

Mary's carol: Luke 1:39-45 (46-55)

by [John Ortberg](#) in the [December 15, 2009](#) issue

The greatest Christmas carol in history was not written by Irving Berlin or Nat King Cole. The greatest carol is not “Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer” or “White Christmas” or even “Silent Night.”

The greatest carol was composed 2,000 years ago by a pregnant teenage girl who was visiting her cousin Elizabeth. After Elizabeth pronounced a blessing, Mary poured out a song.

New Testament scholar Scott McKnight notes that in the 1980s, the government of Guatemala banned this song, or prayer, as it’s also called. Unlike “Away in a Manger,” this prayer was apparently considered subversive, politically dangerous. Authorities worried that it might incite the oppressed people to riot.

Mary begins with words of praise and gratitude, then goes on to note that God has brought down rulers from their thrones. Everyone knew who the ruler was: Herod. Herod the Great, that is, who had been given the title “King of the Jews” by the Roman senate decades earlier.

Herod knew how power worked. He hitched his wagon to Julius Caesar until Caesar was assassinated, then convinced Mark Antony that he was on Antony’s side. When Caesar Augustus overthrew Mark Antony, Herod said he’d really been a Caesar Augustus guy all along.

Herod built huge buildings. One reason the temple became so controversial in Jesus’ day was that it was built from the taxes paid by the poor as they lost their land—so that Herod could be Herod the Great.

Many of Jesus’ stories were about people like Mary and her family, people who were peasants and serfs. Herod grew wealthy off their poverty. He knew people would party when he died, so he supposedly had 70 elite Jewish citizens imprisoned with orders that they be executed on the day of his death so that there would be tears in Israel. He watched other leaders come and go; he outlasted, outsmarted, outmaneuvered and outfoxed them all.

Then one day magi came to Jerusalem and asked: "Where is the one who has been born 'King of the Jews'?"

King Herod heard this, and was disturbed. Meanwhile, Mary, meek and mild, said:

*He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost
thoughts,
He has brought down rulers from their thrones...
[He has] sent the rich away empty.*

Nobody sold her song on a Hallmark card. Nobody turned on the radio to hear Bing Crosby sing, "He sent the rich away empty." But she said it often enough that it got remembered, got known, got written down, got put in the book.

It appears from the gospel texts that only two people understood just how subversive this little life would be: the most powerful man in the country, and a powerless, penniless, illiterate Jewish peasant girl.

To one of them, the coming of Jesus was the foundation of desperate hope; to the other it was a catastrophe to be prevented at all costs up to and including genocide.

There is a pattern to her song:

He has brought down the ruler, but lifted up the humble;
He has filled the hungry with good things, but has sent
the rich away empty.
Scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts,
but been mindful of the humble state of his servant.

God is reversing everything: who is in, who's out; who's up, who's down. Who the winners are; who the losers are. Mary seems to charge the world with having gotten things pretty much exactly wrong.

Our world said: blessed are the beautiful. Blessed are the rich. Blessed are the successful. Blessed are the secure. Blessed is Herod. Mary said that now God's going to turn everything upside down. Why would anyone listen to an unimportant peasant girl? Then a rabbi came along and he too sang the strangest song: "Blessed are the poor, blessed are the hungry, blessed are the meek."

Where did he get his material? Could it have been from his mom? Did he learn from her that God has no intention of tolerating the injustice and greed of this world on a permanent basis? Did she teach him that it angers God when people are selfish or violent, when rich people watch poor people go hungry and do nothing, when the powerful push around the weak because they can get away with it?

The rabbi wouldn't overthrow Herod by using Herod's methods. He wouldn't out-Herod Herod. He would out-love Herod and defeat Herod's capacity to hate by his greater capacity to suffer. He would humble himself—be born in a stable, grow up in poverty and work with his hands. He would teach wherever people would listen. He would be accused unfairly, tried corruptly and mocked. He would be executed.

He would overcome the dominion of sin through his suffering on a cross. God would turn everything upside down, and it would all start on the bottom of the pile with little Mary. And her baby.