

MARY'S SONG

The Annunciation and Magnificat

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Luke 1:26-38; 46-55

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Today begins the season of Advent. The season recalls a time when the Hebrew people prayed for, hoped for, and waited for God to send an anointed one, a messiah, to restore Zion and the life of Israel. We believe that the one hoped for came in the person of Christ Jesus and that Jesus saved not only Israel, but all people, and not just from dominating powers but from sin itself. Still, though the Messiah has come, we too pray for, hope for, and wait for Christ to come in glory, ushering in the reign of God, making heaven and earth one with God at the center. We sing as furtively as those thousands of years ago: "come, thou long-expected Jesus." Thus, in Advent, we look back to when Jesus was born in Bethlehem, and forward to when Jesus will come in glory.

The center point of these dual hopes is the manger. Away in the manger lies the one in whom our hope rests. With music and art we are going to journey to the manger this season, starting with the more modern era and moving ever earlier in time. For our lessons we will be using what are sometimes referred to as songs, words spoken by significant actors in the Advent-Christmas story. We will hear the songs of Mary, the angels, the animals, and Simeon. Today is the song of Mary, also known as the Magnificat, because it begins with the words, "My soul magnifies the Lord."

The story of the coming of the Messiah does not technically begin with Mary. It begins with the prophets, primarily though not exclusively Isaiah, who gave voice both to the people's hope for an anointed one and God's promise of a coming savior. Though the story does not begin with Mary, it is with Mary that the story becomes real. She is the first to hear that the time had come. She was not told as an FYI. She was told because the plan was for her to bear the Christ Child.

This announcement, which we heard in our first lesson, is known as the Annunciation, meaning announcement. That, by the way, is the way to think about it. Though Mary agrees to the plan, she was not really asked. The angel Gabriel never said, "If you are willing, God would like you to be the mother of Jesus." Gabriel said, "You will conceive and bear a son." It was happening whether or not she liked it. And she had plenty of reasons not to like it, the biggest being that her pregnancy would be interpreted as proof of adultery which was punishable by death. She could not have had any confidence that she would be spared simply by saying, "No worries, this is God's son, the coming Messiah." Not even mom and dad would have bought that. Still, in what is one of the greatest statements of humility and obedience

in scripture, Mary accepted the announcement and responded simply, “I am the handmaid of the Lord. Let it be with me as you have said.”

This is a beautiful statement by Mary. It is not, however, the song of Mary. That comes a little later. Sometime after the announcement, Mary left Nazareth to go to the hill country of Judea to stay with her relative Elizabeth. This was, undoubtedly, because, given the circumstances, she had to get out of town. The other reason, though, was because Elizabeth was the one person who would truly understand. You see, Elizabeth was also expecting. Her baby would be John the Baptist, the forerunner of the Christ. Her pregnancy was nearly as miraculous as Mary’s, for while Mary was a young woman, Elizabeth was an old woman, barren her entire life and well past child-bearing years. Gabriel had also shared the plan with her husband Zechariah. Elizabeth would provide safe haven for Mary and a knowing ear.

So it is, that within minutes of arriving at Elizabeth’s home, Mary started gushing about what God was doing. Imagine, this young girl had world-changing news and there had been no one to whom she could tell it. She had to go about everyday knowing she was carrying the very Son of God and there was no one she could tell. No texting. No Instagrams. No posting on Facebook. No girls’ night out. How do you keep that secret? How do you hold that in? Now here was Elizabeth, who knew what was going on, and at last Mary was able to let it out. What she let out is what we call “The Magnificat, the song of Mary.”

Now I want to invite you to use your imaginations for a minute. Put yourself in Mary’s position in that, pardon the pun, pregnant moment. Finally you are safe to speak what is on your heart and mind to one who will understand. What would you say? What would you talk about?

I’m thinking she would be full of questions, including questions about being pregnant, questions she could not ask her mother. I’m thinking maybe she would wonder out loud. What does this mean? What is God’s plan here? What will this mean for me? I don’t know a thing about parenting, how can I possibly be the mother of God? I’m scared. I’m excited. I’m confused. At the very least I imagine that she would have expressed astonishment that God chose an unwed, teenage, peasant girl to bear the Son of God. I mean, come on, no one saw that coming. That’s my guess about what she would say. What was your guess? I hope you are a better guesser than I, because I am wrong.

