

4th Sunday of Advent
December 24, 2017
Luke 1:26-38; 47-55
The Rev. Carenda Baker

Are you ready? It's nearly time to make the final turn that will lead us to a dark cave in Bethlehem, where a roughly hewn feed trough serves as a manger. But to get there, we need first to listen for the strains of two songs. The songs give us a glimpse of Mary. The first song is a glimpse through imagination, our picturing what Mary's experience might have been like. And the second song is in her own words, given us by the gospel writer Luke.

You remember her, Mary, the young teenage girl visited by the angel Gabriel. Gabriel, God's messenger who brings her news of a divine, otherworldly plan. Have you ever wondered how many other women Gabriel might have visited before he showed up on Mary's doorstep? Because the truth of the matter is that always with God's invitation there is a choice to make. Tune in to hear more clearly, tune out entirely, or respond "Not right now, thank you." Do I bravely voice my objections and doubts about the invitation? Do we follow those angelic instructions, "Do not be afraid", or let our fears take over and keep us awake at night? Or ask God to please find somebody else more gifted, more capable, more experienced? Or take a chance and believe that God might know something about what God is doing? Partner with God to birth something brand new that will be radically life-changing? Step into the unknown and walk forward in the dark, into a future we cannot even imagine? Stepping and reaching out for God's hand, which can feel a lot like taking the hand of another person.

Faced with a choice, Mary says "yes". But don't for a minute assume that it was totally smooth sailing for her after she said "yes". It's not uncommon for those who listen and follow God's call to be thought strange by the rest of the world. Imagine what sorts of things Mary could have been thinking following her visit from Gabriel. Let yourself imagine what her prayers might have been in those following days and months. Imagine as you listen to the song, "Breath of Heaven".

“BREATH OF HEAVEN”

(Amy Grant, 1992, recorded on the album *Home for the Holidays*)

“I have traveled many moonless nights.
Cold and weary with a babe inside and
I wonder what I’ve done.
Holy Father you have come and
chosen me now to carry your son.
I am waiting in a silent prayer
I am frightened by the load I bear.
In a world as cold as stone,
must I walk this path alone?
Be with me now, be with me now.

*Breath of heaven,
Hold me together. Be forever near me,
Breath of Heaven.
Breath of Heaven, lighten my darkness,
Pour over me your holiness, for you are holy,
Breath of Heaven.*

Do you wonder, as you watch my face
if a wiser one should have had my place.
But I offer all I am, for the mercy of your plan.
Help me be strong. Help me be. Help me.

*Breath of heaven,
Hold me together. Be forever near me,
Breath of Heaven.
Breath of Heaven, lighten my darkness,
Pour over me your holiness, for you are holy,
Breath of Heaven.”*

Gabriel had mentioned her kinswoman Elizabeth. Imagine it, Elizabeth, at her age, was pregnant too, with her first baby. “*Nothing will be impossible with God,*” Gabriel had told Mary. But what kind of reception do you think Mary got from her own family and friends, people of the town who knew her, or at least thought they knew her? We know how people can talk and create a stir. Who knows what folks said when they learned she was pregnant and not yet married to Joseph? Wisely, Mary leaves Nazareth for a while.

She turns for comfort, support, reassurance, the companionship of another woman, to the shared experience of another expectant mother. She goes to visit Elizabeth.

As Mary enters the house, Elizabeth hears her greeting, and Elizabeth's baby jumps for joy inside her. Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit cries out loudly, "*BLESSED ARE YOU AMONG WOMEN, AND BLESSED IS THE FRUIT OF YOUR WOMB. . . AND BLESSED IS SHE WHO BELIEVED THAT THERE WOULD BE A FULFILLMENT OF WHAT WAS SPOKEN TO HER BY THE LORD.*" Elizabeth is glad that her cousin Mary has been able to take God at God's word. Mary seems to trust that what is happening to her is not an accident, an illusion, or a freak thing of nature.

Elizabeth's excitement eventually quiets down, and then . . .? Well, you might expect the two women would compare notes about their appetites and odd cravings, mood swings, morning sickness, back aches and swelling feet. Elizabeth is further along in her pregnancy and might have had some words of wisdom to offer her young cousin.

But all of a sudden a song comes over Mary, and she cannot remain silent, cannot hold it in any longer. And the words burst forth:

"MY SOUL MAGNIFIES THE LORD", she sings, "MY SPIRIT REJOICES IN GOD MY SAVIOR; FOR HE HAS LOOKED WITH FAVOR ON HIS LOWLY SERVANT. FROM THIS DAY ALL GENERATIONS WILL CALL ME BLESSED: THE ALMIGHTY HAS DONE GREAT THINGS FOR ME, AND HOLY IS HIS NAME."

