened to you, when you hear a song? Music is so powerful. Researchers have shown that music stimulates a part of the brain that is linked to our emotions and that is why a song can conjure up memories of the past (good and bad), move us to tears, psyche us up before a big game or simply prompt us to sing along. What are some of these songs for you from your past?

There is no annual holiday more linked to our emotions of nostalgia and tradition like Christmas and therefore it should be no surprise that music plays such an important role in our Christmas rituals and memories.

That is probably why the malls, coffee shops and radio stations begin an exclusive rotation of Christmas music over a month before the big day. In fact, I turned on the local radio station 103.1 last week and guess what? Christmas music.

This year, it appears they have begun even earlier because the feeling is that people need a bit of cheer and diversion from the global pandemic that has been battering us for the past eight months.

We all seem to have a favourite Christmas song, don't we? I tried googling the top ten Christmas songs and each list seemed to be a little different but Bing Crosby's *White Christmas*, and the classics, *Silent Night* and *O Holy Night* always seem to be near the top of every list with relatively new seasonal favourites like Justin Bieber's *Mistletoe* gaining popularity.

Many of these songs have a unique history but did you know that one of our favourite Christmas Carols actually originated because of someone complained about the quality of the music being played in the church? Can you imagine someone doing that? After one particular Sunday Service, a 15-year-old Isaac Watts complained that the worship that morning had been atrocious. So, one of the church deacons challenged him, *go home and write something better*. And he did! Watts wrote his first hymn and it fostered a love that continued the rest of his life.

In 1719, he wrote the beloved Christmas Carol, *Joy to the World* inspired by a passage in *Psalms 98:8* that says,

*Let the rivers clap their hands in glee!
Let the hills sing out their songs of joy.*

Watts transformed this old Jewish psalm of praise for the deliverance of God's people into a song of rejoicing for the salvation that is possible through Jesus.

George Handel of Handel's *Messiah* fame wrote the music and today, *Joy to the World*, is one of the most endearing Christmas Carols of all time. Like *Joy to the World*, the origin of many of our carols goes back hundreds of years but songs of "Christmas" actually appear in the bible around the birth of Jesus. Did you know that? We have Christmas songs that are almost 2000 years old. In this series that we launch today, *Songs of Christmas*. We are going to have a closer look at four of these songs that are written around the birth of Jesus and their significance in that day and what they mean to us today.

All four are recorded in the first two chapters of the gospel of Luke and they include:

1. **Mary's Song**
2. **Zechariah's Song**
3. **Angels' Song**
4. **Simeon's Song**

During this preaching series, as has become our Christmas tradition at North Park, we will also be looking at the four themes of Advent. They are: Joy, Love, Peace and Hope. Today our theme is Joy.

I developed an interest in the music of Irish rock group U2 while I was a student at Western, many years ago after they released the album, *The Joshua Tree*. I finally had a chance to see them live many years later, in 2009 at Rogers Centre in Toronto where they were promoting their new CD, *No Line on the Horizon*. A featured song on this CD was entitled *Magnificent*. The song lyrics include:

*Only love, only love can leave such a mark
But only love, only love can heal such a scar*

*I was born
I was born to sing for you
I didn't have a choice but to lift you up
And sing whatever song you wanted me to
I give you back my voice
From the womb my first cry, it was a joyful noise*

U2 Frontman Bono says that this song was inspired by scripture. By Mary's Song in Luke Chapter 1. It has come to be known as *Mary's Magnificat* because in Latin, *magnificat* which means *magnify, praise or exalt* is in the first sentence of her song. Look at it in,

Luke 1:46
Mary responded, "Oh, how my soul praises the Lord.

Why was Mary praising the Lord? What was the cause of this joy filled outburst, *Oh, how my soul praises the Lord?* Have you ever had an occurrence to break out with a resounding, *Praise God!* If so, what was it that prompted you to do that?

I have heard this sentiment expressed in a variety of different settings. I have heard it in North Park's main auditorium after singing a song, someone shouts out *Praise the Lord*. I have heard it after a traumatic experience where there is immense relief or an answered prayer, *Praise the Lord*. I have even

heard it when someone's favourite team wins a big game, *Praise the Lord*, the Maple Leafs won a playoff game!

