

Luke 1:39-55

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, 40 where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. 41 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit 42 and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. 43 And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? 44 For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. 45 And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

46 And Mary said,
 "My soul magnifies the Lord,
47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
48 for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
 Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
 and holy is his name.
50 His mercy is for those who fear him
 from generation to generation.
51 He has shown strength with his arm;
 he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
 and lifted up the lowly;
53 he has filled the hungry with good things,
 and sent the rich away empty.
54 He has helped his servant Israel,
 in remembrance of his mercy,
55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
 to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

PREPARING WITH A VISIT

Long ago God used the process of new birth to change not only the lives of a few people in an obscure village far away but to change the whole world for ages to come. As one popular Christmas card puts it,

"Christmas is love tugging men and women back to God ... with the powerful clasp of a tiny hand reaching from a bed of straw."

This is fourth Sunday of Advent. The celebration of the Divine birth is coming soon. The time is short before the Christ child comes. How do we prepare for this blessed event?

Most of us will prepare by spending time with our family. And that's what Mary did. In our lesson for today Mary visits her relative, Elizabeth.

You may remember that when the angel told Mary that she was going to become the mother of the Son of God she quite naturally asked, “How can this be since I am a virgin?”

And the angel answered that “the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most high will overshadow you; and for this reason the holy offspring shall be called the Son of God.”

And then as a kind of proof that “nothing is impossible with God” the angel said that Mary’s relative, Elizabeth ... an old woman who was thought to be barren is now in her sixth month of pregnancy.

So Mary traveled to visit Elizabeth.

And when Mary greeted Elizabeth, Elizabeth’s child leaped in her womb. Elizabeth was feeling not only the gymnastics of an unexpected child. She was feeling the working of the Holy Spirit.

The Scripture tells us that Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit greeted Mary by saying, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.” And then Elizabeth asks a question, “Why has the mother of my Lord come to me?”

MARY’S SONG

Why did Mary come to Elizabeth? She came sing a song.

Everyone sings in Luke’s gospel. Luke’s gospel is a musical. And this morning Mary’s song takes center stage.

Mary sings about the kingdom that comes, God’s kingdom. Mary sings about a kingdom in which the proud and powerful will be laid low while the weak and the hungry will be lifted up.

Now this seems to us to be a very unrealistic song. This is not how it works in the world. The world has (and some say) always will work by the golden rule. He who has the gold makes the rules.

This is the world into which Jesus was born, the world of Caesar and Herod. They are intoxicated by power, and there is no end to what they will do to maintain their power. (Later in the story we will learn that Herod will even have innocent children killed in his desire to eliminate any pretender to the throne.)

And yet Mary sings. Why?

The angel has visited Mary. The Word has become flesh in Mary. And that changed everything. The good news gave Mary the courage to sing in the middle of a world gone mad.

Don't underestimate the power of a song. Songs have a way of speaking to our deepest longings. And Mary's song is no ordinary song. Her song comes from the heart of God.

The world has always provided a harsh cradle for our children. But, Mary foresees a time when mercy and justice will prevail. Mary foresees a time when God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

A SUBVERSIVE SONG

The song that this little girl is singing is a very subversive song. In fact even today there are politicians in some countries who have tried to outlaw this song. In their minds a song like this is still dangerous. And they are right. Mary's song of faith is a danger to their rule.

In a violent and cynical world run by crazy men like Herod and Caesar the greatest threat to their power are these "little ones" who believe in the triumph of God's grace. The greatest threat to evil is the protest song of those who believe in God's justice.

Evil can only rule over people if the powers that be can somehow convince people to give up hope. But, once the seed of hope is born in the hearts of God's people new birth is inevitable and with that new birth there is a whole new world.

Herod will be king no more. There's a new king in town, and his name is Jesus.

TRAGEDY AND THE SONG

One commentator talked about his struggle to worship after the shootings in Connecticut. David Lose is a preacher and a teacher at a seminary. But, he said that over these past few days he has fallen strangely mute.

When asked by a friend who hadn't heard the news he could hardly get the words out. And when his kids asked him to explain what had happened he had to speak in short sentences because it was all so upsetting.

That came as a surprise to him. Normally (like most preachers) he's a talker. But, in the face of such tragedy, words failed him. And so he had to rely upon the words of others. In particular he relied upon the words of the hymn, "O Come, O Come Emmanuel."

