

**ADVENT 4C – 12/23/18**  
***The REAL #1 Christmas Song of All Time***  
**(Luke 1:46-55)**

The late Art Linkletter had an afternoon TV program while I was growing up. (If you're my age or older, you undoubtedly remember him.) And the funniest and most memorable segment of that show, each day, was something he called: "Kids say the darndest things," in which Linkletter would interview schoolchildren between the ages of 5 and 10. And then, as advertised, they would always come out with the most outrageous and humorous comments.

Well, a fellow by the name of Ed Vasicek has compiled a list of some of the funniest things that *Sunday school* kids have said about the Bible and the Christian faith. Here are just a few...

- For instance, did you know that the wife of Noah, famous for building the ark, was named *Joan of Ark*?
- The Egyptians, as you may remember, were all drowned in the Red Sea. But did you know that, afterwards, Moses went up on Mount *Cyanide* to get the Ten Commandments?
- Speaking of those Ten Commandments, did you know that the *first* commandment was when Eve commanded Adam to eat the apple?
- Getting back to Moses for a second: Did you know that Moses died before he ever reached the land of *Canada*? And it was then up to Joshua, of course, to lead the Israelites in the Battle of *Geritol*.
- Or, according to the Bible, that Solomon, one of King David's sons, had 300 wives and 700 *porcupines*.
- And did you know that the *Epistles*, in the New Testament, were actually the wives of the Apostles?
- Finally, Christians, of course, believe in having only one spouse. As one child put it: This is called *monotony*.

Then there was the Sunday school teacher who once asked her class: “What was Jesus’ mother’s name?” One little girl answered, “Mary.” So the teacher then asked, “And what was his father’s name?” Another youngster quickly replied, “*Verge*.” Confused, the teacher then asked, “Where did you get that?” And the little boy said, “Well, you know, they always talk about that ‘*Verge and Mary*.’”

Mary, of course, is the central figure in today’s reading. According to the Gospel of Luke (in the verses preceding our lesson this morning), Mary was visited by the angel Gabriel who told her that she would conceive and give birth to a very special son, who would be named Jesus. In response, we’re told, Mary then went with haste to visit her kinswoman, or “relative,” Elizabeth. Now whether they were cousins, as many believe, or that perhaps Elizabeth was even her aunt – given the fact that Luke tells us that both she and her husband, Zechariah, “were getting on in years” – is something we’ll probably never know for sure. But obviously there was this close relationship, this close bond, between the two women; close enough for Mary to want to drop everything, and go immediately to share this exciting news with Elizabeth.

Elizabeth, you may recall, was *also* expecting a child. *Her* son would grow up, of course, to be John the Baptist. And, as the Bible tells us, when Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting upon Mary’s arrival, her own child “leaped for joy” in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, we’re told, and she cried out to her kinswoman Mary, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!” Then she added, “And why has this happened... that the mother of my Lord comes to *me*?”

Which then prompted Mary, as we heard in today’s reading, to break out in song in response to Elizabeth’s words. Kind of reminds you of one of those old MGM musicals from back in the 1940’s, doesn’t it? The tune, naturally, is long forgotten; only the words remain... Which reminds me of how yet another child once recalled this moment:

- When Mary heard that she was to be the mother of Jesus, said the youngster, she sang a song called the *Magna Carta*.

Again, kids say the darndest things! It wasn't the "Magna Carta," of course. The Magna Carta, which means *Great Charter*, was the document that the nobles forced King John of England to sign, way back in the year 1215, which limited some of his power and at the same time preserved certain liberties for the people.

No, what Mary sang has traditionally been called the "*Magnificat*." But it actually *does* have something in common with the Magna Carta, after all. Here, as well, the Latin word "Magnificat" refers to "greatness." In English, we hear Mary say, "My soul *magnifies* the Lord..." And what this means is that Mary *praised* or *extolled* or *glorified* God. It means to cause something to be held in *greater* (magna) esteem or respect. And that was the tone and tenor of Mary's song: to "magnify" or "extol the greatness" of God for what he was about to do in her life, and also in the life of the entire world as well. Something which was to come to fruition on that day, forever known thereafter as *Christmas*.

