

“God Is Providing Your Missing Note So You Can Sing For Joy”

Luke 1:26-55

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Pastor Brant Copeland said, “Have you ever been to a children’s piano recital? It’s an experience both delightful and excruciating. When a child walks up to the grand piano, crawls up on the bench, feet dangling, and starts to play, my heart leaps either with joy or into my throat, depending on how the first few measures go. If they start off well, I rejoice and enjoy the music. If they start off poorly, I muster all my psychic forces in an effort to beam the right notes across the room into the performer’s fingers. Most of us are doing the same thing. It doesn’t matter whose child is up there on the piano bench, we pull for them all as though they were our own. A girl of nine or so begins to play “Bring a Torch, Jeanette, Isabella.” She starts off with some lovely chiming chords in the left hand, but when it comes time for Jeanette and Isabella to bring the torch, the melody falls apart for lack of an F sharp. Realizing something is radically wrong, the performer sounds the chimes again and starts over. Once again, Jeanette and Isabella are on the verge of receiving their summons when the pianist’s finger failed to find that elusive F sharp. By this time no one in the room has breathed for at least twenty seconds, and a couple of us are turning blue. Teetering on the razor’s edge between giggles and tears, the poor girl tries again. With resolve the chimes ring out in the left hand. Every person in the room leans forward . . . Yes! F sharp! We did it! Transmission received!”

Pastor Brant continues, “I was not just feeling for that young girl in her green velvet dress and shiny patent shoes – her Christmas outfit, no doubt. I was that little girl, patent shoes and all. Together we found that F sharp. And when we did, the angels in heaven rejoiced with us.”

God is eager to provide your missing note, so you can sing for joy. Through the centuries, artists have rendered the scene in today’s Gospel lesson in orderly, formal strokes. Barbara Brown Taylor reflects, “Mary is always the picture of femininity dressed in yards and yards of silk, her golden hair braided like a crown around her head, her nails perfectly manicured.” Mary is often depicted at her prayer desk, an open book before her. You get the feeling she’s studying her script. Respectful as those images are meant to be, they do not convey the bizarreness of this story, or its capacity to make us draw in our breath and hold it, praying that Mary will find the right notes to match the angel Gabriel’s song. How will she even find the same key, much less the right notes? Mary is a young poor lady. Does God really intend to hang the salvation of all humanity on Mary’s answer?

Luke 1:26-38 NLT “In the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a village in Galilee, to a virgin named Mary. She was engaged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of King David. Gabriel appeared to her and said, “Greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you!” Confused and disturbed, Mary tried to think what the angel could mean. “Don’t be afraid, Mary,” the angel told her, “for you have found favor with God! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. And he will reign over Israel forever; his Kingdom will never end!” Mary asked the angel, “But how can this happen? I am a virgin.” The angel replied, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the baby to be born will be holy, and he will be called the Son of God. What’s more, your relative Elizabeth has become pregnant in her old age! People used to say she was barren, but she has conceived a son and is now in her sixth month. For the word of God will never fail.” Mary responded, “I am the Lord’s servant. May everything you have said about me come true.” And then the angel left her.”

God entered Mary’s life – and enters ours – in a way that honors the blood, the sweat, and the pain which make up a large part of our life but needn’t be part of God’s. The immaculate conception of Jesus is the secondary miracle here. The primary miracle is that God joins us in flesh. God leaves the spectacular symphony of heaven, the harmony of ceaseless love, the melody of dancing joy, so you and I can experience love and joy, so we can find our missing note.

Barbara Brown Taylor said, “Way back in the Garden of Eden, God made a woman out of a man. Here God makes a man out of a woman, reminding us once again that life is not a product of biological necessity but of divine will.”

God willed to become one of us by being born of Mary. Mary was oppressed, poor and struggling. Mary was a sinner like the rest of us, groping for the right note, picking her way through her young life with a tin ear, like you and me. The fact that God chose her says less about her than it does about God, and what it says about God is this: God will stop at nothing to give us the note that is missing, the answer to what’s wrong with our song. God is even willing to be born in us.

According to Luke, Mary did not at first feel particularly blessed by the news Gabriel brought. Confused and disturbed, scared out of her wits, Mary tried to think what the angel could mean. How can this be? she asked. She wanted to hear again exactly whose idea this is, and how it would happen. She wanted to make sense out of what made no sense to her at the time and makes no sense to us now: God decided to surrender to flesh and blood, but wanted Mary’s help to do it. In order to carry out this surrender, God wanted Mary’s surrender as well.

Barbara Brown Taylor thinks she herself would have asked other questions, such as, “Will Joseph stick around? Will my parents still love me? Will my friends stand by me, or will I get dragged into town and stoned for sleeping around? Will the labor be hard? Will there be someone to help when my time comes? You say the child will be king of Israel, but what about me? Will I survive the birth? What about me?” Don’t be afraid, the angel tells her. For nothing will be impossible with God. The word of God will never fail.