The words that he found particularly helpful were:

*O come, Thou Day-Spring, come and cheer
Our spirits by Thine advent here
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night
And death's dark shadows put to flight.
Rejoice! Rejoice!
Emmanuel Shall come to thee, O Israel.*

Those words are based on Isaiah's promise:

"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom a light has shown."

David said that when he sang that song last Sunday it was more like a hoarse whisper than singing. But as the verses went on he found his voice growing stronger.

Songs do have the power to heal us. This week I too found special comfort in the songs of faith. And as I struggled to make it through the words from Philip Brook's hymn, O Little Town of Bethlehem kept coming to mind. He wrote,

“Yet in thy dark streets shineth The everlasting Light--The hopes and fears of all the years Are met in thee tonight.”

It is a shame that each tragedies and sorrows mar the celebration of Christmas. And it is especially sad this year. But, I kept thinking, “In our dark streets the everlasting light is still shining. Our hopes and fears are still met in the one who still comes into our hearts.”

And so this is the season that we sing along with Mary. Some of our tunes are mournful, laments that express our grief and fear, and yet at the same time those tunes keep the grief and fear from taking us down.

Songs of praise and thanksgiving unite us with the One to whom we lift our voices. Through song we tell the old story and it becomes our story.

I think about the exiles in Babylon who hung their harps on the willow trees and refused to sing a song of home for their captors. They had given up hope and could not sing.

But, despite their despair God taught them a new song. God lifted them up and took them home on the wings of a song, a hope that would not let them go.

A SONG IN THE PAST TENSE

And so today I ask you to sing with me. Don't give in to the despair of the world. The world is not going to end. The world is going to be renewed, recreated by the One who made heaven and earth.

And the Creator has called us to be a part of the process. He has called us to sing along with Mary and the angels. He has called us to cooperate with the new creation that has already begun in the dark streets of Bethlehem long ago.

When Mary sang God's song it was based on what God had done in the past. In many ways it was reminiscent of the song Hannah sang when she had her son, the prophet Samuel. And so the verbs in Mary's song are all in the past tense.

But, that doesn't mean Mary relegates the work of God to the past. To the contrary as she sings she recognizes that she has already been drawn into relationship with the God of Israel.

This is the same God who has been siding with the oppressed since the days of Egypt.

This is the same God who has been making and keeping promises since the time of Abraham.

The past tense in this case doesn't so much signify that everything Mary sings about has been accomplished, but rather that Mary is now included in God's history of redemption.

You see when we sing God's song it's more than humming a catchy tune. It's becoming a part of the Divine story; it is connecting our story with God's story. It is glorifying God and catching a glimpse of God's glory in the middle of the long, lonely night.

A PROTEST SONG

Advent is a season of standing up against "the way things are." Advent rejects the assumption that humanity remains trapped in never-ending decline.

That's why we light candles at Christmas. It's an act of defiance. As one commentator put it,

"Christians (at least, those in the Northern Hemisphere) light candles 'against' the expanding December night. Our tiny, vulnerable flames pose no threat to winter's natural wildness. But we light them anyway, because they declare a different reality to come."

They are, if you will, a protest against the darkness, the evil in the world. And for the same reason we sing songs of hope when hope seems in short supply.

When Mary sang mad men killed children, sorrow filled the land and hope was in short supply. The sons of the two women in our story today would suffer a violent death.

A DEATH DEFYING SONG

But, even death was not too much for the Creator of heaven and earth. The song of Mary was not silenced. We end each year singing it.

We are defiantly optimistic, not because we believe in what we can do, but because we believe in what God can do through us. The Word became flesh in Mary, and the Word still becomes flesh in us.

When we sing "O Little Town of Bethlehem," we can feel the hopes and fears of all the years met in the vulnerable babe of Bethlehem. Singing, "Joy to the World" can create in us the very joy we have longed for of late and maybe wondered whether we'd experience again.

Singing draws us into reality we voice. God has promised to change the world, and in singing these promises we enter into that work.

Those who think that Christmas is all about snowmen and gifts and nostalgic good times have not understood what this season is all about. Christmas is about singing in the face of hard realities. Christmas is about a hope that refuses to die. Christmas is about a new heaven and a new earth.

The songs of faith move us beyond the heartache of the moment to the hope that is eternal.

