

"The Power of a Song"

Lk. 1:46-55

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Try for a moment to imagine Christmas without songs, without carols, without music. Not a very pleasant thought. As much as anything else about this wonderful season unfolding before us, we enjoy the music, the songs. We wait all year long to sing them.

The Gospel of Luke certainly underscores this thought. Luke tells the story of the birth of Jesus as much with song and poetry as with prose. Mary absorbs the angelic message, this incredible idea that she is going to have a baby, and she breaks out in song, "Glorifying the Lord, rejoicing in God, my Savior...From now on all generations will call me blessed, the Mighty One has done great things for me." Then Zechariah celebrates the birth of John, breaking out in a song of praise. Then the angels sing their Glory in in the Highest to the shepherds. And when the child is presented at the temple, Simeon sings. Everybody is singing!

But the most surprising and remarkable of these songs is surely the one we call the Magnificat, the song of Mary, the focus of our thoughts this evening. After all, being great with child was something she could not explain or understand, nor was it something she had chosen or planned. It had put her in a terribly embarrassing predicament with her fiancé, Joseph. The angel had told her not to be afraid, but that had to be easier said than done. And then later old Simeon had told her that though she was "blessed among women" that a "sword would pierce her own soul."

The motherhood of this child would not be an easy thing, but with the radiance of faith she sings this powerful song of praise, hope, and anticipation.

Now we have to understand, this is not a little lullaby that Mary sings. The words come forth almost like a battle chant. "The Mighty One has done great things for me...his mercy extends to all those who fear him. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud; he has brought down rulers from their thrones, but lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things, but has sent the rich away empty."

Whoa! He has flipped the worlds of the haves and the have nots! We are eager to spiritualize this kind of radical language, but taken at face value this is revolutionary stuff!

I found a fascinating little historical tidbit in my files on this text. In 1985 when the struggles over apartheid were raging in South Africa, at Christmas time the government in Pretoria banned the lighting of candles and the singing of Christmas carols in the black provinces. When asked why, the government representative, the South African Scrooge, replied, "Well, you know how emotional black women are. Christmas carols have an emotional effect on them." Interesting! You let a poor Jewish woman like Mary sing, you let a black mother in South Africa sing, you don't know where it might lead! Maybe Herod has heard about Mary's song! Rulers brought down from their thrones? The rich sent empty away? Revolutionary stuff!

What we are talking about here, of course, is HOPE! Eager, longing expectancy built on the mighty promises of God...a bubbling kind of anticipation that life, with all of its burdens, sorrows and suffering, will someday be transformed, that justice will roll down like mighty stream, that swords will be beaten into plowshares, that the poor will no longer be sent away empty and even death will lose its sting!

Mary, soon to be the mother of God's own Son, is moved by the Holy Spirit to a proclamation of faith and confidence that in her womb was resting God's instrument for the fulfillment of all the glorious promises of old. Jesus defines himself by quoting Isaiah, "the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, sent me to bind up the broken hearted, proclaim freedom for captives, and release from darkness for the prisoners." Mary senses that everything that God's people had been longing for would be fulfilled in her son. And we know that she was "right on."

We dare not politicize this song, but neither dare we simply spiritualize it, imagining that there is no connection between life in heaven and life on earth, that the entry of Christ into the world has no meaning or significance for our immediate hurts and fears and longings. This really is revolutionary stuff. As we sing, "the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight!" All the hopes and fears, all the hurts and longings. The presence of this Savior in human hearts challenges every injustice...and also brings comfort to guilt-ridden sinners, assuring us that his grace is sufficient for us, that his all-atoning sacrifice is the ransom payment that opens the gates of eternity.

No wonder Mary had a song to sing. And there is still every reason for us to sing, to celebrate, to rejoice in God, our Savior. God help us if we lose our capacity to hope, to anticipate, to rejoice!

I came upon a little quote, source unknown..."Life's supreme tragedy is not poor health, lack of wealth, beauty or great gifts...not disappointment in marriage or having boring job, hard as these may be. The greatest tragedy lies in the fading of youthful vision, and our greatest sorrow is always the loss of that sparkling spirit of wonder we possess as children, the deep joy in the world and in living, that pure faith and believing heart, the bubbling of divine joy within us."

Indeed, what a sad thing it is to find one's self wallowing in self-pity, pessimism and cynicism, unable to look forward with longing and hopeful anticipation. Is this why we love to watch children anticipate Christmas? Are we looking enviously at something we are afraid of losing? Does their eager hopefulness keep something of that spirit stirring within us?

I suppose you can get a dose of this watching the kids coming to meet Santa at the mall, but let me suggest a better place. Right here among God's people, absorbing the Word of the Lord, singing songs of thanksgiving and praise, experiencing the Lord's presence beneath bread and wine. Mary sang the song that speaks for every one of us longing to have our faith kindled, our hopes sustained. "My soul magnifies the Lord. My Spirit rejoices in God, my Savior." It is a song which is rooted and grounded in the Word which promises..." My grace is sufficient for you, for my strength is made perfect in weakness. In all things God works together for good for those who love him...nothing shall separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Have you ever thought about what strange and paradoxical thing happens at Christian funerals? The grieving family gathers at the church to confront its loss, and the church coaxes them to sing! It's the last thing in the world you feel like doing. See them singing through their tears, "A Mighty Fortress is our God," "I Know that my Redeemer lives," "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound..." "Abide with Me." It is powerful thing!

I tell you this kind of singing is pure defiance, stubborn faith, an impudent kind of rebellion in face of death's omnivorous presence...declaring ourselves to be in concert with Jesus Christ, the victor over sin, death and devil. Death hates music! All tyrants hate music. The devil hates music. Which is why we must let Mary be our inspiration, our model, our choir director. There would be dark days ahead for Mary...and for all mothers and fathers. Remember slaughter of the innocents? Remember Mary at the foot of the cross?

But now, with the bubbling confidence of faith, she is able to sing. Our lives also are not all Christmas carols and joy. Dark, cold January days lie just ahead. The days are short, the nights long, and the burdens heavy. But our faith enables us to sing. We sing with hope and confidence because we believe; and we find our belief sustained and nurtured as we sing. Don't let anyone ever quiet your singing! "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." Amen.