

Title: Friendship and Love Give Birth to Song

Subtitle: God uses adversity to build the bonds of friendships

Video URL: <https://youtu.be/IC1WMegN4g0>

Today's Gospel story begins just after Mary had submitted to the supreme will of God with the memorable and reverential words, "Behold, I am the Lord's handmaid (bondmaid, willing female slave)¹. Let it be to me according to your word."² Then the Angel Gabriel departs, leaving her alone with her great secret, and little by little, it dawns upon her, as it could not have at first, what this secret means for her—both spiritually and socially. Her mind must have exploded with anxious questions, like: How can I carry this great secret alone? How can I ever explain it? And where can I go to find human support and understanding?

She is a young woman from Nazareth, probably fourteen or fifteen years old. Nazareth was a small town with a questionable reputation. Archaeologists recently discovered that there was a Roman garrison located there. Consequently, it was a crossroad for Gentile influences and most likely a haven for prostitution. Even a good person like Nathaniel, who Jesus said was a man without guile, asked, "*Can anything good come from Nazareth?*"³ Now, here comes a young woman from that town who finds herself pregnant without a husband, and people are supposed to believe the child has a miraculous origin. Even her espoused husband, Joseph, wasn't ready to believe her. Who, under those circumstances, is going to believe her? In her

¹ Strong's Concordance: #1399 doulé (doo'-lay), Female slave, bondwoman, maidservant without pay

² Luke 1:38

³ John 1:46

loneliness, she needed someone to help her carry the burden of this pregnancy, along with the deep secret it held.

As it turns out, her aunt, Elizabeth, was just such a person. She was older and wiser and a woman with deep faith. Her husband was a priest, and she is well acquainted with Holy Scripture. Yet she had borne the grief and shame of childlessness for years until God, in her old age, intervened.

When she and Elizabeth finally meet, before a word is ever spoken, Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, greets Mary with the prophetic words, “***Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!***”⁴ Then, astonished, she exclaims, “***Why is this that the mother of my Lord should come to me.***”⁵ These much-needed words were like the salve to a weary soul. Then Mary, almost beside herself, breaks out into a song of praise.

Each needed a companion in their journey. Then, through divine inspiration and mutual understanding, their friendship begins to blossom. Now tears and fears were safely shared, for they knew they had nothing to hide from each other. Due to that visit with its holy comradery, Mary’s faith is confirmed, celebrated, and strengthened.

Elizabeth’s support of Mary reminds me of the kind of advice the Mother Superior gave to a young aspiring nun named Maria in the Musical *The Sound of Music*. In that story, Maria returns to the Abbey, confused by her feelings for Captain von Trapp. In her perplexity, Mother Abbess assures her that loving another person can be part of what God wants us to do. “You must find the life you were born to live,” she says before singing

⁴ Luke 1:42

⁵ Luke 1:43

the inspirational anthem, *Climb Every Mountain*.⁶ That song, much like *The Song of Mary*, once heard, goes with you for the rest of your life.

The context in each of those songs was forged through the crisis of human perplexity and need, which helped form a bond of friendship that lasted a lifetime and is a model for us all. None of us are meant to live our Christian faith in isolation from others. When friends like this meet, they are, in reality, a gift from God and the cause of great joy.

God, in His mercy, has given people like this to me. As a freshman at Montreat Anderson College, I met Ann and Adger McKay, missionaries, at home on furlough. While living in Montreat, North Carolina, they had an outreach to college students. They regularly welcomed me into their home, and we often broke bread together. They allowed me the freedom to ask questions as I began reflecting on the things I was reading in the Bible. We could talk about everything, from dating to what it would mean for someone like me to respond to God's call. I stayed in touch with them through the years, and we became lifelong friends. Their lives made a significant impact not only on me but also on many other students.

We need each other through the perplexities and difficulties of life. In our Gospel story, Mary and Elizabeth found each other at a critical time. Encouragement flowed between them as they talked about birth, babies, and what the scriptures meant. Relationships like this are not based on trying to have it all together. It is found amid the messiness of life, where grace for all of our challenges and brokenness is experienced.

⁶ Written by Roges and Hammerstein, 1959

This kind of Christian fellowship opens the way to true joy and inspiration. When Mary found this kind of support, she couldn't help but break out into the exhilaration of song as she joyfully sang, ***“My soul glorifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God, my Savior.”***⁷ Her song is not just Mary's song; it is our song. It is a song that has roots in the story of our salvation, where God, through His almighty power, reverses human fortunes and takes us to a place beyond our wildest dreams. It celebrates the assurance of God's mercy to those who fear him in every generation. For He ***“...has regard for our low estate,”***⁸ however daunting and seemingly hopeless our particular circumstances might be.

If ever there was a time when we needed songs of hope, it is now. We must remember the dream that God can break into our lives even when we least expect it. The Advent themes in our readings these past few weeks have shown us that while hope may be well-acquainted with weariness, it points beyond that disillusionment toward the place and time when a new song is born. We, like Mary, may find ourselves vulnerable and wondering if we have what it takes to pursue our dreams, but through the help of others God sends our way, we can learn how to sing that new song. We may be a little out of tune, but we can begin with the confidence of his mercy that God is ready and waiting to fill the hungry with good things as we start to live the adventure God has in store for each of us. Amen.

⁷ Luke 1:46

⁸ Luke 1:48