

An Advent Protest Song
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Luke 1:46-55

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."

A BABY CHANGES EVERYTHING

Nothing changes your life more than the birth of a new baby. It's a whole new world when you become a parent, especially the first time. And things change for the people around you as well. New grandmothers and grandfathers excitedly consider their new role. Each milestone is documented with videos and pictures emailed to family and friends.

Today we also remember the birth of a baby. This baby was born long ago in an obscure village on the other side of the world.

But, this birth would do more than just change the lives of family and friends. This birth would change the world.

Today is the fourth Sunday of Advent. The celebration of the Divine birth is coming soon. The time is short before the Christ child comes.

So 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. Mary visits her relative, Elizabeth.

NOTHING IS IMPOSSIBLE

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.

This is a theme that runs throughout the Bible.

When God decides to do something new there is a miraculous birth to mark the event. For example, Abraham's wife Sarah is so old that she has one foot in the nursing home and then God decides to put the other foot in the nursery.

The idea is so ridiculous that it made Sarah and Abraham laugh out loud. But, as always, God had the last laugh. They had a son in their old age, and old Abraham became the father of many.

Nothing is impossible with God.

So Mary traveled to visit Elizabeth to see if the promise given by the angel was true. Could old Elizabeth really be in her sixth month of pregnancy?

Not only was it true; when Mary greeted Elizabeth, Elizabeth's child leaped in her womb.

Elizabeth was feeling not only the gymnastics of an unexpected child. She was also 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? It turns out that she came sing a song.

Everyone sings in Luke's gospel.

You see, 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 works 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 today in places like Syria and Iraq we see the same thing happening.)

And yet in this violent and uncertain world Mary sings. Why?

The angel has visited Mary. The Word has become flesh in Mary. And that changed everything.

This good news gave Mary the courage to sing in the middle of a world gone mad.

WHY SING?

What makes you sing?

I believe that singing at its deepest level has nothing to do with hitting all the right notes nor does singing require an audience.

Singing is a way of expressing our deepest longing.

Several years ago I was listening to a show called “Fresh Air” on the public radio station. They were interviewing a man who loved to sing the old traditional country songs.

He came from a very poor family, and his early childhood was tragic. The interviewer asked how he first got into singing since he had so few opportunities. The man said that when he was only five or six years old he would climb a tree and sing for hours on end simply because “he had to”.

What he didn’t know was that people had started to enjoy his singing and had begun to gather around the tree as he sang.

Pretty soon a cousin decided that the boy needed to learn how to play a guitar in order to accompany his singing. So he bought him one, and from there a career in music was launched.

Music changed this man’s life, and it all began with a young boy alone in a tree wanting to express the music he found in his heart.

THE POWER OF A SONG

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.

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 very 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.

PAST TENSE

When Mary sang God's song it was based on what God had done in the past.

In the Old Testament we read the story of Hannah.

Hannah was thought to be barren, but she prayed to the Lord and miraculously she had a son, a son that she dedicated to the Lord. And in the joy of new birth Hannah sang a song.

In many ways Mary's song was reminiscent of Hannah's song. Perhaps, that's why the verbs in Mary's song are all in the past tense.

Mary is making a connection between what God has done long ago with what God is doing in her life today. Mary realizes that she stands in a long line of people who have been called by God in miraculous ways.

She understands that before the foundation of the world the God who made heaven and earth had planned this miracle of new birth. 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.

This is the same God who brings forth the mighty prophet Samuel from a woman named Hannah, a woman who was thought to be barren.

The past tense in this case doesn't so much signify that everything Mary sings about has already 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.

THE PROTEST CONTINUES

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

This Advent song is 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.

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.

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 we sing.

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.

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 forever.

THE SONG TRANSFORMS US

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.

We sing in protest to the way things are.

We sing in the hope of what things will be.

Mary's song tells us that God loves us too much to allow us to be lost in our conceit and self-centeredness.

Out of love God promises to knock us down a peg or two when we need it.

And Mary's song also tells us that God's loves too much to allow us to be consumed in the depths of poverty or despair.

SINGING MARY'S SONG TODAY

You may have seen a heartwarming story on the local news. Someone anonymously donated money to be given to the poor in an unusual way. Policemen were given cash and their task was to pull over people whose cars made it look like they were struggling financially. You know those cars; the ones that blow black smoke and have the one bumper that doesn't match the rest of the car.

Anyway, the police cameras recorded these events.

At first the people were afraid. With all the Christmas bills they didn't need another ticket.

But, then the officer gives them the unexpected money, and there are hugs all around.

It presents quite a different and welcome picture compared to what has been going on recently.

That's Mary's song.

That's a sign of what can happen when we dare to lift up those who are down. There is unexpected joy and reconciliation.

And that's the song we are called to sing.

Christ has promised to come into the broken places of our world. Christ has promised to come where healing is most needed.

And just as Mary bore the presence of God in Christ so we are all pregnant with the possibility of new life. All of us can become more than we are because God is with us and God is for us.

SHE IS WORTHY!

I read this week of a woman who was preparing to be ordained as a pastor in the United Church of Christ.

Part of the service was a liturgy, in which the congregation spoke the following phrase, "She is worthy!" And the liturgist responded, "She is worthy indeed!"

The candidate for the ministry was appalled at this. She went to the senior minister who was leading the service and said, "We have to take it out. I am not worthy. There are many people more worthy than me." The senior minister replied,

"No, we're not taking it out, and I have two reasons. First, it's in the bulletin and the bulletins have already been printed.

But, there's another more important reason. We're keeping it because you missed the point.

This affirmation isn't so much about you as it is about God.

It's the congregation saying they believe in a God so loving, so powerfully compassionate that God can transform most any willing soul into being worthy, *even you*.

We forget sometimes what God can do. We forget sometimes that nothing is impossible with God. We forget sometimes that God is with us and in us.

So God has given us Mary's song to help us remember. In Mary's song we remember that God still promises to save God's people, to lift up those who are broken by life.

What about you?

Are you ready to sing Mary's song? Do you believe in the impossible possibility of God's new life?

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

Like Mary we too 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.

Like Mary we too need to sing an Advent protest song.

God in Christ is coming to change everything.
May Christ be born in you this Christmas season.

Amen.