

Song
Third Sunday of Advent
December 13, 2015
Gordon Wiersma

Text: Luke 1

Introduction to Magnificat

We are going to help the choir sing Mary's Song. Mary has been visited by the Angel Gabriel who tells Mary she will conceive a child who is the child of the Lord God, the promised Messiah, Savior; then Mary goes to visit her cousin Elizabeth, who is pregnant with a child who will be John the Baptist; and Elizabeth sings with joy when she sees Mary, and Mary then does the same with this song that we know as the Magnificat – which is the Latin for the phrase “magnify” – ‘my soul magnifies the Lord’ (in this setting you'll see it is actually ‘my soul *proclaims*’ – but I'm going to use the idea of ‘magnify’ in my sermon, so keep that in mind!)

Magnificat – Mary's Song - from Luke 1

So what if for the Call to Worship this morning, as the dancers moved so beautifully – what if the choir would have just SAID the words to ‘Rejoice – Emmanuel?’ – ‘*O come, O come Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel – Rejoice!*’ - how would that have been? And then for the Processional hymn we'd all just said together: ‘*Rejoice, rejoice – Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.*’ And then all the way through with the Advent wreath and the Magnificat and Call to Prayer and Anthem and Doxology – if all the words were just spoken - concluding with a recessional recitation of the hymn ‘People, Look East’...oh, except we'd also spend some time during the prelude and postlude sitting in silence, watching Rhonda sit idly at the organ bench. So what if we did that? how would that be? Well, I'll tell you: it would be odd and it would be bad.

We have a lot of music around here – have you noticed? and as a preacher around here, I am very aware that the music is not somehow secondary or subservient to the spoken word, including the sermon! At best, it's all of a piece (pun intended!) - word and song and sight and movement all woven together into meaningful worship. But let's be clear: sometimes, often, it's the music that really touches you, and the preacher just has to do his or her best not to get in the way. What that's about – the power of music? – I'm certainly not the first to wonder about such

things and certainly no expert on it, but I know the power is there, and that there is a mystery to it, the impact it has on us. There are others of God's creatures that speak in songs too, but it is a particularly human attribute how we so broadly create and use and rely on song.

So, I'd like you to think today about what song is in you – because that seems to be a great deal of the power and purpose of song, that it settles in us and even forms us in a deep way. And whether or not you've thought of your life having a song, I'd like you to at least try out that idea – and I'd like us to do so using the Song of Mary as our melody – the Song of Mary – the Magnificat – 'magnifies' – 'my soul magnifies the Lord'. It seems I've had songs on my mind recently, as a few weeks ago I preached on the Song of Hannah in the book of Samuel – finding some things to receive from Hannah and some things to leave behind; and that Song of Hannah echoes into Mary's Song – as Hannah's son Samuel anoints King David who centuries later is noted as the ancestor of Joseph, the human father of Jesus - echoing the Messianic promise of a Savior through David's lineage to Israel. From Hannah to Mary's song – and there's nothing in Mary's song I want to leave behind - but I do want to listen carefully for all there is for us to take from this song.

As you listen to Mary's song, it sounds to me like there are 4 essential notes to hear in it – notes that come together as a melody. And I'd like us to listen to 3 of those notes first – joy, judgment and justice – and then wait to listen to a fourth (which isn't another 'j' word ☺).

“My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior” – the joy of this song speaks for itself – it is clear and strong and pure. There are some interesting things though – 'my soul magnifies God' – isn't that an interesting phrase? – literally: 'Mary's soul makes God look bigger' – which is to say, 'joy makes God more visible' - there is power in joy that reveals, makes clear, God's presence. And then interesting too, that Mary's joy could seem very self-centered: 'God has blessed me and people will see God's goodness to me!' But what makes the joy of Mary more than personal self-congratulation is when you consider her circumstances: she is to be an unwed pregnant teen in a culture where that could cost her her life! This is not a surface joy – this is a deep trust in God that creates the rich joy of seeing God's presence in all circumstances.

