

“Song of Mary”

23 December 2018: 4th Sunday of Advent

Salado UMC—Salado, Texas 76571

Preaching Text: Luke 1:39-55

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“Understanding is the reward of faith.

**Therefore, seek not to understand that thou mayest believe,
but believe that thou mayest understand” (Augustine).**

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If any preachers think they can upstage this text with a sermon, then they do not have the wit or wisdom to survive the ministry. Because this is the eve of Christmas Eve, I want to share Luke’s marvelous story of Mary and her kinsperson Elizabeth—and Mary’s song. May we hear a lovely song of the gospel:

[39] In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, [40] where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. [41] When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit [42] and exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. [43] And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? [44] For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. [45] And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”

[46] And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord,

[47] and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

[48] for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

[49] for the Mighty One has done great things for me,

and holy is his name.

[50] His mercy is for those who fear him

from generation to generation.

[51] He has shown strength with his arm;

he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

[52] He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,

and lifted up the lowly;

[53] he has filled the hungry with good things,

and sent the rich away empty.

[54] He has helped his servant Israel,

in remembrance of his mercy,

[55] according to the promise he made to our ancestors,

to Abraham and to his descendants forever.

[56] And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home (Luke 1:39-56).

In Luke’s Gospel, singing is the preferred manner of revelation, at least in the first two chapters. Fred Craddock said: “When I teach my seminary students the Gospel of Luke, we just hum through the first two chapters.” In Luke everyone sings. The angels sing, Elizabeth sings, Zechariah sings, the

shepherds sing, Simeon sings, and when “the cattle are lowing the poor babe awakes,” perhaps we could speculate that even the animals of creation sing. Yet, one song stands out among all the other marvelous songs that first Christmas. That is the “Song of Mary.” Luke uses Hannah’s prayer in 1 Samuel 2:1-10 as a prototype to guide the composition of this dazzling song. Bearing in mind the news Mary receives, this is an amazing song indeed!

There are several ways we can understand Mary’s song. One way to understand it is from the biblical account. Here we hear of God’s grace. We love to tell this story—we do it every Christmas. This morning’s lesson recounts Mary’s visit to Elizabeth and Zechariah. God’s messenger, Gabriel, tells Mary that she will bear Jesus, “the Son of God,” who is not only the successor to David but also the founder of God’s eternal kingdom. With God, “nothing is impossible” (v. 37). Mary thanks God in her song, the *Magnificat*, a title which derives from the first word of its Latin translation. Speaking in today’s turn of phrase, she might have begun: “From the depth of my heart, I declare the Lord’s greatness and rejoice in God my Savior.” We may also render “servant” (v. 48) as slave or handmaid: for earlier in verse 38, Mary acknowledged that she is a “servant of the Lord.” Mary is obedient to God in all things. People of every age, in this new era of salvation, hail her as the mother of Jesus. Why? Because of the seemingly impossible “things” (v. 49) God has done for her, through her, and by her. Verse 45, which reads “blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her,” portrays Mary as a model believer. Mary trusted that God would keep God’s promise made through Gabriel, laughable as may have it sounded at the time.

There is, however, an alternative way to understand the story. What would this story sound like if we heard it as if it happened today? Mary comes home and tells her parents that she is with child. This situation has come to pass because an angel tells her that she is to give birth to the savior of the world. How would such a story play in Salado, Tx or Bell County? Even Mary’s husband-to-be, Joseph, was suspicious of her story, at least according to Matthew’s Gospel story. Yet, Mary was an individual of deep faith, and despite all appearances, she genuinely believed in God’s message. And because she believed, she sang. Her song gives us a sense of the wonderment of this miraculous birth—and Christmas.

Mary illustrated what J. S. Bach eighteen or so centuries later demonstrated in his music. Bach merits his reputation as one of a handful of the greatest composers of sacred music. Bach once said, “All music should have no other end and aim than the glory of God and the soul’s refreshment; where this is not remembered there is no real music but only a devilish hub-bub.” Bach headed his compositions: “J. J.” *Jesus Juva* which means “Jesus help me.” Bach ended his pieces “S. D. G.” (*Soli Dei gratia*) which means “To God alone the praise.” Music and the story of God, especially at Christmas, naturally seem to belong together.

Mid-nineteenth century brought to prominence a young singer and protégée of Felix Mendelssohn (who wrote the melody for “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing, lyrics by Charles Wesley). Jenny Lind came from a small Swedish village. She was dreadfully poor and unskilled as well. She got by doing menial of jobs . . . but she loved to sing. Despite her poverty, she dreamed of becoming a skilled singer. She sang on street corners, hoping passersby would toss her a copper coin or two. She sang each day—and made barely enough to buy food. One day a true musician passed by and heard her. Entranced by her beautiful voice, he adopted her, teaching her how to use her splendid voice to its fullest. In time she became the toast of

Europe and America. Everyone came to know and then love “The Swedish Nightingale,” as they called Jenny Lind.

We might describe Mary as “The Galilean Nightingale” and Jesus’ first disciple. From Jesus’ beginning to his end on the cross, Mary was there as a follower and a learner. Humanly speaking, her introduction to the things of God must have been terrifying. After all, Gabriel’s first words to her were, “Do not be afraid, Mary” (Luke 1:30). How would her parents, her synagogue, and her fiancé Joseph understand the unbelievable things that had happened? More than anything else, our lesson reminds us that she rejoiced in being the Lord’s handmaiden, regardless of the personal trauma.

Today, each of us has our own reasons to believe—or to not believe—in God’s promises. Are we able to follow Mary? Is she worthy of our devotion and dedication? Can we hear a young, unwed mother sing of the joy of salvation?

Martin Luther, in a sermon on this particular Sunday nearly five hundred years ago, said that when Jesus was born in Bethlehem, three miracles occurred: God became man, a virgin conceived, and Mary believed. Luther said the greatest of the Christmas miracles was this: Mary believed.

A newspaper reporter found an old woman, down in the bayous of Louisiana, who had raised over a dozen children, most of them adopted and foster children whom no one else wanted, raised them up to be worthwhile and able adults; an amazing achievement, especially in her poverty.

“What made you do it?” the reporter asked.

She replied: “Well, I saw a new world a’comin.”

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