Far from asking questions or wondering out loud, Mary interprets the experience and speaks to God’s intent. She expressed no timidity about being chosen, certainly no regret. Instead she begins, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.” She was excited about her role, thrilled to be part of God’s plan. There is no, “Oh, man, why did he pick me?” She’s pumped. “He picked me!”

And what did the fact that God chose her mean? Mary laid it out. “He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.” Wow!

Keep in mind these words are coming from the mouth of one who was powerless and voiceless in society. She was young in a society that valued age. She was female in a male dominated society. She was not married in a society in which women were valued as wives and mothers. She was Hebrew in a society ruled by the Romans. She was poor in a society controlled by those with money. She was about the bottom rung on the hierarchical ladder. She was accustomed to no one listening to her or paying any attention to her, accustomed to being nearly invisible.

Yet, she did not interpret her being chosen as God making a mistake, picking a nobody instead of a more mature woman perhaps in a family of means or influence. She interpreted her being chosen as the sign that God was about to turn things upside down. God bypassed the proud and powerful and affluent and instead lifted up the lowly. A nobody in the eyes of the world was the most favored in the eyes of God. In that sense, Mary’s song is not a sweet song. It is a song of defiance – a shout out to the world that God was about to shake things up. El Nino, the child, was coming.

I’m hearing a lot about El Nino these days. Of course, it is connected to weather forecasts, not biblical texts. What kind of winter will we have, the prognosticators are asked? Depends on the strength of El Nino comes the answer.

El Nino is the phenomenon of parts of the Pacific Ocean warming. How much it warms has great implications for the climate. It changes the migration patterns of whole bodies of fish. It causes rain in the desert and drought in rainy areas. It intensifies storms. It completely disrupts standard weather patterns. It could mean many, many more inches of snow for us or maybe no snow at all. The only certainty is that things will be different. The amazing thing to me is that the temperature change in the water is sometimes less than one degree and no more than a few degrees. But oh the havoc that is caused by what seems to be an inconsequential change.

This phenomenon was given its name by Peruvian fishermen. Their livelihoods are, of course, greatly affected when fish relocate to find slightly cooler water. Because it normally occurs in the Christmas season they named it El Nino, The Child, or the Christ Child. It fascinates me that a phenomenon that climatically turns the world upside down is called El Nino.

It fascinates me because in every way this is exactly what the true El Nino does. His birth is seemingly inconsequential. I mean, born to a peasant girl in a barn behind the inn in the tiny and remote town of Bethlehem? Yet, this seemingly inconsequential event signaled the change of everything. This is what Mary is telling us in her song. She did not say that God

is coming to tweak a few things. She did not say that God is coming to set this or that right. She certainly did not say that God is coming to play nice.

The strong words of this previously voiceless girl was that God is coming and it will not be business as usual. It is not a matter of things staying the same, just slightly improved. She said God was about to turn the world upside down. She needed no more proof than the fact that God chose her. Oh, things were about to be different.

It seems to me as we begin the journey to the manger that this is the point we should be clear about. It is not the sweet carols and lullabies, little-house-on-the-prairie experience that most modern Christmas images like to portray. It is a life-changing, radical experience. Jesus turns our worlds upside down. He eradicates the importance of positions, saying that we are all children of God precious in God's sight. No one is better or more important than another. He teaches love as the core of all relationships, a love deeper and more sincere than the world is usually ready to accept. He teaches sacrifice over greed, forgiveness over revenge, grace over fairness, inclusivity over exclusivity, humility over pride, giving over hoarding, simplicity over extravagance, faith over dogma, peace over violence, reverence over hedonism, and complete and total allegiance and obedience to God.

That's how it is in God's kingdom, Jesus would come to say, and if you are ready and willing to live in that kingdom, to be part of that kind of world, and be bathed in the love of God and love for God's children, then by all means travel to the manger. By all means come to see the Christ Child. It is possible for us to come because Jesus has defeated the power of evil that would prevent us from entering that kingdom and forgiven the sin that would prevent us from entering that kingdom and showed us the pathway to that kingdom, if only we are prepared to allow the Christ Child to turn our worlds upside down, which is to say right-side up.

Away in the manger is El Nino, The Child, The Christ. Come to the manger. Mary has sung to us about what to expect. Maybe it is not what we were expecting. It is, however, what we need, and truly, when it is all said and done, what we want. May our souls magnify the Lord and our spirits rejoice in God our Savior.

Amen.