And, in a way then, Mary's song was therefore the very *first* Christmas song, wasn't it?. Now... wait a second, I know what you're thinking. Jesus isn't even born yet! In other words, how can Mary be singing a *Christmas song* before its even Christmas? And all I have to say to that is: Have you been listening to the radio, or been out shopping at the mall, lately?

Now it used to be that they started playing Christmas songs right after Thanksgiving. Remember that? Those quaint old days? Then it was just *before* Thanksgiving. And, in recent years, of course, they've been playing them right after *Halloween*, practically, haven't they? Pretty soon – if things keep going the way they've been, that is – they're gonna start playing them right after *Labor Day*! So, I think you can indulge me a little bit here when I dare to suggest to you that Mary's song was, in fact, the very first Christmas song.

But, besides being sung *before* the actual event, of course, Mary's song really doesn't have too much else in common with most of our *other* all-time favorite Christmas songs, does it?

For instance, just out of curiosity, I actually did an Internet search yesterday of the greatest Christmas songs of all time. And, as you can imagine, there were a number of lists that came up, but the one I chose was Billboards latest "Holiday 100" for the week of December 22, 2018 where I found some truly memorable, meaningful, *spiritual* Christmas classics like... Well, like:

#99, "The Chipmunk Song," recorded by those irrepressible rascals, Alvin and the Chipmunks! You know the one that goes:

*Christmas, Christmas time is near  
Time for toys and time for cheer  
We've been good, but we can't last  
Hurry Christmas, hurray fast*

*Want a plane that loops the loop?  
Me, I want a hula hoop  
We can hardly stand the wait  
Please Christmas, don't be late.*

Or how about...

#72, "Baby, It's Cold Outside" which, you may have heard, has gotten a lot of negative press recently for its controversial lyrics, especially in this era of the #MeToo movement. First off, what does this song even have to *do* with Christmas, I want to know, other than cold weather? And second, for those who aren't offended by the implications of the lyrics, all I have to say – as the father of three daughters – is that if some guy ever attempted to prevent one of *my daughters* from going home...? Well, let's put it this way, the cold outside would have been the very *least* of his worries. In fact, after I got through with him he's be *asking* for the cold... ice packs, that is! The there's...

#65, Freehold legend Bruce Springsteen's version of "Santa Claus Is Comin' To Town." And who can ever forget...

#26, "You're A Mean One, Mr. Grinch.

But enough of this nonsense, let's cut to the chase. In other words, the Top 10 Christmas Songs of all Time...

#10, "Here Comes Santa Claus" by the singing cowboy himself, Gene Autry.

#9, "Let It Snow, Let It Snow, Let It Snow" by Dean Martin,

#8, "Last Christmas," by the 1980's English pop duo Wham!

#7, another Gene Autry hit, "Rudolph The Red-Nosed Reindeer,"

#6, "The Christmas Song" by Nat King Cole. (I actually like that one, especially the part about "roasting chestnuts on an open fire." Until, that is, I once bought some roasted chestnuts from a street vendor up in New York City and just about gagged.)

#5, "A Holly Jolly Christmas," by Burl Ives,

#4, "Rockin' Round The Christmas Tree" by Brenda Lee,

#3, "Jingle Bell Rock," by Bobby Helms,

#2, "It's The Most Wonderful Time of The Year," by Andy Williams,

And at #1, the Top Christmas Song of all-time (at least this week!), "All I Want For Christmas Is You" by Mariah Carey.

All of them, each and every one of these classic Christmas songs remind us of the *true* meaning of Christmas, don't they? *Not...*

Now, I don't think I'm going out on a limb here when I make the following observation that none of these all-time favorite, all-time great, Christmas songs has anything *whatsoever* to do with what Christmas is really all about! Do they? Especially #1...