What was it for Mary that she begins her song with a joyous, *Oh how my soul praises the Lord?* To understand Mary's song, we have to remind ourselves of the context. Her words actually come at the end of a rather interesting series of events in Luke Chapter 1. The Israelite people find themselves in a dismal state of affairs at this time. They were oppressed by the rule of treacherous King and their day to day quality of life was bleak. They were longing for the Messiah to come and save them. Around this time, the angel Gabriel makes an appearance to announce the impending birth of two very special babies. First Gabriel appears to a guy named Zechariah while he was carrying out his priestly duties in the temple and tells him that his wife, Elizabeth will bear a child named John who will,

Luke 1:17

He will be a man with the spirit and power of Elijah. He will prepare the people for the coming of the Lord.

This news stuns Zechariah and Elizabeth. Why? It is because they have not been able to have children up to this point and both were now quite old.

Not long after this, Gabriel makes a second visit. This time it is to Mary, a peasant girl, probably around 13-14 years of age at the time, who is engaged to a guy named Joseph. This was not unusual for this day. Mary also know had a deep faith in God.

Put yourself in Mary's shoes for a moment. This young teenage girl has a face to face encounter with an angel, which would have been startling enough but look what the angel says to her in,

Luke 1:30-33

"Don't be afraid, Mary," the angel told her, "for you have found favor with God! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. And he will reign over Israel forever; his Kingdom will never end!"

An angel of the Lord appears to Mary. She was a nobody in that first century world. She was a young female, Jewish and she was poor. She had three strikes against her. I don't even know who to equate her to in our society today maybe a homeless, opioid addicted woman on the streets of London. What this angel tells Mary would have been stunning. She will conceive and give birth to the Son of God, King of Kings and Saviour of the world. That would be a little shocking, wouldn't it?

Carolyn and my latest Netflix binge is *The Crown*. Have you seen it? It tells the story of the British Royal Family and what an interesting family they are. Queen Elizabeth and her posse. We are now in season four and I can tell you that peasant girls just don't give birth to kings. That would be frowned on. In fact, it appears the royal family does all that can to dissuade their men from associating with such riff raff, let alone have a baby with them.

But that is the news that is sprung on Mary here in this text. She will be the mother of Jesus, the Messiah and King.

You have to think that sort of news would take a while to set in, won't it? Understandably Mary has some questions but look what is forefront on her mind. She asks the angel,

Luke 1:34

"But how can this happen? I am a virgin."

I think that is a good question. God had to know that what he was asking of Mary would put her in a very awkward position in this society. She was engaged but not married to Joseph yet. God purposely chose her to become pregnant by someone other than her fiancé before she was married which, in this culture, would have been a crime.

Mary could have been charged with being an adulterer which might have meant a death sentence or the very least, being rejected by Joseph and returned to her parents which would have caused an economic burden on them. Mary would have also experienced shame and scorn on a daily basis as an unwed, pregnant teenager in this society. Perhaps not unlike what an unwed, pregnant teenager experiences in our culture today.

This past week, I had a chance to talk to a young woman from our church. Today, she is happily married with two adorable daughters but twelve

years ago, she was an unwed, pregnant teenager. In the church that she and her parents attended at the time, her situation was greeted not so much with shame as it was pity.

There was just not a lot of encouragement or support. That is what she needed most during that uncertain time, support. Regardless of the circumstances of the pregnancy, there was still human life forming in her body.

Fortunately, she was able to find that support when her family decided to attend North Park and then through the London Pregnancy and Family Support Centre. She found peace as she gave the situation to God and his will for her and that little baby. It wasn't easy but with faith and perseverance, she is now married to the father of that child and they have since had another daughter.

God can work through our difficult circumstances when we are open to it.

Although the optics were not good in Mary's situation, it is so interesting that this is the miraculous way in which God chose to send his son, Jesus to earth. Have you ever thought about that? Through a young, poor, unwed, Jewish female. God always seems to work in the most unexpected ways. Have you found that to be true in your life?

If you are wondering, *where is God at work in my life or in the world*, can I give you a little hint? Don't look to the obvious. Look for the unexpected. That is where you find him almost every time.

Back to the text. After the angel explains to Mary the intricacies of the, what we now know as the "immaculate conception", she responds with great faith to the task she has been given.

Luke 1:38

"I am the Lord's servant. May everything you have said about me come true."

In other words, *God's will not mine be done*. Even though the optics were bad and it would involve literally turning her life upside down, Mary responds, *your will be done, Lord*. What a demonstration of faith and trust. Though Mary is not mentioned in many other places in the bible, her life and obedience has a lot to teach us.

Which leads us to *Mary's Song*.

After being given the news of her impending pregnancy, Mary pays a visit to her relative Elizabeth who you remember from earlier, is also pregnant. She will give birth to John the Baptist who will prepare the way for Jesus. We will talk about that more next week.

