

When my older brother was in high school, he got a summer job working for a home improvement store that was not far from our house. He worked in the garden department of this particular store, which was a marvelous thing for him as he loves plants. One day I asked him how he felt about his new job and he replied, “The job is good. The pay is okay and I like the work but I could do without the muzak. If I hear ‘Stairway to Heaven’ performed on a violin one more time, I might just have to quit.”

Naturally, I laughed at him and sought to find a recording of “Stairway to Heaven” performed on a violin. (This was before the internet – I’ve already found a copy and sent it to him.)

I came to know what he meant, though, a few years later when I had a job at another retail store during the holiday season. I never, ever need to hear Mariah Carey sing, “All I want for Christmas is You” again. Ever.

There are certain songs that should just be left alone.

Indeed, as I was thinking of this I asked Walter if he could provide me with an example of a song that was so iconic that it should simply be retired and never recorded again because no one could possibly capture the quality of the original, but then he countered by reminding me that Dolly Parton did awfully well letting an original be recorded by someone else.

I was thinking of these things because of Mary’s song in Luke. You’ve probably heard it called *the Magnificat*. It’s called that because that is the first word of the Latin translation of Mary’s song. Indeed, the Magnificat is one of the earliest hymns of the church - such composers as Monteverdi, Vivaldi, Bach and Tallis all composed

masterpieces inspired by Mary's words. The western church sings it at vespers and evensong, and the eastern church includes it in matins.

Mary's song gets a lot of play – but I wonder, do we often listen to it?

Indeed, outside of the liturgical traditions of the Catholics, Episcopalians and Orthodox, we don't hear Mary's words all that often either.

All generations may indeed call Mary *blessed*, but we really don't hear from her very much.

And what's more, she's really not very original in her song. It's a recording of somebody else's music.

Mary lifted her words from the lips of Hannah. Not word for word, of course, but it's close enough that she would lose an intellectual property lawsuit.

You remember Hannah? Drew preached about her a few weeks back. She was the mother of Samuel and she was afflicted with barrenness. It is tough enough to want desperately to conceive and be unable to in any culture at any time, but in the time of Hannah it was made so much worse by the attitudes surrounding fertility. Women were expected to be able to bear children – not to be able to do so was to be seen as just a little bit deficient in some way – to be not quite as significant.

And so when Hannah does finally conceive and bear a son the occasion is marked by song.

It is her words that Mary lifts to sing her Magnificat.

There is an interesting thing about Mary's song, though, and I want to share it with you: it's all in the past tense!

Mary is singing about God having done mighty and great things, and about all of the ways in which she is going to be remembered as blessed and unless I've missed something big, none of them have happened yet at this point in the story.

Maybe they are going to happen, but they haven't happened yet. It's all a bit early.

In fact, it's so early in the story, that one wonders whether Mary really meant them all or not.

Has the Lord done wonderful things for her, or is it a terrifying thing that the Lord has done for her?

Don't we often sing hymns when we're scared? Or recite the psalms or the Lord's prayer?

I don't mean to be indelicate, but Mary was in a delicate situation.

The music of the Magnificat in history is magnificent, but I have a hunch that at its first performance in Galilee it went something more like, "My soul doth magnify the Lord, my soul doth magnify the Lord, my soul doth magnify the Lord."

Again, it's just my hunch but Bach and Tallis, as talented as they were, couldn't capture the raw poignancy of emotion as Mary recited scripture to herself to tell herself it was going to be okay.

Mary didn't so much rip off Hannah's song as she went to the songs of her childhood to seek comfort and strength to face what she knew was coming. It's like when we gather in the sanctuary when someone dies to sing the songs of faith to remind ourselves of the truth of God's promises. We sing *Amazing Grace* or *Our God Our Help in Ages Past* because we need to remember in the face of an uncertain future that God's promises are true.

And what was coming?

An uncertain future, to be sure.

