

How Does a Weary World Rejoice?

We sing stories of hope.

Fourth Sunday in Advent

Luke 1:46-55 Luke 1:67-80
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
December 24, 2023

How does a weary world rejoice?

- **We acknowledge our weariness.**
- **We find joy in connection.**
- **We allow ourselves to be amazed.**

And on this fourth and final Sunday of Advent:

- **We sing stories of hope.**

And at this evening's Christmas Eve Candlelight Service:

- **We make room.**

These have been the theme's presented by the resource material we've been using throughout this year's season of Advent, from A Sanctified Art.

You may have noticed that all of our Gospel readings have come from just the first chapter of Luke. We began with an in-depth exploration into the stories of the temple priest Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth, and the angelic announcement of the birth of their son, who will be named John, despite their old age.

The overall theme for this fourth Sunday of Advent is how singing stories of hope can help us rejoice in a weary world. Our first Gospel reading today, heard just a few moment ago, is known as Zechariah's Song, his proclamation of joy and thanksgiving after regaining the ability to speak following Elizabeth's birth of their baby. He gives thanks for God's favor and acknowledges that God has something better for those who await the future. Our second Gospel reading will now jump a bit back into the story when Mary, who has just learned of her own pregnancy, visits her relative Elizabeth and receives her blessing.

This passage is called the Song of Mary, or **Mary's Song**. This is poetry, not prose. It is commonly referred to as the **Magnificat**, which is the Latin word for "magnify" from the song's opening line, "My soul magnifies the Lord." Listen carefully, now, to its lyrics. For it is more far reaching than a song of faith sung in just a single moment of praise and gratitude for the blessing God has bestowed upon Mary.

⁴⁶ And Mary said,

'My soul magnifies the Lord,

⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

⁴⁸ for God has looked with favor on the lowliness of God's 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 God's name.
⁵⁰ God's mercy is for those who revere God
 from generation to generation.
⁵¹ God has shown strength with God's arm;
 God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
⁵² God has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
 and lifted up the lowly;
⁵³ God has filled the hungry with good things,
 and sent the rich away empty.
⁵⁴ God has helped God's servant Israel,
 in remembrance of God's mercy,
⁵⁵ according to the promise God made to our ancestors,
 to Abraham and to his descendants forever.'

Poetry and songs can bring out almost every emotion imaginable, and there's always just the right one when you're feeling in a particular mood, or hoping to draw yourself into a different mood. **Recall a memory when singing, or a particular song, was part of a meaningful event for you**, perhaps a memorial service, a wedding, a birthday party, a protest, a bedtime routine, etc. A recent meaningful one for me was just last month when our choir sang, "Here I Am, Lord" during the celebration of my anniversary here at the church. That song of hope goes back to my first sense of calling into ministry.

Undoubtedly, **one of the spiritual highlights of our services of worship here at College Hill comes in and through our magnificent music program**, under the very talented and gifted direction of Dr. Kim Childs, and our superlative organist Mike Gibson. Have there not been times when you were deeply touched or lifted to a new and higher plane of consciousness when hearing the choir, the bells, the organ, and soloists? Many of us have the same experience when singing congregational hymns together.

Let us explore, therefore, how we can experience all of that in and through Mary's Song, a song of hope in her weary world. Unfortunately, we don't have time to actually listen to Bach's or John Rutter's "Magnificat" – yet our choir did sing the Rutter version several years ago. First let me mention that according to a majority of modern biblical scholars, the gospel writer, **Luke, took what was most likely an already independently-existing poem inspired by many different verses from the Hebrew Scripture, our Old Testament. And he likely used this song in his first chapter because it introduces, as we will see, a powerful thematic prelude and overture of his entire Gospel, setting the tone for Jesus' radical ministry that is to come.**

