

“Singing a New Song to an Old Tune”

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Third Sunday of Advent

Luke 1:46-55

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.”

A PROTEST SONG

Today’s message is a song,
 Mary’s song.

This Scripture is also known as the Magnificat.
 The title comes from the Latin version of the first line,
 “My soul magnifies the Lord.”

If I had to categorize this song.
I'd call it a protest song.
This song is like the Bible's version of say "Blowing in the Wind".

It's not just a sweet little song about a baby that will soon be born.
It's about a divine challenge to the rich and powerful.

I ran across a quote this week from a Jewish rabbi that summarized this song's version of hope.

Rabbi Sharon Brous wrote,

"Hope is not naive,
and hope is not an opiate.

Hope may be the single greatest act of defiance
against a politics of pessimism
and against a culture of despair."

The story of the birth of Jesus is very familiar.
We have heard it over and over again.

But, because we have heard that story so much,
I think we sometimes miss the power of that story.

Yes, the coming of the Messiah brought joy to the world.

But, the birth of the Messiah was not the tame, sentimental tale that we
have made it.

The coming of the Messiah also was (as the Rabbi put it)
an "act of defiance against a politics of pessimism and against a culture of
despair".

THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK

When Jesus was born,
the politics of pessimism came in the form of the Roman Empire
and the Empire's puppet, King Herod.

Politicians in those days catered to the rich.
And they ignored the needs of the poor.

(Glad politicians don't do that any more.
That would be horrible!)

Anyway, back to the ancient world.
It was definitely a time when the rich and powerful exploited the weak and helpless.

You might remember that the story of the Jesus' birth contains a reference to excessive taxes levied by the oppressors on the poor.
And it also includes the tale of a paranoid old king who killed anyone who might challenge his authority.

He even took the extraordinary step of killing innocent children.

Sadly, it sounds all too familiar.
There are still Herods in this world who will kill the innocents to maintain their power.

The only difference is today they have more powerful weapons with which to do the killing.

And so the world into which Jesus was born (like our world) was filled with darkness.
No one dared challenge those who exploited the poor and ruled with fear.

THE SIGN OF A NEW CREATION

But, God decided to break this vicious cycle.
God decided to take down the politics of pessimism
and this culture of despair.

So, how did God do it?
Did God send any army to vanquish the enemy?

No, God sent his Angel, Gabriel to a young woman named Mary.

Now Mary seemed like an unlikely candidate to start a revolution.

She lived in a town in the backwaters of Galilee, a place called Nazareth.
Most of you know what they said about Nazareth,

“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”
Well, up until this time the answer was “no”.

The Bible tells us that Mary wasn't married,
at least not yet,
and she was a virgin.

So the visit of the angel must have come as a real shock.
The angel said to this poor, young, unmarried woman...
from this no good, very bad town,

“I have good news.
You're going to have a child.

His name will be Jesus.
He will be the Son of the Most High.
And this Son of David will reign over the house of Jacob forever.”

Mary replies,
“How can this be?”

Part of Mary's doubt was due to the obvious.
She was a virgin.

But, she had many other reasons to doubt.
She had no power.
She had no husband (at least not yet).

It all seemed like a recipe for disaster.
How can God be at work in the life of a single mother all alone in the world?

The angel said that the Holy Spirit would come upon her.
The Word would literally become flesh in her life.

The angel encouraged Mary's faith by telling her what was going on with
her relative.

“Remember Elizabeth ... the one they said was too old to have children? Well, she’s in her sixth month of pregnancy. That’s the kind of thing that happens when God decides to change the world.

Nothing is impossible with God.”

Mary believed the angel.
She said, “Ok. I’m the Lord’s servant.”

A NEW SONG TO AN OLD TUNE

Some describe Mary as a person who passively waited on the Lord, a person who believed but really didn’t have clue about what was going to happen.

But, today’s lesson shows us that nothing was farther from the truth. Mary’s hope for the future was informed by the mighty acts of God in the past.

She was singing a new song,
but she was singing that new song to an old tune.

Mary could accept the message of the angel for her future ... because that story had been foreshadowed in God’s gracious acts in the past.

For example, remember the story of Abraham and Sarah?
They were really old.

“How old were they” you ask?
The Bible says they were as “good as dead”.
“Good as dead” is really old.

And when the angels disguised as strangers came to tell them that they were going to have a son, how did Sarah respond?

She thought it was hilarious...
...rolled on the ground she laughed so hard.

But, God had the last laugh.
 God always does.
 And, so, as Frederick Buechner put it,
 This woman who had one foot in the nursing home now had one foot in the
 maternity ward.

That theme continues throughout the Old Testament.

The prophets all agreed.
 A new birth would signal the coming of God's kingdom.
 And the birth of Jesus would be the most miraculous birth of all.

ELIZABETH

Mary responded to the message of the angel by quickly going to see her
 relative, Elizabeth.
 And sure enough old Elizabeth was (as they put it in those days) "great with
 child".
 A miracle.

Mary said "Hi, how's it going?"
 And the baby in Elizabeth's womb began to turn summersaults.
 I bet that sounds pretty familiar to some of you.
 Sometimes unborn babies do that ... a lot!

But, Elizabeth gave a very unusual explanation for the gymnastics of her
 unborn baby.
 It was prophecy.