This is no saccharine sweet song – which means it’s the kind of joy that belongs alongside notes of judgment too: ‘God’s strength scatters the proud - brings down the powerful – sends the rich away empty’ – God’s judgment in which human power that is used destructively is confronted by God’s power used constructively, as the judgment of God has justice as its purpose: ‘to lift up the lowly and fill the hungry with good things’ – justice for the oppressed. Notes of judgment and justice sound together to tell how God’s power is at work in this world – bringing down the barriers to true community and the lifting up of power used for one another rather than over one another.

Joy and judgment and justice at play in Mary’s song. And I want you to wonder – how does such a song suit your life? how does such a song suit this world? With our lives, with even just a few of us gathered for worship, it’s remarkable the great variety of circumstances that are brought together– so much blessing and pain, so much faith and falling short, so much brokenness and so many gifts; and then try to think about our world – all that is happening, all that is so broken and so blessed...too much to know or take in. And what I want to say is that as we audition this song of Mary, unless we bring all of it to our lives and world, it will ring hollow.

We can’t just try to always hum a happy tune of joy – our faith is not putting on a happy face – joy on its own makes of this sanctuary little more than a place of escape or denial or deception. We can’t be just a dirge of judgment – judgment on its own divides the world into good and bad, in and out, and inevitably puts God on our side. Justice on its own can too easily turn to self-righteousness, with our way as God’s way. A song that speaks truthfully to our lives and world weaves joy and judgment and justice together, each coming to the fore at different times.

And one thing more – because what we also hear of in Mary’s song is mercy. And in fact I think how we hear what Mary says about mercy is at the crux of how this song will play out in our lives. Mary sings: “God’s mercy is for those who fear God from generation to generation” – what does that mean? Well first of all, it isn’t about fear – I have a long-running issue with the NRSV translation, as instead of ‘fear God’ it should say ‘revere God’ or ‘worship God in awe’. But then, does it mean ‘God’s mercy is the *reward and possession* of those who revere God’? or ‘God’s

mercy is the *calling* of those who revere God'? Mercy is the heart of God shown in compassion, faithfulness, love, to us – and the very nature of receiving such mercy from God is that it cannot be held as a possession, but instead possesses one's heart with the same compassion, faithfulness, love for others. Mercy weaves together joy and judgment and justice into a song of compassion for God's world; a song that aches and thrills with the notes we hear in God's children around us.

One could say the song of the world today is a cacophony - discordant notes of division and fear and violence and reactivity and hate and suffering; so how do we respond? I learned something about that from a Muslim Imam this past week. It was a sermon, a khutbah, on a video that my wife Anne shared with me – she had received the video from a colleague/friend who is part of the leadership at a mosque in Grand Rapids that she has visited with her classes at Hope College. This Imam at a mosque in the United States preached following the terror attacks in Paris and then in San Bernardino - spoke of the shock from the Muslim community, and also of the fear of vitriol and reprisals faced by Muslims. He heard Muslims asking, 'what should we do? how should we act?' – and the Imam's response caught my attention. He said – 'if we are just asking that now, then shame on us! – if we are only asking because we feel an impact on us, that is not right! We should have been asking before: "how can we make our lives about serving others?" – because', he said, 'we have been called by God to be light and leaven and hope in the world.'

That Imam's call to his congregation struck a chord in me. As we as Christians see events play out in our world, if we only start to care because they impact us – then shame on us (did you remember there is judgment in Mary's song?!). We are not called to join in the competition of reactivity that bounces from fear to rage to pandering to despair; we are called to be part of the song that is already present – we are called as part of a chorus of joy and judgment and justice in this broken world sung with a heart of mercy. Which is a difficult song - too much, really, for us to hold steady such a song in our own lives let alone sound such a grace note into our world; too much, except that it is not our song or our world – it is God's song and God's world. Mary's song is not her own – it magnifies the Lord – it is the song of faith that allows us to see God at work in

our lives and in our world; the song that the God of mercy holds our lives and calls us to live with such mercy in our hearts.

Our response to headlines is not happy denial or escape, not superiority or self-righteousness; not fear or fury; our response is: 'it is Advent, and we are singing a song: a song of the coming of God with us and among us in Jesus Christ, the coming of joy and judgment and justice, the coming of mercy for a broken world.' Thank you, God, for mother Mary teaching us her song, our song, your song; not a new song, but a song that God makes ever new in us and through us; a song of true joy for us and God's world. So, with Mary, it's time to sing. AMEN.