Unlike the nativity scene image of a meek, mild, compliant, tender **Mary**, let us try to see her instead as a **real person** – a young woman of faith called by God, struggling with the daily demands of her life, and with the shocking news that she is to bear God's son. When Mary sings about being lowly, she is not just referring to humility, but also about actual poverty and the precarious position in which she finds herself. We must not forget that Mary is very young, poor, pregnant, unmarried, vulnerable, living in a Jewish patriarchal society, and under the oppression of the Roman Empire. Therefore, when looked at through the lens of those in the world who actually are poor and oppressed, as has been done in many third-world countries over the past several

decades – called Liberation Theology, **Mary's Song of hope becomes revolutionary, reflecting a call for liberation, justice, and a new world order.** You may be interested to know that over the years the Magnificat has been banned in several countries, both in public and in church, because it has been viewed as dangerous by people in power. Those countries included India during the time of British rule, Guatemala in the 1980s (which led to the Sanctuary Movement in our country, of which College Hill played a part), and later in Argentina. This revolutionary message was recognized by others, as well. Before being executed by the Nazis, German theologian **Dietrich Bonhoeffer** stated during an Advent sermon in 1933:

The song of Mary is the oldest Advent hymn. It is at once the most passionate, the wildest, one might even say the most revolutionary Advent hymn ever sung.

Why is this so? On the biblestudytools.com website, I found an article posted just this week from Ashley Hooker, a freelance writer and contributing author for Journey Christian magazine. Entitled, "What is Mary's Song and What Does it Teach Modern Readers?", I appreciate her analysis when she writes: [All references to "he" and "his" have been replaced with "God" and "God's".]

Three types of revolutionary thought begin in the words of Mary's Song [- moral, social, and economic].

Her words in verse 51, "God has done a mighty deed with God's arm; God has scattered the proud..." convey a moral revolutionary thought. She is speaking of the death of pride. In 21st century society, we hold to a lot of pride. We tend to turn a blind eye to those in need, and refuse to ask for help when we need it. Our pride can hold us back from acting on God's direction and being obedient.

Secondly, we can look at her song in a social revolutionary frame of mind. Mary says, "God has toppled the mighty from their thrones and exalted the lowly.

Make no mistake, talk of toppling rulers, including those who exist within the confines of institutionalized religion, let alone those within governments, is decidedly political in nature, and intended to be so.

God is proving that the world's labels [of privilege and] and prestige are not important to God. God is looking at the heart of a person, as God did with Mary.

Lastly, we see an economic revolution. Luke 1:53 says, "God has satisfied the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty." [The Gospel of Luke takes this more literally than metaphorically, as is found in Matthew's gospel.] **To live in obedience to God, we should not gain wealth and let our fellow [neighbors] go hungry.** Having wealth is not a bad thing. The issue is how we choose to use our wealth to glorify God.

If you're wondering, then, **Mary's Song does not sound like good news to those who are well fed, or rich, or in a position of power and might – or if we benefit from systems that oppress.** Theologian **Warren Carter** reminds us, however, that in the times of Jesus, only 2 to 3 percent of the population was rich, while the majority lived a subsistence-level existence. He writes, "**Mary articulates an end to economic structures**

that are exploitative and unjust. She speaks of a time when all will enjoy the good things given by God."

Well, it's obvious that this time has yet to arrive. And that, in a nutshell, is what the season of Advent is all about, recognizing that we find ourselves living in the in-between times, between and now and the not yet. And because of that we must maintain a posture and attitude of hope.

We must also see it as a revolutionary call to work to change systems at a moral, social, and economic level. Was this not a foundational part of Jesus' ministry? As an unapologetically progressive congregation, socially and theologically, **should Mary's Song of hope not be our song as well**, and a guiding principle for the wider church to bring about social transformation? Or as boldly stated by **D. L. Mayfield** in their 2018 article in the *Washington Post*, entitled, "Mary's 'Magnificat' in the Bible is revolutionary. Some evangelicals silence her.":

Mary, no longer just a silent member of the nativity, or a holy womb of God, or an obedient and compliant girl, has become the focal point for how I, and many other Christians, celebrate Christmas while living in the reality of waiting for true justice to come.

[Mary] has helped me understand the true magnificence of how much God cares about our political, economic, and social realities.

May that be true for our understanding of God, as well. Therefore, let us continue to sing stories of hope as a way to rejoice in a weary world. **What songs of hope, peace, joy, and love would you sing?**

Amen.

Resource:

A Sanctified Art, Advent 2023.

Carl Gregg, "Magnificat! Learning To Sing Mary's Song (A Progressive Christian Lectionary Commentary On Luke 1:46-55)", 2011.

D. L. Mayfield, "Mary's 'Magnificat' in the Bible is revolutionary. Some evangelicals silence her.", *Washington Post*, December 20, 2018.