

“Transformed by the Song”
Luke 1:46b-55
Rev. Liz Kearny
Longview Presbyterian Church
December 15th, 2019

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.”

This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

In the Middle Ages, there was a church bishop from Paris, France who was sending letters to another high-up leader in the Catholic church complaining that some local churches were

apparently singing this song of Mary, called the Magnificat, too many times in their worship services. In his letters, the bishop was suggesting that a policy should be put in place so that no local congregation would be allowed to sing Mary's song more than 6 *times* in any single worship service. And if the limit was suggested to be 6 times in a worship service, one can only imagine how many times these little local French churches were actually repeating Mary's song in their regular services of worship!¹

I wonder if we can imagine why exactly these little po-dunk French churches were repeating Mary's words over and over. The theology of Mary's song speaks for itself. Mary sees the advent, the coming of God in Jesus, who is growing in Mary's own womb, as the next move of God to bring liberation and reversal into the world. Mary sings out that God has been liberating God's people since the beginning, helping God's "servant Israel, in remembrance of [God's] mercy." Mary sings of a God who comes to bring the powerful down from their thrones as the lowly are raised up, sending the rich away empty as the hungry are filled with good things. And she is so sure that those liberating acts of God in the past will continue in the future, that she speaks of a future reckoning in the past tense, as if it has already happened. The rich and powerful in our world, and indeed the strongholds of greed and control-seeking even in our own hearts, tremble at the idea of this great leveling that God has come to bring. Mary understood that Jesus was coming to flip the world upside down.

But what strikes me most about Mary's words is that she sings them. At this point in the story, Mary has been visited by an angel who told her that the Savior of the world was being formed

¹ Adam Hearlson, homiletics scholar, in "The Holy No", a *Distillery* podcast of Princeton Theological Seminary from April 10, 2018.

in her own body and that she would carry and give birth to Israel's Messiah. Mary said "yes" to being swept up in this liberating act of God. And now, she is visiting her elderly cousin Elizabeth, who after many decades without being able to bear her own children is now pregnant with a son, John the Baptist, who would prepare the way for Jesus. And as these two vastly different pregnant women meet each other, John leaps in Elizabeth's womb and the two celebrate in awe and wonder that God is bringing about the salvation of the world through their unlikely bodies.

Mary could have responded to this joyful meeting with her cousin with a long speech about her excitement. She could have responded with awestruck speechlessness. But instead, Mary sang. And that is significant. Because it is not speeches or great orations or eloquent lectures that stick with us when we are exhausted and downtrodden, when we are afraid and alone, when we grow old and begin to lose our memories. It's those songs. Great speeches have always been a part of liberation movements throughout history, from the days of the Protestant Reformation to the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, but it is the songs of protest and liberation that seem to come back to us when other modes of communication fall short. Songs have staying power. I've heard a Christmas Eve sermon every year of my life, but you know what I actually know by heart? The words to "O Come, All Ye Faithful" and "Joy to the World" and "O Little Town of Bethlehem," those carols I've sung year after year.

And maybe that is why Mary *sang* her words of joy to celebrate God's reversals of liberation in the world. Maybe she sang those words so that they would not be forgotten after she spoke them, but would instead move from her body to our own

through song, crossing time and space to live in our consciousness, making us bolder and braver with every repetition of the song so that we like Mary could say ‘yes’ to joining God’s next move to bring liberation to this world.

Debbie Studebaker, an elder here at LPC, sent an article to the members of the LPC choir recently that spoke about how singing actually changes the chemistry in a singer’s brain, physiologically filling singers who are sad with joy, helping those with dementia connect to memories that we thought were long gone, even bringing physical health to a singer’s body by aiding their digestive and immune systems!² Because songs live in our bodies, they have the capacity to change our bodies. And so it occurred to me that Mary’s song is not just a song *about* change. It is a song that changes *us*, that transforms us, by the power of the Holy Spirit, into the kinds of folks who get swept up, like Mary, in God’s work to flip empires on their heads and lift up those who are downtrodden. Which is why I imagine those little churches in France kept repeating Mary’s song over and over and over again until the church hierarchy got so anxious about losing control that they started forming policies to suppress this advent protest song. The words of Mary weren’t just being contemplated or discussed in those little French churches. They were being embodied as the song went on, as the music wrapped around each word of God’s liberating love that vibrated through their bodies. Maybe that’s why they kept repeating the song, because they sensed that as they kept on singing those words, God was doing something in them, changing them, transforming them into the kinds of people

² Jaime Babbitt, “Your Brain and Singing: Why Singing in a Choir Makes You Happier”, <https://www.choraldirectormag.com/articles/vocal-pro/your-brain-and-singing-why-singing-in-a-choir-make-s-you-happier/?fbclid=IwAR0y282CCF3hgikKsubXdvTDWOMBQymJtXLO1Ebcg52ptLBzwLq01MF4DPM>

who could join God in scattering the proud, lifting up the lowly, and filling the hungry with good things.

So today, my sermon is brief, because it's time to stop talking and start singing. Because when we move from discussing God's love to singing it, the beauty of the Gospel goes from an idea that we consider to a reality that starts making its home in our very bodies. Let's not forget that Mary looked square into a very uncertain future when she sang these words of bold assurance and promised liberation. She knew that God had been faithful from generation to generation, and that as God grew in her own body to be born into the world, Immanuel, God with us, that faithful chain-breaking God would once again be unleashed to set the world free.

The responding hymn we will sing together is a setting of Mary's Magnificat called "My Soul Cries Out With a Joyful Shout," or "The Canticle of the Turning." I would invite you to let this song, rooted in Mary's explosive words of praise and liberation, start living in you this week. Perhaps as it seeps into your bones and echoes through your body, you'll feel the Spirit opening up new ways for you to stand up to injustice and fresh pathways to feed the hungry with good things. I wonder, if we sing this song enough, if we might start embodying its chain-breaking Gospel message. I wonder if we will find that the God who lifts up the lowly is indeed being magnified in our midst. It's at least worth a try.

So turn to page #100 in your hymnals and let's sing together Mary's song, "My Soul Cries Out With a Joyful Shout."