

*Advent Wisdom: Creating Strength & Beauty*

Third Sunday of Advent

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Texts: Isaiah 61 & Luke 1

So let's start with Mary, with Mary's voice. I'd like you to try to imagine Mary's voice – have you ever tried to think what her voice sounded like? She had a voice – a young woman – perhaps 18 years old – perhaps younger still – what did her voice sound like each day as she talked and laughed and cried and sang...? Imagine Mary's voice as Luke tells the story of Jesus' birth: Mary first visited by the angel Gabriel – told that through the power of the Holy Spirit she will carry in her a child who is to be born as the Messiah, the chosen one of God, the promised savior – her voice sounds: “how can this be?...let it be as you have said...”. Then Mary talking with her cousin Elizabeth – in Mary's voice the intensity of secrets shared and the surprising turns of life; and then Mary giving voice to the words of the poem, the song, that we heard today – the Canticle, the Magnificat - imagine this young woman in this situation, and she gives voice to these words: “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.” Can you imagine the sound of her voice...?

Start there – and then this is next: now try to imagine all of the other voices going on in the world just then – at that moment – all of the lives – all of the needs – all of the love – all of the violence – all of the joy – all of the despair – all of the births – all of the deaths – that were being voiced at that time – can you imagine? And then with that, imagine some of the louder voices of the day: the mighty voice of the Roman Empire, drowning out any other, claiming all things for the empire; the voice of religion that had much to do with using the name of God as a way of having power – so many voices, great and small, can you imagine?

And then, put the two together, the singular, small voice of Mary, the song of Mary: “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior” - alongside all the other voices, great and small. Is Mary’s voice even audible at all? Try to imagine that.

Now, most of you have been hearing sermons long enough that you probably suspect I’m going to end up saying that YES, Mary’s voice can be heard, and you’re probably right about that, so I don’t want you to think I am setting something up just to switch it around on you. But what I am trying to do is to give a reality check on Mary’s circumstances rather than just sentimentalizing Mary’s song or listening to it as something disconnected from who she was and the world she lived in – this was one person, a small voice, in a big world. And as we do that, I think it’s likely that you can very much relate to that description of Mary’s voice amidst the cacophony of voices in her world, voices small and great – and if you can’t, then let me tell you: you have a very small voice in this world! Now, just as then, there are so many different voices sounding in the lives around us, and there are in our world the booming voices of empire and religion and power wielded over others. Can you even imagine how small your voice is?

So, with that discouraging outlook before us, let me turn back to Mary’s voice, with something that I find really interesting to notice. In Mary’s small voice, singing her singular, beautiful song: “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior” – there is something interesting about the word ‘rejoice’ used there – it is a different word in the Greek than is most often used for ‘rejoice’ – this word for ‘rejoice’ occurs just a few times in scripture, and in the root meaning of this word there is something unique: this word for ‘rejoice’ has to do with the idea of being proud of something or proud about someone.

Which means that you could understand what Mary is expressing here is that Mary is proud of God...!...what do you think of that?...Mary is proud of God. Have you ever thought of

someone being proud of God? – does that seem a bit odd? – does God really need people to be proud of God? Well, I think it's a fascinating image and idea that this word for rejoice gives to us – Mary being proud of God strikes me as a very personal and genuine and intimate response from Mary to what is happening in this story – and it seems somehow maternal, too, for this mother of the Messiah. And what Mary is proud of, proud about, is of what God is doing in the world, of what God cares about and takes action for – Mary's song begins with her gratitude for God's goodness and blessing to her, but it quickly broadens far beyond her: Mary sings that God brings down the powers and lifts the lowly; God cuts off the rich and fills the poor; God's strength of life speaks over and under and amidst the voices of death in this the world. This is the God of faithfulness, of hope to those in need – and Mary is proud – it brings joy to her to know such a God. It's a different sort of way to hold onto what rejoicing, praise, is about – it is an act of faith that believes God is the source of good and hope for us and for all – proud of who our God is.

And yet, still, it is just that one small voice in the world – heard only by her cousin Elizabeth – and maybe a few chickens. We don't want to minimize just how small that voice was then – or how challenging it was to voice it. This was difficult for Mary – there is fear and pain for Mary then and more for her ahead - there are all the voices and powers of the world to deal with. But that is what makes her voice so powerful – so piercing – so true - not that it is easy, but that it is what is real and alive. To praise God is a profound act of hope which challenges the circumstances of our world, of our lives, by giving voice to the grace and hope of God. It is the power of a voice that sees, clings to, believes, is held by, who and what God is about – proud of the God of salvation – proud to live as a child of God; in such a voice, in such faith, there is a great power, because it has more to say that is real and true and creative and lasting than all of the loud voices of this world put together.

I thought I was going to spend more time with the Isaiah passage in this sermon, but really it is the Isaiah passage that got me thinking about the voice of Mary. Of all the striking images that we heard in Isaiah 61, I've been drawn especially to the closing one:

*As the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown to spring up, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all nations.*

It's a beautiful, abundant image in its own right, of the fruitfulness of the earth, but what is so intriguing about the image here is that it connects the persistence of God's life-giving presence in the world to the very fabric of creation: as much as this earth is a place in which life springs again and again from the earth, just as much has God created us, has made human existence to be, a ground in which the righteousness and praise of God takes root, comes to life, springs forth – it is how God created us to be. There is that in the Isaiah image – and there is this – that it is small: little plants and shoots springing up, that is an image for the great righteousness of God to all the nations? – yes, it is – and it is with such an image that the prophet points us to the good news of justice from our God for this world.

I think that's we see in Mary – that her voice, her choices, her actions, are not drawn from the voices that claim to be in charge of this world, but rather from a different voice, a creative voice, the voice of God that God has woven like seeds of hope into creation itself – the voice of conviction; courage; persistence; fierceness; integrity; love; dignity; justice; passion; beauty – little things really, but the source of creation itself – and in giving voice to such things, you are changed and the world around you is changed toward the righteousness and praise of God.

Hope, it turns out, is a small thing – does that sound like a revelation or a frustration? – perhaps both sometimes. But when we bring together Isaiah and Mary, it is a revelation of how the creative power of God is at work in the world. In the voice of Mary the presence of God and the needs of the world are joined – the personal and the communal are linked – the activity of God and the life of faithfulness are merged. And the beauty of imagining Mary's

voice is that in doing so we begin to imagine our own. Mary is certainly unique in carrying in her womb the Messiah – but the beauty is that Mary is also just one of us; and what she gives voice to is not too holy or lofty for us. This is a story of our voices as well – that our voices count too – small and powerful. For our lives to voice praise to God is for us to be a voice of God’s goodness and hope; our praise to God is a voice of resistance – a voice of resistance to the destructive powers of the world; a voice of healing to the broken powers of diminishment within us and around us. When our voices praise God for who God is, we find our true voice – joined with God in the ways of grace and hope for the world.

The voice of Mary – can you imagine it? – can you imagine the world without it? Your voice – can you imagine it? – God did not imagine the world without it. When we find our voice, speak our voice, our song, with Mary, then we are joined to One who used the words of Isaiah 61 to define who he was as the Messiah: “the spirit of the Lord is upon me to bring good news...” Imagine your voice – imagine our voices joined with Mary– imagine our voices joined with the Messiah’s. Through such small voices – through such persistence – through such seeds of creation - the promise and hope of God is still conceived and born.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.