Filled with the Holy Spirit Elizabeth said,

"What a blessed woman you are Mary.
 And what did I do to rate this?
 The mother of my Lord has come to visit."

And, because Luke's gospel is basically a musical,
 this is Mary's cue to break into song!

PRAISE AND WORSHIP

She begins with a praise and worship number.
 The song extols the virtues of God.
 She sang,

“My soul magnifies the Lord.”
 “My spirit rejoices in God my Savior.”

What is the chief end of men and women?
 To glorify God and enjoy God forever.

And what better way to do that than in song?

AMAZING PERSONAL GRACE

And then, in the second verse,
 Mary gives thanks for what God has done in her own life.

God has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
 All generations will call her blessed.
 The Mighty One has done great things for her.
 His name is holy.

In order for a song to be an act of praise and worship,
 we have to take it personally.

For example, we sing,
 “Amazing grace,
 how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me ...”

The emphasis in that line is on the word, “me”.

We can’t sing that song with integrity unless it’s about “me”.
 I am a sinner saved by grace.
 That old song must be my song.

Grace is never amazing unless we take it personally.

Mary took the grace of God personally.

When she saw Elizabeth and her acrobatic unborn child, she knew that “nothing was impossible with God”.

She knew that because the impossible had happened in Elizabeth’s life, and she knew in her heart that the impossible was about to happen in her own life.

HANNAH’S SONG

There was another reason that Mary could sing at the drop of hat. She had been singing a version of this song all her life. She knew and lived with the stories of faith.

Mary’s song is a lot like the song of a woman named Hannah. Some of you may remember that story.

People thought that Hannah couldn’t have children. She and her husband had tried for a long time, but to no avail.

And so in great distress Hannah prayed to the Lord and said,

“If you let me have a child,
I will dedicate him to your service.”

Well, it happened.
Hannah had a child.
And when that child was born,
Hannah’s prayer of thanksgiving took the form of a song.

Mary patterned her song after Hannah’s song.
She was singing a new song to an old tune.

That’s how we prepare ourselves to worship God.
We learn to sing the old songs of faith.
And eventually we learn to sing those songs in a new way.

We take them personally.

Every family should have at least one hymnal.

We should teach our children the songs of faith.

We should learn to sing our way through life.
 We sing the songs of God's grace today
 ...to a tune that is as old as the universe.

A SONG ABOUT JUSTICE AND RIGHTEOUSNESS

But, remember, I said Mary's song is, at its heart, a protest song.
 It's not just lifting our hands in the air and extolling the benefits of our salvation.
 It's not just praise and worship.

It's also about justice and righteousness.

It's a song that is dissatisfied with the way things are.
 God made the world good.
 But, we keep messing it up!

So, like Hannah and the prophets of old,
 Mary envisions a time when the good world God created will be restored.
 At that time, as the prophet put it,

Justice will "roll down like waters,
 and righteousness like an ever flowing stream." (Amos 5:24)

The coming of God's Son brings salvation,
 but it also brings disruption.

According to Mary, God's Son is coming to really "drain the swamp".

Those who think they are so smart
 ...will learn just how muddled their thinking really is.

Unjust rulers will lose their seat in Congress
 ...while the lowly will be lifted up.

The hungry will be fed.

And those who have gotten rich on the backs of poor?

They...will be sent packing!

SINGING TODAY

It's amazing how this ancient song can be so relevant to the world in which we live.

Mary's protest song is as powerful today as it was many years ago.

The hope contained in this song is still an act of defiance.

In a land where the "politics of pessimism" is still prevalent ...

In a land where the "culture of despair" seems to choke out every hope...

Mary still sings.

And she invites us to sing with her.

After all, we come from a long line of musicians.

We have been singing this song of grace for a long time.

This was the song of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob.

This was the song of Moses and God's people as they traveled in the wilderness.

This was the song of the prophets.

This was Jesus' song.

This was the song of the apostles.

And this is our song.

With God nothing is impossible.

And if we believe that, we open ourselves up to a new world.

So, this morning I would suggest that God calls all of us to join the choir!

You know, the design of many modern churches

...often give us the wrong idea about worship.

With the comfortable seats, and subdued lighting,

we think of the congregation as an audience

...and the minister and the choir as "performers".

That's not right.

If you want to think about worship in terms of a performance,
the audience for worship is an audience of one
... the Lord.

And all of us are called to perform...
... not for each other, but for the Lord.

All of us are called to join in singing this song of grace and salvation.

This song lifts our spirits and gives us faith.
This song enables us to worship the one true God,
the God who is in the process of changing everything.

It is the song of a new creation.

This past week I've had fun singing a bluegrass Christmas song, "Dear Little Stranger".

And the chorus to that song goes ... well, let me show you...

(Give me a G chord Mark!)

"Dear little Stranger, born in a manger
No downy pillow under his head.
But, along with the poor he, slumbered securely.
The dear little Savior, asleep in his bed."

I come from a place where they sing songs like that.
Those songs remind me of home.
My home was a lot like Nazareth.
People said nothing good can come out of that place.

Many of the people in my home are poor.
They've been exploited by the rich and the powerful for many generations.

But, they still know how to sing.
And they see in the humble birth of Jesus a word of hope.

They see in the birth of this child a new day coming.
It's the third Sunday of Advent.
It's high time for all of us to start singing.

Amen.