How does Elizabeth know that Mary is pregnant with Jesus? Women's intuition? No. Was it posted on Facebook? No. It is because her baby jumped for joy in her womb when he heard Mary's voice upon her visit.

When my wife, Carolyn was pregnant, the baby jumping in her womb was usually the result of something Carolyn had eaten that wasn't agreeable. In this situation, Elizabeth's child jumping in the womb is a sign. That somehow even an unborn child, a fetus, knows when the mother of the Lord is in the house. God works in the unexpected. Elizabeth says to Mary,

Luke 1:45

You are blessed because you believed that the Lord would do what he said.

It is in response to those words that Mary begins her song,

The Magnificat, Luke 1:46-48

*"Oh, how my soul praises the Lord.
How my spirit rejoices in God my Savior!
For he took notice of his lowly servant girl,
and from now on all generations will call me blessed.*

Praise the Lord, she begins. First words are important because they draw us in. Can you see now why Mary was so overwhelmed with praise? God has chosen me?! Of all the people everywhere, he noticed me! That is so powerful. Has that ever happened to you? Out of a crowd of people, you are the one who was spotted. You were selected. Out of a pile of resumes, the employer saw something in you and chose you for the job. Out of all the people trying out for the sports team or dance recital, the coaches or instructors chose you. There was something about you.

Just before Covid hit, Carolyn was called for jury duty. After a day of questioning the pool of candidates, guess what? They saw something in her! The lawyers chose her. In this situation, I didn't hear a lot of *praise God* from her. Perhaps jury duty is one of those few situations where you wish you

could have just blended into the crowd and not stand out.

But God noticing Mary and calling upon her was cause for great joy and praise and her statement, *from now on all generations will call me blessed* was not so much a boastful proclamation as it was a deeply humble recognition and acceptance of the gift God had given her to be used in this way.

Could it be that the act of the incarnation, God becoming flesh and coming to earth as a baby addresses the problem of injustice in the world? Just think about it. God entrusts the care of Jesus to a lowly, peasant, teenage mom. Jesus laid aside his power and privilege came to earth as a baby to be held and nurtured by Mary, a nobody in that society.

You would think that in selecting the future mother of his child, that God would be a little more choosy, wouldn't you? At least ensure he is in a home where he will have proper food, clothing and shelter but God is up to something here. He is at work in the unexpected. Mary's participation in the co-creation of the Saviour of the world was not just a matter of Jesus needing a womb to prove his humanity. It was God's example to us of what it looks like to share in abundant love, humility and social justice for the poor and marginalized in the world.

The significance of this is certainly not lost on Mary as her song suggests. The lyrics are both conservative and revolutionary. They are conservative because they affirm the fulfillment of ancient promises God made with his chosen people, the Israelites. Her song is also revolutionary because it proclaims the overturning of societal norms and expectations. God's choice of Mary- a person of low status-represents what God is doing for the poor and powerless of society in general. This is quite a song. Listen as it continues.

Luke 1:49-51

*For the Mighty One is holy,
and he has done great things for me.*

⁵⁰ He shows mercy from generation to generation

to all who fear him.

⁵¹ His mighty arm has done tremendous things!

He has scattered the proud and haughty ones.

Here Mary is reaffirming the ways that God has always been there for his people and has provided for them in their time of need but at verse 51, Mary conveys what would have been a revolutionary thought for this first century world.

Luke 1:51

He has scattered the proud and haughty ones.

Mary is speaking to the death of pride. God wants pride to die. All throughout the bible, from the pages of the Old Testament right through to the New Testament we see that one of the things that drove a wedge in the relationship between God and humanity was pride. In Hebrew, the language of the Old Testament, pride means to “rise up”.

It is the idea of exalting yourself above everything else. Focusing all of our attention on me, myself, and I.

Pride is arrogance, entitlement, smugness and boastful. As some of us have experienced, pride destroys relationships, individuals and organizations because when you lift yourself up, what happens? You look down on everything and everyone else. Scripture is quite clear what God thinks of pride. In the book of James it says, *God opposes the proud.*

However, the first century world in which Jesus was born into, was saturated with pride. Humility was seen as a character flaw, as a weakness. To stifle pride was ludicrous. I wonder if much has changed over the last 2000 years of history. We still hold onto a lot of pride which causes us to turn a blind eye to those truly in need in our society but it is also a stumbling block for us asking for help when we need it.