Most of Mary’s questions were not answered, yet instead of asking them, or being afraid, she places the note of Jesus within her song. Suddenly a new song is born, here am I, she sings, the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word. It is much the same song the prophet Isaiah sang centuries before, when he had a vision of the spectacular holiness of God, and of his own miserable unworthiness to be anywhere near God. Woe is me, he sang, for I am a person of unclean lips and the people I live with are just as bad. But God sent an angel to change his tune. I need help, God then announced, “Whom shall I send?” “Here am I,” Isaiah sang, “Send me.”

Without God continually being born in us, we get overwhelmed with the struggle, pain, and ugliness of our life. Without God we are missing the note we desperately need, the note that enable us to sing with love and dance for joy.

The last two weeks we have been reflecting on the already but not yet. Eschatology, God has already saved us and the entire cosmos; however, our salvation is not yet fulfilled, so we strive to live the future. The Kingdom of God is coming, but not yet here, so we prepare the way of the Lord to fully usher in God’s kingdom.

Mary is pregnant with Jesus her savior, the savior of the entire world, the prince of peace, the author of love, the source of everlasting joy, yet her life was a mess, the world was a mess. God gave Mary the strength to keep going, keep loving, keep serving.

Luke 1:39-55 NLT “A few days later Mary hurried to the hill country of Judea, to the town where Zechariah lived. She entered the house and greeted Elizabeth. At the sound of Mary’s greeting, Elizabeth’s child leaped within her, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. Elizabeth gave a glad cry and exclaimed to Mary, “God has blessed you above all women, and your child is blessed. Why am I so honored, that the mother of my Lord should visit me? When I heard your greeting, the baby in my womb jumped for joy. You are blessed because you believed that the Lord would do what God said.” Mary responded, “Oh, how my soul praises the Lord. How my spirit rejoices in God my Savior! For God took notice of God’s lowly servant girl, and from now on all generations will call me blessed. For the Mighty One is holy, and God has done great things for me. God shows mercy from generation to generation to all who revere God. God’s mighty arm has done tremendous things! God has scattered the proud and haughty ones. God has brought down princes from their thrones and exalted the humble. God has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away with empty hands. God has helped God’s servant Israel and remembered to be merciful. For God made this promise to our ancestors, to Abraham and God’s children forever.”

Mary’s song is a time warp. Mary sings of God’s perfection of the cosmos in the past tense, in the midst of her struggle. Mary’s song is a robust affirmation of faith. Mary sees God’s future glorious kingdom, believes

God's kingdom will come to earth and sings the tune of faith. Mary trusts the good news. She marvels in the wonder of grace that has made her a bearer of Jesus, our savior.

Mary's life had plenty of awful notes, yet somehow God kept giving her the note she needed to keep going, keep loving, keep rejoicing. Mary sings, "Oh how my soul praises the Lord. How my spirit rejoices in God my Savior. Her soul resonated with God."

Physically Mary was a mess, morning sickness, swollen feet, saddle soars from that donkey ride, chilled to the bone in that stinky stable. Mary persevered through emotional horrors, betrayal, abandonment, loss, grief, agony. Mentally her mind flooded with the reality of her dilemmas, fleeing for her life to a foreign country, searching for the missing boy Jesus until they found him in the temple, hearing their town reject Jesus, watching Jesus crucified. Through it all, Mary was sustained by God's song of love and resurrection.

Physically God puts the beat of the song in our heart, the rhythm in our lungs. The transformation of the song flows from our soul filling us with love, gratitude, and joy.

Each of us is missing a note. We can sense that we are out of tune. We realize something is missing. Perhaps you think about it in the chaos and busyness of your life. Maybe you feel it in your losses and grief. Perhaps your aches and sickness. Maybe you are shell shocked, traumatized, afraid to love again. Perhaps violence and hate are crushing you. You know your own struggles. We are not in control. Life is not as it should be. Our song is way off key. Try and try again on our own we cannot find the missing note. God is coming to you. God is providing the missing note. Your soul will rejoice in the song God gives you. Still you will have numerous questions with no answers to ponder in your heart. The way may be absurd, and difficult and full of more twists and turns than you hesitate to ponder; yet, God will get you through it all.

The Eastern church knows Mary by an old Greek word, theotokos, which means "God-bearer." We can choose to be what Mary is, to be God-bearers in the world. We can sing with her my soul praises the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Savior. God desires to make each of us pregnant with grace and joy. God can do that without our consent, of course. But out of love, God waits for us to choose.

"We are all meant to be mothers of God," wrote Meister Eckhart. "What good is it to me," he said, "if this eternal birth of the divine Son does not take place within myself? And, what good is it to me if Mary is full of grace and if I am not also full of grace? What good is it to me for the Creator to give birth to God's Son if I do not also give birth to Jesus in my time and my culture? This, then, is the fullness of time: When the Son of God is begotten in us." As we find our song, we are called to help others find their missing note.

Greetings, favored ones! The Lord is with you. Do not be afraid. For nothing will be impossible with God. God is providing your missing note so you can sing for joy. Amen