

Britt Carlson
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11 o'clock am

Community Church of Issaquah
Issaquah, Washington

"Songs for a Savior: The Song of Mary"

Luke 1:26-56

In the days of President Obama of the United States of America and the governorship of Jay Inslee of the state of Washington, there was a small town called Ione, Oregon, population 329.

Now I'm guessing not many of you have heard of Ione. I'm sure *I* wouldn't have heard of Ione if that weren't where I spend most of my Thanksgivings. You see, about 12 of those 329 Ione residents are my wheat growing and cattle ranching cousins, and every year we rent out Ione's Legion Hall, and all of the family gathers to play Scattergories and pinochle and Yahtzee, and to eat a lot and to sit around and talk a lot.

For city girls like me and my sisters, Ione is a whole other world. It's a world that couldn't be farther away from Portland and Seattle. It's a world that you can pass through on the highway without thinking twice. A dot on the map. A blip on the screen. 329 lives that don't seem to make much of a difference when you're sitting downtown sipping on your java mocha skinny cappuccino extra whip.

At least, it's a world that wouldn't seem to matter if we hadn't read what we just read this morning. Because what Charlotte read this morning from the Gospel of Luke changes how we see things. As Luke will go on to say in the book of Acts, the Good News of God's salvation in Jesus Christ is going to turn our whole way of seeing the world upside down.

But for us to understand what it would look like for the world to turn upside down, we first have to see how the world looks right side up. So Luke begins, "In the days of King Herod of Judea when Quirinius was governor of Syria and Augustus was the emperor of all of the Roman Empire." Now the Roman Empire spanned the

vast territory from England down to Morocco across to Egypt and then reached up all the way through Turkey till its borders stopped at the shores of the Black Sea. Now, these those might be historical details that we usually skim over, but for Jews at that time those few sentences carried so much meaning. Those sentences meant they weren't autonomous—that they didn't rule themselves. They were under the thumb of a foreign government, and they chafed under that thumb. Those sentences had meant hundreds of years of resistance and rebellion among the Jewish people. The world right side up is a world ruled by the powerful and the stranger.

So in this context, what would salvation have looked like? Salvation would have looked like release from the Roman overlords. Salvation was going to be political. So as Luke's story gets going and he begins to talk about King Herod and Emperor Augustus, his listeners would have been tipped off. This salvation that is coming, it's going to be a political salvation. The expectation: probably a military leader. Most likely, something that had teeth and swords and a coup d'état.

So what a surprise.

Because here, however in Mary's Song we first start getting a sense that God is not like us. That God is holy. Because here, the world begins to turn upside down.

After sweeping our vision across the empire, Luke focuses in on a young girl in a backwoods town called Nazareth. A town like Ione. A dot on the map, a blip on the screen, filled with lives that don't seem to matter compared to the hustle and bustle of downtown Jerusalem.

And this girl. Mary. She was nothing to take note of. She couldn't have been more than twelve years old because most girls her age were betrothed around ten and married off by thirteen.

Now stop for a minute and think what that means. After our sermon, Kadence and Kayli are going to be helping with our meditation. As they help I want you to think: these girls are not much younger than Mary. This is the kind of person God chooses out of all people. This is the kind of person that Elizabeth, the respected wife of the priest Zechariah, much older, much higher in social status, clearly Mary's superior, declares to be blessed of the Lord.

Do you see what's happening here? God is changing what we're seeing. God is turning the world upside down. God could have chosen a daughter of the high priest. God could have chosen the sister of the emperor. The Lord could have chosen someone in a high place who would have been respected, whose word would have been trusted.

But this is who God has chosen. Mary. What more important, more prestigious, more high-status role could there be in all of history, than this? To be the one who partners with God in this most sacred way. She is the the God-bearer, the one whose DNA will be knit together with the divine.

This is why Mary can sing, "He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty."

God has shown that all of the pretensions of power of the Roman officials and all of the social climbing of 1st century religious life, all of those pretensions are just tat: pretensions. Because God has chosen the weak of the world to shame the strong and the foolish to shame the wise.