Pride is not just an obsession with talking about ourselves or placing ourselves on a pedestal. It can be seen in more subtle ways such as an unwillingness to submit to authority or the constant comparing of ourselves to others. As Mark Twain once said, *Comparison is the death of Joy.*

Here is a bit of a test on whether you are prone to moments of pride. Covid has caused many to take our business activities and meetings online. Many of us are making good use of Zoom.

So, when you are engaged in conversations on Zoom, do you find yourself spending more time looking at the other people on your screen or at yourself? Here is the pathetic confession I have to make. I find myself looking at myself. Some days I like what I see, others not so much. Vanity, vanity. Pride. What makes pride so toxic? It is when it holds us back from responding to God’s call and direction for our lives because we want control. That is what Mary is referring to in her song and she should know. Her steadfast faith and humility is what enabled her to respond in obedience to the mission that God called her to. To be the mother of Jesus.

What role does pride play in your life? Really, just think about it for a moment. In what ways do you think it is stifling you from truly following God in the way that he desires us to? Mary’s exhortation in her song is, let pride die in your life. Surrender it to Jesus. As the song continues we get a glimpse of a second revolutionary statement.

Luke 1:52

He has brought down princes from their throne and exalted the humble.

If anyone was aware of their status in that society, it was Mary. She was self-aware. She knew that she was nothing special in the eyes of the world in which she lived. She was a poor, teenage girl, yet she sees her situation as God exalting the humble. She was a living breathing example of it. God has seen fit to use her to carry the greatest gift ever given to humankind, Jesus. I think that turns our conventional understanding of greatness upside down, doesn’t it?

What is greatness in our society? I see that soccer legend Maradona died this past week. Most of the obituaries are hailing him as the greatest soccer player who ever lived meaning, he was the best. That is the way we define greatness, being the best. The top of the heap. The cream of the crop.

In the kingdom of God greatness is not measured by how well we play a game or how much power we exercise over others or the rung we have climbed on the social ladder. Greatness is signified by our willingness to serve. Not go higher but go lower.

The more we practise this posture of Jesus, serving in humility, do you know what happens? The more concerned we become about the plight of those who are powerless in our society rather than advancing our own position. Our hearts and priorities change and that is the point where true joy and life purpose is found.

Shane Claiborne grew up as a typical Christian. While he was at college, he participated with a group of his classmates in a protest against homelessness in inner city of Philadelphia. His exposure to these homeless people touched his heart and led Claiborne to re-evaluate his conception of Christianity. During this time, he also spent a term working alongside Mother Teresa in Calcutta. This prompted him to develop a Christian philosophy of living and working with the poor and fighting for social justice causes.

With some friends, he founded [*The Simple Way*](#), a faith community in inner city Philadelphia that among other things provides:

- free school supplies to the disadvantaged children
- create community gardens to provide fresh fruit and vegetables for poor families.
- built parks for children to play in.
- provide mentorship programs to bring highly educated and skilled people to share their expertise.
- arrange for donated clothes to be given to the homeless

Among so many other things. This is how they live the way of Jesus in their neighbourhood. By building community through relationships with the people they are trying to help. To give them dignity, self-respect which leads to joy filled living. We see glimpses of that here in London with organizations such as Mission Services, Ark Aid and Sanctuary.

That is what Mary is getting at in her song.

God reverses the strengths of this world. Those who are mighty are brought down and those who are lowly, are exalted and lifted up. Is that the way we are living out our faith in our communities? Are we doing what we can to lift up those that the world has pushed down? That is what our *Dare to Give* campaign that we are currently running at North park Fanshawe, is all about. Giving dignity to those

who are vulnerable in our society. It is a key theme of Mary's song. It goes on in,

Luke 1:53

*He has filled the hungry with good things
and sent the rich away with empty hands.*

Mary continues to praise God for his faithfulness but the circumstances of the rich and poor are contrasted here. With God, the hungry will be filled with good things and the rich sent away with nothing. Why? It is because the hungry understand their need and dependence and reach out to God and he fills their searching soul with good things. It tends to be the rich who are more self-sufficient and prideful striving after worldly things and cravings of the flesh that never satisfy or fill them up. They end up empty handed because they have neglect God in all their pursuits.

Our society puts so much emphasis on prestige and wealth, doesn't it? Did you know that from March to June 2020, the first four months of the Covid Pandemic, Amazon Founder Jeff Bezos saw his wealth rise by about \$48 billion? In fact, billionaires have increased their total net worth by over \$650 billion during the Covid pandemic at the same time when millions have filed for unemployment and food bank lines are snaking for blocks.