What a heartfelt song of praise this is, a song of thankfulness Mary is singing about herself, and what God has done for her. But it's more than a private song of this particular teenage girl from Nazareth. *The Magnificat* has been part of Christian worship since the Church's earliest days. For centuries members of religious orders have sung or said these words on a daily basis.

So in case you missed it, the song shifts from being about Mary to being about something bigger, startling, and much more universal. The focus shifts to God taking action to set things in this world right. It is not just Mary's song any longer. It is a song for the whole world that speaks of things turned upside down, or right side up if we could look at the world from God's eye view. Mary is a simple teenage girl. She is no religious extremist, not a bold and radical prophet. She is no political activist. But this song that comes from her IS a song of revolution, about a radical turning.

"GOD HAS SCATTERED THE PROUD IN THEIR CONCEIT. GOD HAS CAST DOWN THE MIGHTY FROM THEIR THRONES, AND HAS LIFTED UP THE LOWLY. GOD

HAS FILLED THE HUNGRY WITH GOOD THINGS, AND THE RICH HE HAS SENT AWAY EMPTY.”

The song declares that God acts in human history to upset and reset the human imbalance of power. The words are written in the past tense, like these reversals have already happened – the hungry have already been fed, the rich and powerful have been relieved of their pride and swelled heads, and set free from their possessions. God’s promise has already come true. But how can this be? Mary’s baby is still just a tiny mass of growing cells. It is too soon to even distinguish any of his features on a sonogram. And yet – Mary sings of his accomplishments, God’s accomplishments as if they were history. The prophetic announcement of what Jesus will do comes straight from the lips of his mother. And there is no doubt that they will come to pass.

In the last century it has been documented that at least three times *the Magnificat* was forbidden by governments to be read or sung in public. The first time was during the British colonial rule in India, sometime between 1857 and 1947, perhaps in the 1930’s. The words were deemed too subversive and provocative, inflammatory. So *the Magnificat* was prohibited from being sung in church. Gandhi, who did not consider himself a Christian, yet sought to follow the teachings of Jesus more radically than most Christians, requested that this song be read in all places where the British flag was being lowered on the final day of British imperial rule in India. He understood. India was free at last!

In the 1980’s, these radical words sung by Mary, were taken literally and very seriously by the poor of Guatemala. The words of Scripture were inspiring the people to believe that change was possible, so the government banned its recitation in public. There is nothing more unnerving to people in charge, people who think they hold all the power, than when there is a groundswell of movement from grassroots folks calling for change.

In Argentina, from 1974-1983 the country was plagued with state sponsored terrorism due to military and political infighting. Certain people were targeted and made to “disappear”. It was called the Dirty War. Those groups especially targeted after 1977 were the church, labor unions, artists, intellectuals, university students and professors. A group of women called “The Mothers of the Disappeared” wrote the words of *the Magnificat* on posters and hung them throughout the capital plaza. The words were seen as provocative, and the military junta of Argentina outlawed any public display of *the Magnificat*.

Words have power. They can create alternate realities. Mary’s song, *the Magnificat* shows that there is no telling what God will do with a heart willing to say “yes”, yes to

being a willing servant. Yes to being a partner in God's plan of redemption and reconciliation of the world. The revolution Mary sings of and which Jesus brings is not violent, but it is transformational. God intrudes, and life is never the same. The song that flows from the heart of God is powerful, life-giving and life-disrupting.

Advent and Christmas are rich with songs of the season. What song does your soul need as you approach Bethlehem this year? A song of healing? A song of hope? A song of freedom? A song of courage? A song that is a call to action, to name and resist that which is not of God? A song of faith? A song of peace?

As happened for Mary, God is ready to give us the song we need – a song to strengthen, restore, and empower us to be the people God calls us to be. A song to remind us that the Holy Spirit is at work in us whether we can see evidence of it or not. And our songs like Mary's, need to be shared with the world, because if our hearts ache for all these good and life-giving ways of being, you can be certain that our world desperately needs to hear them, too. The invitation is to say "yes" to God, and listen for the new song God will bring to life in you and me. Listen for the whisper of the "Breath of Heaven". Watch for the new thing growing, waiting to be birthed in you. Mary could stifle the song of truth, the ultimate rule of God's love and holy justice. Mary would give birth to Jesus, who came speaking and mirroring that love of God. Jesus would learn, grow, and live deeply singing God's love. He would die and be raised singing the power of God's love to change the world.

Sisters and brothers, NOW is the time for us to partner with God, so that God's song of love and holy justice might be sung in, and through us. It's time friends. Time for us to take up the singing.

Here we are - the servants of the Lord. Let it be with us according to God's word. As we join Blessed Mary, may "our souls proclaim the greatness of the Lord. For the Almighty has done great things for us, and holy is his Name."

Amen.