

The 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent: 23 December 2018

Luke 1: 39-55

St. Michael's Episcopal Church, Norman Oklahoma

During the years that we lived in New Jersey, one of the joys of living there was going into New York to see live theater. One spring we had gotten tickets to a revival of "Guys and Dolls" on Broadway, and I was looking forward to the show. I thought I knew it inside and out—so imagine my surprise when Miss Adelaide, a brassy platinum blonde bombshell soprano, began belting out the song that I had grown up believing my mother had made up to sing me to sleep: "I love you, a bushel and a peck..." Honest to God, I thought it was a lullaby.

What songs did your mama or daddy sing to you at bedtime? Or on a long car ride? Or to comfort you when you were sad or scared? The words and the music get into your memory, and your heart, and your soul. They hold onto you, even now.

The songs we sing, matter. Music has a way of bringing people together, strangers and sometimes even opponents. For us as Christians, the work of theological formation gets "into us" in our songs, far more than in any other way. Martin Luther is quoted as saying "Let me teach the hymns, and I care not who teaches the theology." Particularly now, at this time of year, people come into the churches, not so much to hear the preacher talk but to participate in a song, in an act of worship that is bigger than themselves, that reminds them of something good, an ancient story of truth and freedom and love, and to be awakened in hope for the future, that Christ is here and is coming, again and again, into the world and to each of us.

And that is a very different song than the ones we hear most of the time.

That's why it is still powerful, and why it is a challenge to the world as we know it.

Because the songs we hear most of the time tell another story. And I'm not talking about the songs on the radio, or Pandora or Sirius or Alexa (choose your media)...I'm talking about the songs, the hymns, the anthems, the messages of who we are as a nation, a culture, a people. Who are "We"—and who do "We" get to exclude in order to continue being "Us"? What walls do we get to build to protect us from "the Others"?

Too often, the songs we hear in our world, and throughout history, have been messages of "us vs. them," anthems of oppression, hymns to injustice and fear, choruses celebrating war and violence. There's nothing new in all this, it's been happening for centuries. But this year the volume seems especially loud. What was once a quiet hum or drone in the background has become a brassy belted Broadway show tune, in the streets and in the halls of power and influence. These seductive, deceptive lullabies of human history get stuck in our ears and hearts and souls.

We need to hear another song, a different, song, and allow it to come in and get "stuck" in us.

And so this morning we hear another song. A mama's song, as our gospel, our good news. The song of Our Lady Mary, the Magnificat.

We're overhearing the moment when Mary, who has been asked if she will consent to allow her own life to be completely turned upside down (and she says Yes!), comes into the home of her cousin Elizabeth, who along with her husband Zechariah is "getting on in years" and yet is in the sixth month of a first (and very unexpected) pregnancy. This is not a quiet, dreamy scene...energy and life and loud excited amazement are all here! Elizabeth knows nothing of what has happened to Mary; yet she is "filled with the Holy Spirit" like the prophets; her first words to Mary recognize what has taken place, and what is yet to come.

And Mary said: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior..."

Those of us who recite (or preferably, sing) Evening Prayer even on an occasional basis know these words, perhaps even by heart. They are the centerpiece of the evening office of the Western Christian tradition for centuries, recited and sung in churches and monastic chapels, on city buses and commuter trains, in living rooms and on back porches around the world. Over the centuries, at least three national governments have attempted to banish the public recitation of Mary's song, fearing (rightly) that it is subversive, that it is a song of liberation, a vision of God's reign, Mary's lullaby to her son, Christ our Lord.

Listen again. Or better yet: read with me.

"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."

Like the prophets before her, like Moses and Miriam, like Hannah and Samuel, Mary proclaims a reality that is already present, and is coming into being. Her song is what a godly worldview looks like, God's vision of justice, the Almighty's anthem of freedom to a world longing for redemption, groaning in labor with the birth pangs of new life.

"The song of Mary is the oldest Advent hymn," explains German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer. "It is at once the most passionate, the wildest, one might even say most revolutionary Advent hymn ever sung. This is not the gentle, tender, dreamy Mary we sometimes see in paintings ... It is instead a hard, strong, inexorable song about collapsing thrones and humbled lords of this world, about the power of God and the powerlessness of humankind."

And it is the song that Our Lady Mary sang to Our Lord Jesus, the song that entered his ears and heart and mind, that got stuck all over him. It was the song she sang to quiet him in the stable, amid the sounds of the animals. "But little Lord Jesus no crying he makes." Uh huh, right. It was the song she sang to comfort and calm him, on that long terrifying journey to Egypt, when she and Joseph did not know where they were going to stay, or how long they would be there, or how they would be welcomed at the border. It was the song she sang his whole life, as he taught and healed and fed thousands; it was the song she sang to him on the cross, unable to reach out to touch him, but able to make her voice heard amid the groaning and cursing; it was the song she sang in astonishment and impossible joy on the morning of the third day, when the angel said "he is not here, he has been raised from the dead." It was her heart's song, the melody of her soul, the lyrics of her life.

And she taught it to her Son, it became his lullaby of transformation. In all that Jesus does, the song of Mary resounds. Her words of justice, love, mercy and righteousness echo through every episode, every confrontation, every action and teaching and miracle of his life and ministry. When he says, "Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven," there is Mary singing of God looking with favor on his lowly servant; all generations will call her blessed. As he constantly and consistently returns to the image (the chorus, the refrain, the antiphon?) of the kingdom turned upside-down, that the first shall be last and the last shall be first, again and again Mary sings of God casting down the mighty, lifting up the lowly, feeding the hungry, and sending away the rich empty. In his shocking stories of the Rich Man and Lazarus, the parable of the Repentant Tax Collector, in his mercy even on the cross for his executioners, Mary's voice proclaimed God's mercy for all, in every generation.

She teaches the song to him, and to us. He sings the song to those who follow him, and that includes us. And it is our song too. In the midst of the darkness, and surrounded by the clamor of songs of seduction and domination, of power and violence and enmity and strife, we join the song of the saints of God through history: Mary and Martha of Bethany and Mary of Magdala; Thomas the Twin and Nicholas of Myra; St. Francis, St. Clare and ten thousand times ten thousand more;

those who resisted unjust laws and fought for an end to chattel slavery in this country; those who spoke and wrote and stood up for the wellbeing of all people, regardless of ancestry or skin tone or wealth or status: Anna Butler Alexander, David Pendleton Oakerhater, Jonathan Myrick Daniels, Rachel Corrie.

They all had Mary's song on their lips as they proclaimed the good news of Christ in the world in both word and deed.

It is the song of a world turned upside down, the song that tells another story, one that can drown out the stealthy, seductive hymns to violence and injustice that are part of the DNA of our world. It is a hymn of liberation and redemptive justice, the DNA of our faith, Mary's eternal lullaby not meant to rock us to sleep, but to call us, to wake us, to stir us so that we might rise up in glorious song.