

“A Song of Mercy”
1 Samuel 2:1-10
Luke 1:46-56
Rev. David Hutchinson
Sunday, December 8, 2019

Last week I made the claim that the first three chapters of the gospels are full of covers - - of famous songs - - from the Old Testament past. / Well known songs from the Old Testament are revised and used by the New Testament - - to tell the story of Jesus. Jesus IS even - - a kind of “cover” of ancient Old Testament expectations about the Messiah. / And the gospels refer to these Old Testament images. / In fact - - there are ancient songs that get re-sung.

But these Biblical “songs” are more like poems.

They are called songs by commentators and some may have been set to music.

The songs are found on the lips of several characters who we meet along the Advent and Christmas way in the Bible. And this year - - during the next few weeks, my sermons will focus on these Biblical Songs of Christmas.

In last week’s song, the prophet Isaiah sang about the wilderness. This song has long been connected to Christmas by followers of Jesus, and Isaiah’s song about the wilderness is part of how we prepare for the coming of Christmas.

Today, it’s Mary’s song. / Mary the mother of Jesus has probably the most famous biblical song of Christmas, sometimes called the “Magnificat”. And YET - - her song is very similar to a much more ancient Old Testament song of Hannah.

So it’s like Mary’s song, the Magnificat, is a cover of Hannah’s song.

People who read Luke would have said: “Wow - - we recognize that - - but it’s different”. / Like when you hear a well known Christmas carol - - but it’s sung by a popular group. / Or the choir sings “Mary Did You Know” - - but it’s the syncopated version! / We discovered in rehearsal that the version of the choir anthem we sang today was familiar to some who have sung it at Plymouth before - - but not to others who are used to a different version.

So let’s look more closely at the song of Mary.

The Magnificat is found in Luke chapter one. / If you telescope out a bit - - a larger section of the first chapter of Luke - - is about the meeting of Mary and Elizabeth. So the meeting of Mary and Elizabeth is the scene. / In this scene BOTH Elizabeth AND Mary have a song. / First Elizabeth...

It’s like a scene from a 1950s Christmas musical.

For example, think: “White Christmas” - - - anyone seen it?

White Christmas is the story of two singers who become buddies in the war. / Played by Bing Crosby and Danny Kaye, they meet up with Rosemary Clooney and Vera-Ellen. / The whole movie is filled with songs and dancing. / Like in lots of these musicals - - people just break out into song. / It used to be very popular. / But then in the 1980s musicals fell out of favor. / When I was growing up people almost made fun of the genre. / No one made musicals anymore, is how it seemed to me. / Recently the movie “La La Land” kind of revived the form, nostalgically.

Well, this scene between Elizabeth and Mary in Luke chapter 1 is kind of like a musical. / There is very little plot. / Not much narrative or action. / It’s mostly the inspired speech - - or songs - - of the two main characters. /

Like in musicals - - in which the thin plot - - serves as a setting for the songs and dancing - - here it is the songs of Elizabeth and Mary that are center stage.

Mary's song is by far the longest of the two - - and the most significant.

In the song, Mary praises God for bestowing favor on her - - and giving her a child. / This is a blessing - - but in some ways, Elizabeth as a character - - is more like Hannah in the Old Testament than Mary. / So Elizabeth might have been a better match. In fact some old Latin manuscripts attribute the song to Elizabeth instead of Mary!

Elizabeth is pregnant in her old age with John. / Just like Hannah with Samuel.

And BOTH John the Baptist and Samuel - - ANNOUNCE someone greater.

John paves the way for Jesus...

And Samuel paves the way for King David...

But this song is on Mary's lips, instead of Elizabeth.

Mary - - who is much younger - - and the mother of Jesus himself!

And whereas Hannah's song is a LOT about the blessing of a child in old age - - and reversal of fortune - - and would have connected in that way - - with the character of Elizabeth - - INSTEAD Mary's song expands on this theme.

In Mary's song - - what God has done for her - - only anticipates what God will do for the poor - - and the powerless. / Mary takes this song to the next level!