Luke doesn't really tell us how the conversation with Joseph went. All we know is that Mary, on hearing her predicament from Gabriel, set out to her cousin's house a few counties away *with haste*.

We know she's pregnant, we know she's living with her cousin, and she's singing about all the good things God has done for her.

Right.

There was a practice in those days when speaking of what God is going to do – of what one wanted God to do – to put it in the past tense.

It's in the past tense to say, "I'm so sure of God's power, and God's ability to pull this thing off that I'm going to put it in the past tense as if it has already happened. That's how sure I am that it is going to work out this way."

Although perhaps a more accurate assessment is, "That's how badly I need to it to work out this way... God helped Hannah, maybe God can help me.

I need it to work out so that all generations call me blessed – I don't want them to call me something else.

I need it to work out so that my fiancé isn't going to dump me because he knows it's not his.

I don't want to be powerless and afraid and poor and at everyone's mercy.

I need this to work out differently."

No, the original sometimes captures something that the later performances miss. Hannah sang her song from the place of her desperation being relieved – but every once in a

while someone sings the same song in a way that captures the haunting reality of what made the music in the first place.

There's something about the way Mary sings Hannah's song that just catches you.

It reminds me of the way Anne LaMott puts it – that the best prayer is sometimes just, “help me, help me, help me.”

But do we often listen to Mary's song?

It's pretty specific.

“He hath shewed strength with his arm: he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.

He hath put down the mighty from their seat and hath exalted the humble and meek.

He hath filled the hungry with good things: and the rich he hath sent empty away.”

It's pretty specific, and it's pretty political.

Mary has some clear ideas about what God ought to do with the world.

I wonder what the Magnificat would sound like if you or I were writing it?

I wonder what the Magnificat would sound like if child in Haiti were singing it?

I wonder what the Magnificat would sound like if under a bridge when the mercury drops – or really, anytime?

I wonder how the Magnificat sounds to someone facing foreclosure, to someone deciding between food and medicine?

“He hath shewed strength with his arm: he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.

He hath put down the mighty from their seat and hath exalted the humble and meek.

He hath filled the hungry with good things: and the rich he hath sent empty away.”

I wonder how the Magnificat sounds to us?

Oh, there are some songs that should just be left alone.

But there are other songs that need to be sung – that have to be sung until they really are in the past tense.

That's the thing about faith this time of year – I know we're all struggling with the same things – we're struggling to keep a sense of the holy amidst all of the competing pressures to get things done. And I know we're struggling to keep a sense of faith amidst the tasks of acquiring and wrapping gifts. And I know that we're struggling to know how to *be* about the season when the season is interrupted with violence and bloodshed. We know there's some way to do it – to give witness to our faith and yet to give normalcy to our children.

I know that's a struggle. And it's a struggle at any time, to be honest. Nobody wants to be a scold or a killjoy. Even the prophets got tired of speaking God's word to power some of the time.

And yet, we have a deep need to be faithful to Mary's words.

And so we keep singing. We keep giving voice to the claims of faith with the words of carols. And we work for the redemption of the world with those words.

I remember a chapel service at Princeton Seminary many years back. Pat Miller was preaching – he's Mary Brueggemann's twin brother, by the way. He asked us all a question, one I've never forgotten. He asked, "What do you suppose all of the folks who are walking around shopping malls hearing Christmas carols piped in think about them?" It's a good question – what do you suppose people think of when they're pawing through the markdown rack at Brooks Brothers or waiting in the line around the corner for

whatever the newest, greatest offering from Apple will be and they hear strains of *Greensleeves* over the loudspeakers and hear the words, “What Child is this, who laid to rest on Mary’s lap is sleeping?”

Dr. Miller went on to say, “I think, deep down, what the people think, whether they know it or not, whether they can give voice to it or not, is this: ‘I hope those Christians are right.’”

I hope those Christians are right.

And so we keep on singing our carols and our Magnificats because we know that they tell a story that is true.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.