When we sing together by the grace of God we become more than just a collection of individual Christians. We become a part of that great cloud of witnesses. We are witnesses to the grace of God as revealed in Jesus.

And with Mary and Elizabeth and the saints who have lived down through the ages we sing God's song. We raise our voices in hope and expectation. We wait once more for the presence and comfort of the Lord.

THE SONG OF NEW BIRTH

I know. Sometimes it's hard to sing. Sometimes our voices can barely muster a whisper.

But, as we sing together we enter into the new reality of Christmas. We witness and participate in God's promise to change the world.

Christians are not given the option of wallowing in despair because Christians believe in the power of new birth.

Christians believe that when a child was born in Bethlehem long ago that was the beginning of a new world. God was in Christ, and that changed everything.

We all have challenges to face in the coming year. Some of you face the challenge of raising children. Some of you face the challenge of poor health.

Some of you face the challenge of finding a job. Some of you face the challenge of an important relationship that has gone bad. Some of you are filled with grief.

Life is not easy.

But, according to our passage for today, there is hope in even the worst of circumstances. There is reason to sing because the song we sing is God's song.

Like Mary we need to hear the promise of the angel and believe that it can happen to us.

Like Mary we need to seek out those who have also been touched by God's Spirit and let them give us encouragement in our time of need.

ADVENT BAPTISM

A Presbyterian minister baptized a child on Thanksgiving weekend. As is the custom in many churches, the pastor routinely asks the congregation, "Who stands with this child?" At this point the grandparents and an assortment of relatives join the parents in holding the baby and presenting the baby for baptism.

After the service was over, and the congregation had left for dinner, the pastor was putting the sanctuary in order when he noticed a person who had remained. He said that she was dressed "Salvation army style, clutching a black plastic purse." He recognized her as someone who always sat in the back pew, close to the door. She seemed at a loss for words.

After an awkward silence, she commented on how lovely the baptism was and then with much emotion she said, "Tina has had a baby and, well, the baby ought to be baptized, shouldn't it?"

The pastor suggested that Tina and her husband should come to see him. They could discuss the possibility together.

The woman looked up at the pastor and said, "Tina has no husband. She was confirmed in the congregation and came to the youth group. But, she got involved with an older boy. And then she got pregnant. She is only eighteen."

Now it was the pastor's turn to be at a loss for words. He finally mumbled something about needing to bring her request before the Session. When the pastor presented the request to baptize Tina's baby there was more mumbling.

How could they be sure that Tina would be faithful to the promises she was making? How could they be sure about anybody's promises?

After thirty minutes of indecisive discussion, the session finally decided to schedule the baptism for the fourth Sunday of Advent. When the Sunday arrived the church was filled, just as it always was a Christmas approached. They went through the usual service ... lit the four Advent candles and sang "Come Thou Long Expected Jesus."

And then it was time for the baptism.

The pastor said, "Will all those who are going to be baptized please come forward." An elder of the church stood and read off a three by five card, "Tina Corey presents her son, James, for baptism." He awkwardly stared at the card as if he wasn't quite sure who that might be.

Tina got up from where she was seated and came down to the front, holding two month old James in her arms. A blue pacifier was stuck in his mouth, and he was giving it a real workout. The scene was just as awkward as the pastor and the elders knew it would be.

Tina seemed so young, so alone. As she stood there they could not help but think of another mother and another baby, young, alone, long ago.

And then the pastor came to that appointed part of the service where he asked the usual question, "And who stands with this child?" He looked at Tina's mom dressed in her meager way and nodded. She slowly, awkwardly stood and moved toward her daughter and grandson.

The pastor's eyes went back to the service book to proceed with the questions to be asked of the parent. It was at this point that he sensed some movement within the congregation. A couple elders stood up. Then the sixth grade teacher stood up. Then a new couple in the church stood up.

And then much to the pastor's astonishment, the whole church was standing, moving forward and clustering around the baby and her mother. Tina was crying. Her mom was gripping the pew as if she were clutching the railing on a tossing ship.

And little Jimmy as the water touched his forehead grew peaceful and calm ... as if he could feel the warm embrace.

The whole congregation came together that day. It was as if this child was their child. It was as if they were all one family.

I believe that a Savior was born long ago, but that was just the beginning.

I believe that each and every day a new birth occurs. I believe that each and every day the divine touches the human, and lives are changed forever.

Won't you join the whole congregation in singing Mary's song?

Amen.