Mary revises this and lifts it to a higher significance.

Kind of like "White Christmas" did - - for the movie "Holiday Inn".

Did you know that the MOVIE "White Christmas"

was based on the 1940s movie "Holiday Inn"?

Holiday Inn contained the song “White Christmas” - - but was not as good a film.

The 1950s movie “White Christmas” was a significant change - - though a recognizable cover of the previous one. / There are some elements to Holiday Inn that are dated - - and racist by our standards. / White Christmas changes much of that.

So Mary in the New Testament - - revises Hannah’s Old Testament song.

One unusual feature of Mary’s song is the verb tenses.

It refers to God’s MERCY - - being in the FUTURE and the PAST simultaneously! / Mary sings that God “HAS” scattered the proud - - and “HAS” put down the mighty from their thrones - - and “HAS” filled the hungry.

In reality - - we STILL have some work to do on those things.

But for Mary - - as she sings about the impending BIRTH of Jesus - - it’s like all those things have already happened. / For Mary - - Jesus IS the very BIRTH - - of God’s MERCY - - into the world!

These images of God’s mercy - - are TIMELESSLY true:

Past - - present - - and future.

This points to the main theme of Mary’s song:

The COMPELTE reversal of fortunes.

The powerful and the rich - - change places.

The hungry and the full - - change places.

The lowly are not just raised, but the lofty are also brought low.

They change places.

This raises the bar - - on Hannah’s song a little bit.

Hannah’s song is - - nevertheless - - amazing too.

Like Mary - - Hannah sees her fate as just a part of something much bigger that God is doing. / In giving her a son - - named Samuel - - God has brought HOPE to a hopeless situation. / The whole nation of ISRAEL - - now has a future...

Israel's hopeless death - - is raised to life by God's power.

AND - - did you know that even Hannah's song - - is a cover!

The "Song of Hannah" is a revision of an even more ancient public hymn.

People of Israel would have RECOGNIZED some of it.

The memory of God's power - - in specific times past - - is now BIGGER!

Hannah - - generalizes this hymn of praise - - to hope for the future.

And then centuries later - - Mary - - takes it to yet another level.

It is an AMAZING act of hope - - and praise!

These songs - - are about the very HEART of God - - to change the world.

Something that is about to come to LIFE - - as Jesus is soon to be born.

All this - - from a young woman - - who sees HERSELF as lowly.

I am reminded a little of a duo on the TV show "The Voice" this season called: "Hello Sunday". / They are AMAZING singers - - and even more so for being only 14 years old. / They are competing with people much older - - and holding their own.

Mary - - is young - - and sees herself as lowly. But she sings an amazing song.

As I think about how it might feel to be Mary - - a little ditty called, "Elvis Kissed Me" comes to mind. / It goes like this:

"Elvis kissed me once," she swears,

Sitting in a neon dive

Ordering drinks in pairs.

“Back in sixty-eight,” she sighs,
 Smoothing back her yellow hair.
 Teared mascara smears her eyes.
 “Call me cheap,” she sobs, “or bad,
 Say that decent men dismissed me,
 Say I’ve lost my looks, but add,
 “Elvis kissed me”

Well, maybe it goes a little too far, to compare to her to Mary.

Maybe you have to be an Elvis fan - - to really get it.

But Mary - - had a bad reputation because of this pregnancy.

And Joseph - - would wonderfully and faithfully overlook that.

And Mary - - didn’t see it that way.

She saw - - only blessing.

The KISS - - of God.

Hope for the future.

Hope - - NOW!

The complete reversal of fortune - - already at hand!

Is it possible to reclaim Mary’s hope - - for our world?

Well - - consider this:

Redoing - - is so much of what these early gospel stories are about.

The HOPE of Advent - - is in the possibility - - that GOD KEEPS redoing things.

God's mercy - - is not JUST a thing that happened once.

AND - - it is NOT just a thing we are waiting for - - someday.

God's mercy - - IS - - God's very heart.

Past - - present - - and future.

All rolled up in one.

And maybe even - -

All rolled up - - in song.