*I don't want a lot for Christmas*

*There is just one thing I need...*

*All I want for Christmas is YOU*

Really? That's all you want? That's all you need? Seriously?

And the rest of them? Did you notice how many, if not most, of them were about trivial, even *selfish* hopes and dreams, most notably "The Chipmunk Song," as I noted, at #99 on the list? Christmas, Christmas time is near – at least there's a sense of anticipation. Right? But then it goes on about a "time for toys" even before it's a "time of cheer." Although I guess the cheer is really all *about* the toys, isn't it? Especially Alvin's hula hoop.

We can hardly stand the wait, they sing. Please Christmas don't be late... Why? Because we want our toys, of course!

Well, in complete opposition, and in stark contrast, to these greatest all-time Christmas songs that we've been hearing on the radio and while shopping, for well over a month now, we have that simple, humble, down-to-earth song sung by Mary as she contemplates the *real* true meaning of Christmas with her close relative, and even closer friend, Elizabeth.

And right from the get-go, we can see how utterly different it is from the catchy, yet emotionally and spiritually hollow, tunes we hear all around us during these days leading up to Christmas. So many of *them*, when you get right down to it, are only about what *we* want and desire; what *we* enjoy and look forward to; what pleases *us* and makes *us* happy.

Not so for Mary and *her* song. For starters, it's clearly not at all about Mary; it's about God. "My soul magnifies *the Lord*," she sings, "and my spirit rejoices in *God* my Savior..."

Why? Because (as she tells us) he has looked with favor upon the lowliness of his servant Mary. You see, she understands – utterly and completely – that it's not about *her*, and *her* qualities or aspirations. No, it's about *God*, and about the grace and mercy of a God who looked down on this poor, ordinary, peasant girl from some small, backwater

village in the middle of nowhere, and chose *her* – this unknown, insignificant teenager – to give birth to the Savior of the entire world!

And so the first thing for us to note about Mary's song is that it's a song of PRAISE. My soul *extols, praises*, the greatness of God, she sings. But she does so, again, not from a lofty position of her own perceived greatness or success, but rather from a decidedly low and humble position.

As James Kay, who teaches at Princeton Seminary, has written: "The Greek word behind our English word (lowliness) is not simply about humility, but about *poverty*. Mary is poor – dirt poor," he says. "She is poor and pregnant and unmarried. She is in a mess. But she *sings!* Why? Because... Mary, despised and rejected, is favored by *God* and will bring the Messiah to birth. And so, she sings," he writes.

Professor Kay then goes on to note that those of us who are *not* poor and lowly may have a hard time, therefore, singing *along* with Mary. Those of us who are, by the world's standards – by any standards – among the most wealthy and comfortable people on earth, may have a hard time grasping where Mary is coming – and *singing* – from. It's easy for us at times, he says, to fool ourselves into actually thinking that we don't even *need* God – especially Mary's God. But from where Mary is standing (and billions like her in our own time, as well) one cannot *help* but to praise God, and to acknowledge the hand and the presence of God in their lives.

Which leads us, then, to a second observation. Mary's song is a song of PRAISE. But it is also a song of HOPE.

As Dianne Bergant has observed, Mary's song invites us into a world of reversals. A world (according to the hope that Mary sings about) in which mercy is shown to those who fear God, but where the proud are scattered; a world in which the powerful are brought down from their

thrones, while the lowly are lifted up; a world where the hungry are filled with good things, and the rich are sent away empty-handed. A world, in short, that is about to be... transformed. And that transformation is going to begin *with* and *through* the birth of Jesus, the promised Messiah. A world, says Bergant, where the lowly among us will finally begin to enjoy the blessings that God promised long ago.

In fact, most biblical scholars and commentators say that it is almost *impossible* to consider Mary's song *apart* from the great reversal she is singing about here; the almost revolutionary future she attributes to the in-breaking of God's kingdom through Jesus.

