

# The Park Road Pulpit

*Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church*

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## **Fireworks at Christmas – They’re Not Just for the Fourth of July Anymore**

**Luke 1.46-56 – Mary’s Song**

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Last week as I drove the 15-passenger van full of PRBC folks into Biltmore Village I heard this story from Sylvia Garrett from the back of the van: “Look up there ahead – you see that building way up there on that hill – that’s the hospital where Greg was born – on the fourth of July – and on that night after he was born as I looked out the window of my hospital room at the fireworks going off, I thought – look, a fireworks display just for me and my baby.” You see, it wasn’t a celebration of the birth of a nation. For Sylvia, it was a celebration of the birth of her baby. I glanced in my rearview mirror to see Sylvia’s face smiling her beautiful smile. She was beaming. These 30-something years later the memory was obviously so vivid – as if it had just happened yesterday. There we were last week on a windy, cold December day, yet for a brief moment it was the fourth of July 1967 all over again for her. And for me too, for a split second – for as she told it, I could see it. Looking back was a reminder of the joy of life and the miracle of birth. Looking back was a reminder that all of life is gift and as one my favorite sayings puts it: *Every time a baby is born it brings with it the hope that God is not disappointed in humanity.* Looking back was a moment of brightness and goodness. Looking back was a way for fireworks to happen at Christmas this year.

The details of a baby’s birth never seem to fade. And so it is today - over 2000 years later - that we gather in anticipation of telling the story again of the most significant

birth ever, and we take a look at it all through the eyes of the baby's mother. And after all is said and done, perhaps we will anticipate fireworks for this Christmas.

I have said many times that, perhaps in an effort to distance ourselves from our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters, as Protestants, we have not given enough attention to Mary the mother of Jesus. I collect Madonnas and have brought some of my collection to display alongside the Advent wreath for today we *Sing Christmas* with Mary's song. We expect to come here today to hear something about donkeys and mangers and stables and no room in the inn. We expect to come here today to hear something about a multitude of heavenly hosts singing or shepherds in a field keeping watch over their flocks by night. We expect to come here today to hear something about swaddling clothes and wise men that follow stars. But I doubt anyone came here today to hear: *Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now, and at the hour of death. Amen.*

But because of Mary's song and because of Mary's life and because of Mary's role in the story of Jesus, that is the prayer this day, and every day, for many of our Christian sisters and brothers around the world. I'm not suggesting that we add the "Hail Mary" to the "Our Father" in our prayer life, but I am suggesting that we pay attention to Mary's role in God's story. One commentator suggested that perhaps Mary can be the bridge of conversation – "the key to ecumenism" - between Catholics and Protestants. It is "Mary's ordinariness" that that we are drawn to – young, poor, small town girl – now I can relate to that! Jesus was born "in the midst of a quite average life." The feature of the New Testament is obviously Jesus and his ministry, but what Mary "lacks in quantity of

appearance in scripture she makes up for in quality. Luke's telling of the gospel begins with her [and her response to Gabriel's announcement – *let it be . . .*]. . . She is present at and indeed an instigator of Jesus' first miracle at Cana in Galilee. She and other women are present at the cross, when the male disciples flee . . . [some interpretations put her in the resurrection narrative – that she is present there, too.] It is striking that Mary is in the upper room at Pentecost – the only woman present who is named – to receive the outpouring of God's Spirit at the birth of the church . . . We are twice told that she *treasures* the words entrusted to her by angels and shepherds and that she *ponders these thing in her heart*. [Though her appearances are limited, Mary shows up in the narrative at crucial moments in salvation history.] While it is true that much of the Roman Catholic reverence and adoration of the Blessed Virgin Mary is founded in tradition, it is also true that Protestants have tended to “throw the baby out with the bath water” as we look to scripture alone to find God's story. (Much information from this paragraph was gleaned from a *Christian Century* article: “What about Mary?” by Jason Byassee, December 14, 2004, pages 28-32)

Back to Mary's song: You'd think that an expectant mother would be looking forward to what is to come – dreaming of what her child will look like and how he will act and what and who he'll grow up to be. Every mother in the world – as soon as she finds out that she is expecting – goes out and buys the book What to Expect When You're Expecting. And we read it cover to cover. We begin thinking of names and making plans for the nursery. We figure out the due date and try to schedule every single thing around the grand event – vacations, work, holidays - everything. From the moment we find out that we are with child – we are forward-looking and future-focused. Nesting

begins as we make preparations. But not Mary. She didn't buy the book What to Expect When You're Expecting, and she obviously didn't have the nursery ready. But instead she took that opportunity to take a look backwards. She stopped to sing her thanks and acknowledge God's presence in her life – and not just in her life – but in all the generations that preceded her. Mary's song is not about Jesus. Mary's song is all about God.

Who God has been is the best indicator of who God is and who God will be. And that is Mary's consolation. In pregnancy, there is so much unknown – especially with a first child. So Mary takes a deep breath in order to sing her song. With the uncertainty and the scandal of it all, she sings God's praises for what has been. She sings: that God's mercy has been far-reaching; that God performed mighty deeds; that rulers were brought down as the humble were lifted up; about feeding the hungry and sending the rich away empty; all the way back to Abraham that God has been present and shown mercy.

Our hope and our peace this Advent will not be just in looking forward to Christmas, but it will come in looking back and evaluating God's presence in our lives. But how will we do this – we are so busy and there's so much yet to do. We are much better at planning ahead than looking back. Memory is a gift, and we should treat it as such. Just ask anyone who suffers from memory loss or dementia of any kind. Or ask anyone who deals with this among friends and family. Memory is a gift, and we should treat it as such. There are lessons to be learned from what has been. There are joys to be relived and wounds in need of healing. There is forgiveness that needs to be offered and gratitude that needs to be shared. As we prepare for Christmas, perhaps part of our list making should include all the times that we can name God's presence in our lives thus –

in the good times AND in the difficult days. And as we make that list this will be our hope and our peace – that who God has been is a good indicator of who God is and who God will be.

So for Sylvia's Song that got me thinking about the fourth of July and fireworks and the goodness of life even when some days are more difficult than words can describe – I say "Thanks be to God." And for Mary's song that got me to thinking about how God has been present in my life – I say "Hail Mary full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women." I pray that this Advent we might each sing a song of our own, and in so doing, Christmas will come again. May it be so.