

Mary's Song of Joy

Scripture - Luke 1:39-56

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

And Mary said,

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

And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.

SERMON: Mary's Song of Joy

My brother-in-law hates musicals. They just don't make sense to him. The play is going along nicely, characters are developing, plot is advancing, when all of a sudden.... they look at each other, or out into the audience, and begin...singing? It is a little silly when you think about it. Until you realize that the reason they begin singing is because there is no other way they can express what they are feeling. Music is what feelings sound like.

Some things are just better sung than said. And for the church - this is absolutely true. In fact, St. Augustine said, "Those who sing, pray twice."

I suppose that's why the story of Jesus' birth is filled with songs. In the Gospel of Luke, songs break out all over the place as he declares the astonishing good news that God is with us. Four of them in fact.

When Zechariah finds out he is going to be the father of John the Baptist, he sings,
Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.

When Elizabeth answered the door that day and found her young cousin Mary - alone, pregnant, and probably scared - Elizabeth broke into that ancient song, still beloved in the church, the *Ave Maria: Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb.*

And Mary sang right back. Her song is called the *Magnificat* and is being sung in churches around the globe this morning. You heard it read as our scripture lesson.

And fourthly, an old prophet, Simeon, upon seeing Mary and Joseph with the baby Jesus sings,
Now, O Lord, you let your servant depart in peace, for my eyes have seen your salvation.

Some things are better sung than said. And Mary's song, her *Magnificat*, is certainly one of them. And the setting for her song is a unique one, two pregnant women singing about their babies and God, no doubt crying with joy and talking about things pregnant women talk about.

And everything they are feeling - the worry and the fear and the who knows what else - is wrapped in JOY. Even back when Elizabeth - old beyond childbearing years - is told she will conceive, she is told "**You will have joy!**" (1:14); and then after Jesus is born, the shepherds receive **good news of great joy.** (2:10)

Indeed, some things are better sung than said. And Christmas is certainly one of those things. Because the miracle of Christmas lies beyond the bounds of ordinary rational thought: Jesus, whose birth we are celebrating, is at the same time both fully human and fully God.

Not even the most astute theological mind can adequately explain how God was in Christ reconciling the world. But we can know in our hearts. For our hearts can know what the mind can only imagine.

No wonder Mary broke into song.

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior.

This song that Mary sings, however, is no lullaby. It reads more like the *Magna Carta* than a sentimental Christmas carol. In it Mary declares that God's ways with us are astonishing and unexpected, in fact they are the reverse of what we might expect.

When God comes to us, God comes to a little village called Bethlehem, not to mighty Rome. The King of kings is born to an unknown peasant girl, not to King Herod's Queen. And the new ruler is a baby, not proud Caesar.

And ever since, God has been reversing things.

The poor are rich.

The humble are exalted.

The hungry are fed.

And so Mary sings, *The mighty one has done great things...*

There are two things for us to consider as we ponder her song this morning. First is the word magnify - the first word of the song and the word which gives it its title. *My soul magnifies the Lord*, Mary sings.

Think for a minute about a magnifying glass. It makes things look bigger. With a magnifying glass we can see things more clearly, more sharply.

Similarly, Mary's joy in God's promises makes her joy grow and swell within her, as she thinks about the coming Savior and her role in all this. Just as God is enlarging Mary's belly, her soul is magnifying God - making God larger, enabling us and the world to see Him more clearly.

And what we see is this reversal of the social order where the poor are made rich and the humble are lifted up. Though it seems unfair, this is the way God works.

The second thing to notice about the *Magnificat* is that once Mary proclaims her joy, the verbs are all in the past tense. Mary describes these divine reversals as if they have already happened:

He *has* looked with favor,
 He *has* scattered the proud,
 He *has* brought down the powerful and lifted up the lowly,
 He *has* filled the hungry,
 He *has* helped his servant Israel.

God has already done great things! This isn't some pie in the sky ideal, some lofty goal to which we must strive. God has made his way through to us and the world in the baby growing in Mary's womb, and she has already said yes.

And as her soul magnifies the Lord, her spirit rejoices in God her savior. Joy - anyone's joy, not just a pregnant woman's joy - is most fully expressed in the praise of God. Even people who don't believe in God, will say "Thank God," when something over the top wonderful happens in their life.

Because a heart full of joy responds in praise! You could say that the exchange between Mary and Elizabeth is nothing less than the story of the first Christian worship service in history. The call-and-response of Mary's greeting and Elizabeth's leaping baby, Elizabeth's prophetic blessing and Mary's glorious *Magnificat*, is the first liturgy enacted in a gathered celebration of Jesus the Christ. It is the Good News proclaimed, honored, savored, and adored, months before the Son of God makes his way through a birth canal. (Debie Thomas, *Journey with Jesus* blog, 12-12-21)

The joy for Christians and the church is much deeper than the happiness we feel when we see Christmas lights, or gather with friends, or find the just right gift for someone we love.

The joy of Advent is a **defiant never-the-less** (Karl Barth), and it comes when we glimpse the impact of God becoming human - one of us - as Joan Osborne sang.

I'd like to think that this is why churches are so full on Christmas and then again on Easter. Christ is born and Christ is risen. And some things are better sung than said.

Every December, every Advent, Pastors and Music Directors are asked the same question - "Why can't we sing more Christmas hymns sooner? Why do we have to wait so long?" We're not asked, "Why don't you read the Christmas story sooner?" or "Why don't you preach a Christmas sermon sooner?"

For some reason, we're drawn more than anything else, to the singing of this wonderful event.

Yet while Christmas Eve is just a few days away, for us gathered here this morning it is still Advent. We've given in on the hymns, 2 of our 3 hymns this morning are Christmas rather than Advent. But the message is still one of waiting. Because even as they sing for joy, Mary and Elizabeth are still huddled together in the dark talking, praying and waiting.

And some of us are huddling in the dark, praying and waiting as well. While many are also singing for joy; for others, the song doesn't come so easily. Mary's song may stick in your throat this morning. Because for many people, Christmas is the most difficult time of the year and the singing comes with great difficulty - or it doesn't come at all.

But if the joy song we're singing is a defiant never-the-less, and not a sentimental Christmas card that doesn't exist in real life anyway, then perhaps we **can** join in the song.

And so we wait together, with Mary and Elizabeth and with each other. And as we wait we listen. Out of the night a clear soprano voice cuts through the darkness. Mary flings a song at the darkness of that night, her world, her own life. In an act of defiance and faith, Mary sings.

Sometimes the most radical and faithful thing we can do is to sing. In impudent faith we throw songs into the darkness of doubt and anger and fear. That's what we do in church here Sunday after Sunday. We fling our hymns at this world's darkness and the darkness in our own lives.

We proclaim Christ's victory over death;
we are assured forgiveness for our sins;
and we leave with a good word - a *Benidictus*.

So as we move from Advent to Christmas this week,
may your souls be enlarged by the birth of Jesus in your hearts,
may God be magnified,
and may you sing for joy.

Amen.