Now don't forget... just three chapters later in Luke, when Jesus stands up to read the scriptures in his home synagogue, he takes the scroll of the prophet of Isaiah, you may remember, and reads: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the *captives* and recovery of sight to the *blind*, to let the *oppressed* go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." And then Jesus does something which is *unprecedented*. After he had finished reading, handed the scroll back to the attendant and sat down, he began to speak, "*Today...* (he said) this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

In other words, Jesus understood his purpose and mission in life in terms of what Isaiah, and even his own mother, had prophesied; a world in which the poor and forgotten would be remembered and blessed. A world totally unlike the world that he – or *we* – had been born into.

A few years ago *Parade* magazine told the story of a self-made millionaire by the name of Eugene Land who completely changed the lives of a sixth-grade class in East Harlem, New York. He had been invited to speak to a class of 59, predominantly African American and Puerto Rican, students – most of whom were destined to drop out before ever graduating from high school. Not really knowing what to say to inspire them, and scrapping his prepared notes, Land made them a



promise from his *heart* instead. “Stay in school,” he told them, “and I’ll help pay the college tuition for every one of you.”

At that moment, in that instant, the lives of each of those students suddenly changed. You see, for the first time *in* those lives – lives of poverty and very few opportunities to escape it – they had something they never had before. They had *hope*. “I had something to look forward to,” one of them later said, “something waiting for me.” Six years later, nearly 90 percent of that class went on to graduate from high school and then go on to college...

Well, what Mary is singing about here, and looking forward to, is something very similar, isn’t it? God, you see, has also made some wonderful promises; promises to the very least of his people – among whom, Mary herself is included. God has offered them nothing less than *hope*.

And as James Kay notes, it’s a hope “even for the likes of us.” When we listen to Mary’s song of a hopeful future in God, “we will finally know that every song... *apart* from hers is simply off key. Every future apart from Mary’s God has no future – it is doomed, and it is damned,” he says. “So sing it again, Mary,” he writes. “Sing on... till *your* song at last becomes *ours*. Sing, till all the world hears you and makes your (song) its own.”

Mary’s song, then is a song of PRAISE; it is also a song of HOPE; and finally it’s a song of JOY. The joy in her words is unmistakable. From the outside looking in Mary has no *right* to be rejoicing. Think about it. She’s young and poor; not to mention unmarried and pregnant. But she understands, she senses deep down in her heart, that she has reason to give praise, to have hope, and to feel real, unadulterated joy – pure and unqualified and complete joy. Why? Because *God* has looked upon her with favor, and he has done great things for her.

The great classical cellist, Pablo Casals, once described his very first memory of attending worship on Christmas Eve, when he was only 5 years old. He walked to church in their small village in Spain, hand-in-hand with his father, who was the church organist.

He later recalled that, as he walked, he shivered. But not because of the cold, though it *was* cold outside. But, rather, because the atmosphere that evening was so electric and so mysterious. “I felt,” he said, “that something wonderful was about to happen. High overhead, the heavens were full of stars,” he noted, “and as we walked in silence, I held tightly to my father’s hand...” Later, during the worship, he said, “My father played the organ, and when I sang, it was really my *heart* that was singing, and I poured out everything that was in me.”

“It was really my heart that was singing.” As Keith Broyles has observed, “I think Mary could identify with that. When we sing praises to God, we sing from our hearts. We sing with joy. Yes, Pablo Casals was only a small child. Yes, Mary was still a young girl.” But they sang from their hearts, and they sang with joy, says Broyles. And for that, they have something to teach us...

For weeks now: on the car radio as we drive around, and in the stores as we go about our shopping, we’ve had no choice but to listen to Christmas songs – many of them trivial, if not downright silly, others pretty superficial and self-centered. But then, this morning, we had a chance to hear Mary’s song – well the words, at least. To listen to a song of PRAISE, a song of HOPE, and a song of JOY. And, if you ask me, the *real* #1 Christmas song of all time!

Amen.