You know what's so interesting about Mary's song? The verbs are in the past tense. God *has* scattered the proud. God *has* brought down the powerful. God *has* helped his servant Israel. Mary's song praises God for having saved the world... but to most eyes nothing has happened yet.

I mean, if we take a step back, what has happened? Has Jesus done any miracles? No. Has he opened the eyes of the blind? No. Has he taught God's wisdom? No. Has he forgiven sinners? No. Has Jesus gone to the cross? No. Has he risen from the grave? No. None of the things that we usually think about when we think of our salvation has happened yet.

And yet Mary still sings, praising God for salvation. She sings because Mary sees what we have a hard time seeing. She sings because God has accomplished salvation in the hidden quiet of her womb. She sings because God has chosen the out of the way places, the small town, the young girl, the Jewish, the rural, to bear the very Son of God.

No wonder the angel calls her blessed. Mary isn't blessed in and of herself. She is blessed because God has chosen her. Salvation is God choosing this girl: young, low status, on the outskirts of society—to bear God himself, to carry God within her. There isn't a good reason why the Lord chose Mary—except that the Lord has been choosing men and women like Mary all throughout Scripture.

Maybe like you, I identify with Mary. Growing up I was never out there in front in my church. I was not a leader. I mean, I was very active in the youth group, I went on mission trips, I led junior high and high school discipleship groups, I was on our youth group leadership team, but I was never the person out front. In the church I grew up there were always a couple of young people who were being groomed for ministry—usually they played in the worship band or were really

prominent in the youth group. It sounds funny to say this, but that wasn't me. No one looked at me and thought, "Mmm future pastor right there." Maybe it was because I was a girl—I don't know. But whatever the case, I just was not at all the expected choice for a future pastor. And honestly that's why this call to pastoring is so joyful for me. It's so not expected. It felt and still feels like to me like God's saving power coming to turn the world upside down. And he started with my world first and foremost.

All of this, all of God's unexpected choosing, is why we don't have to be afraid anymore. We don't have to be afraid of being unimportant or out-of-the-way or small. It's why I'm not worried about how many people we have in our seats or about what our building looks like or what our future will be. Because let's go back to Emperor Augustus. Emperor Augustus had everything that looked like power and success. He had countless citizens. He had military might. His empire was secure. Everyone looked up to him. But just think. Emperor Augustus took a census to count his citizens to try to get a picture of how things were looking in the empire, to try to figure out what the future might look like. But his census could have never predicted that baby J born to Mary, age 12, housewife, and Joseph, age 30, carpenter, would turn not just his empire, but the entire world upside down.

God's choice was not the world's choice. The true King came, and we all had to retrain our eyes to see a king not on a throne of gold and diamonds, but lowly and in a manger.

Shane Claiborne—who is a Christian minister who advocates for the poor—said something interesting. He said that for years and years he was trying to climb the ladder of success. (Because don't be fooled, even pastors and ministers can be selfishly ambitious.) But one day as he was trying to move up the ladder of respect and esteem he realized: He was trying to climb up and all the while he was trying to climb

up, Jesus was trying to climb down. So Shane decided that if that's the direction Jesus was going, maybe he should be going that way as well.

What hope there is for us. We are no longer captive to trying to climb up anymore. We don't have to look successful. We don't even have to try to figure out where our future is going like Emperor Augustus tried to do. We are set free by God to give up our climbing up and start to climb down.

Cause let's be honest. Most—if not all of us—are not the movers and shakers of the world. We're not the people who aren't making the nightly news (well, at least I *hope* we're not making the nightly news). We're not people that the world thinks are that special. But in hope against hope, in a salvation that is greater than what the Jews were hoping for, we are a people who are chosen and beloved in the eyes of the King of all Creation.

So for us who have sat in the darkness. For us who haven't been at the top of our class or the star of the football team. For us who have been captive to climbing the social ladder or the career ladder or whatever ladder exists out there. For us and for our salvation, God came down to be with us. For the LORD will be our everlasting light, and our God will be our glory. Amen.