It seems we have bought into the ideology that the more we have in our hands, money and things, the better we are. God flips that narrative upside down proving that wealth and prestige are not important to him. He looks at the heart of a person. Oh, it is not a sin to be wealthy but God is concerned about what you are doing with everything he has given you. He looks at the heart. How hungry you are for him? Just as he did with Mary. He then fills us with everything we need. To live in obedience to God means that we should not pursue wealth at the cost of letting our fellow brothers and sisters go hungry, physically and spiritually. Look how Mary concludes her song,

Luke 1:54-55

*He has helped his servant Israel
and remembered to be merciful.*

*For he made this promise to our ancestors,
to Abraham and his children forever."*

Mary once again affirms that God keeps his promises. He kept his promise to Abraham, the patriarch of the nation of Israel to be merciful to his people forever. The birth of Jesus is the fulfillment of that promise and Mary understood that she has been given a role, as unlikely a candidate as she may seem, she has been given a role in that divine miracle.

This is *Song of Mary*. The longest set of words spoken by a woman recorded in the New Testament. A poor, young, unmarried, pregnant woman at that. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a well-known German theologian who was executed by the Nazis during World War 2, called the Mary's Song "the most passionate, the wildest, most revolutionary hymn ever sung." Many love it but some in positions of power have seen it as dangerous and threatening to their prosperity gospel mindset. It has been banned from the liturgy of the church in places like Guatemala and Argentina.

Mary's Magnificat shows us that God has a special affinity for the poor and lowly. There was nothing remarkable about Mary. Oh, we have no reason to think she was flawed in any particular way, but she was clearly humble and insignificant from that world's perspective. Yet, God chose her to bear his son. Her response? She was faithfully obedient to God's call and direction in her life and he worked in her completely through his power. Mary's life is a testament to the fact that God loves to exalt the lowly, and do a deep work in their life along the way.

But *Mary's Song* is also a warning to beware of worldly riches, power and pride. At the same time that God is exalting the lowly, he is pulling down the mighty. He humbles the proud, by bringing them down. The bible tells us that it's difficult for the rich and powerful to become Christians. Why? It is because we have a hard time acknowledging our need for something beyond ourselves and what we can provide. We have a hard time confessing that we are needy- hungry.

In our world, we have to beware of anything that makes us feel superior or self-sufficient. We have to be vigilant to keep a posture of spiritual dependency. In our world where everything seems to be available at the tip of our finger, where we can do all of our Christmas shopping with a few clicks

of the computer buttons, we have to daily remind ourselves that we need Jesus. To fight complacency and the arrogance of thinking that we have everything figured out. We need to swallow pride and practice humility.

Mary's Song reminds us that we have a perfect model to follow. God humbled himself and came to earth in human form. Remember He does some of his best work in the unexpected. He made himself a helpless child, growing inside the womb of an earthly mother. The infinite creator of the universe was nurtured and nursed by a poor, young Jewish woman in the 1st century. That is amazing humility.

This Christmas we remember with joy, that this helpless baby, Jesus eventually went to the cross to save helpless people; rich, poor, young, old, male, female, trans. He humbled himself so that we could be lifted up and praise his name.

Mary's Song reminds us that we can trust in God and believe that he is in control. It is also a reminder that his desire is to compose a song of faith, in all of our lives. Amen? Amen.

Points to Ponder

The Songs of Christmas

A Song of Trust-Mary ~ Luke 1:46-55

Advent theme: JOY

With a friend, your family or in your small group, discuss the following questions.

1. Can you think of a song that when you hear it, it brings back a flood of memories of a certain time or situation? What is the song and why does it have such deep meaning for your life?
2. What is your favourite Christmas song/carol? What role does Christmas music have in your traditions and memories of the Christmas season?
3. Are you someone who exclaims, "Praise the Lord" on occasion? What is it that usually draws that sort of response from you?
4. Have you ever been noticed? Out of a crowd of people, you were the one who was selected. What was the situation and what were your feelings in being chosen? How can you relate to

Mary's feelings of praise in being selected by God to carry Jesus?

5. How does God's selection of Mary to give birth to Jesus, overturn some norms and expectations in that society?
6. What role does pride play in your life and how does it cause a barrier in your relationship to Jesus?
7. How would you say that our world defines "greatness"? Give a practical example of what greatness looks like in the Kingdom of God.
8. How does our accumulation of wealth and possessions stifle our hunger for God?

Prayer and Action Item

Reread Mary's Song together as a group. Pray for one another out of the key points that were discussed. What is the song that God is creating in you based on your life as a Christian to this point?