

December 16, 2018
Luke 1:46-55
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“The Joyful Community”

Good morning! We have a wonderful opportunity this morning to consider joy through the lens of a familiar passage of scripture -- Mary’s song, known as the Magnificat, because of the opening phrase “my soul *magnifies* the Lord.” It’s the first record we have of a song sung about Jesus’ birth -- Mary was pregnant with Jesus at the time -- so not only is it the first Advent song or Christmas carol, this scripture has the dubious distinction of being banned from public reading or display by at least three different governments. Not governments who were anti- Christian and made Christianity in general a crime, but governments who claimed to be Christian and banned this passage specifically: the Magnificat was prohibited from being read in churches in India during British colonial rule in the 19th and early 20th centuries; Guatemala’s government banned any public recitation of it in the 1980’s, and when Argentina was fighting a nasty civil war and children were being kidnapped and “disappeared,” mothers whose children had been taken put posters with words of the Magnificat through the capitol, so the military junta outlawed any public display of these verses.

It isn’t difficult to discover the parts of this song which are a problem, or to figure out why they are a problem. Verses 32-33 read, “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.” That is pretty subversive stuff -- no wonder folks in repressive governments didn’t want these words out there. The Magnificat isn’t just a Christmas carol, it’s a song for a revolution.

Revolution and Joy don’t typically pair well -- I at least more often associate revolution with anger and protest. It may be hard to imagine where the joy comes from if we see this narrative as only as

Mary's story. You know what led up to this moment: Mary is a young teenager living with her family in Nazareth, a rural backwater in the region of Galilee, part of an entire country and culture which has been co-opted and occupied by the empire of Rome. An angel appeared to Mary and told her that even though she was a virgin, she was going to conceive a child which would be the Son of God. She is to name him Jesus; He will be the Savior of his people. Incredibly, Mary agrees to this plan. She walks across the Galilean hills to visit her cousin, Elizabeth, who is much older but also pregnant. Mary enters the house of Zechariah, who is unable to speak at this time, but she is greeted warmly by Elizabeth, and Mary responds with this song.

And part of what is so wonderful about this song is that it is not only about Mary. Mary locates herself within her family and her community, a chain of generations which have experienced God's faithfulness in the past and generations in the future which will look back on Mary and call her blessed. Mary claims her place in the family tree which Matthew's gospel listed for us, in which Joseph is listed as "the husband of Mary;" the only generation where the man gets second billing.

There is a summary of the gospel message which goes like this: I was made in God's image but was separated from God because of my sin. God sent His Son to be my personal Lord and Savior so that I could be reconciled to God and be saved from sin and have eternal life. That is a story of an individual out of relationship with God who is brought into a personal relationship with God. That is a truth of the gospel, but it is not the whole truth. The Bible is a story of community and God's work to save a community, a people, a nation, and ultimately the world. And here is where I find the intersection of revoltution and joy in Mary's song: Mary acknowledges the struggles of her community: those who are proud and powerful and rich in contrast to those who need mercy and are weak and hungry. God the Might One will take care of his community; in fact, God already has. Mary is not proclaiming what God will do someday, but what God has already done -- not just for her, but for all generations of her community.

If you are familiar with the term the "Beloved Community" it is probably because of the speeches and the writing of Dr. Martin Luther

King Jr. who spoke of the Beloved Community as his ultimate goal. King saw the Beloved Community not as a vision for some other people in some other time, but as something which could actually be achieved by people committed and trained in nonviolence. The goal is not to crush our enemies, it is to transform relationships. After the Montgomery Bus Boycotts King wrote,

“the end is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the Beloved Community. It is this type of spirit and this type of love that can transform opponents into friends.”

I believe this is the kind of transformation is the kind of revolution which Mary is singing about. Her song is prophetic because she is proclaiming what God *has already accomplished* through Jesus Christ. I loved the phrase from our Advent devotions this week, that Mary is pregnant with the presence of God. Mary carries the seed of the revolution within her, and her spirit rejoices because God has already won. Jesus saves individuals and reconciles them to God, but Jesus also transforms communities of people to work cooperatively toward reconciliation, redemption and right relationship. That is cause for great joy to all people.

If this sounds pretty pie-in-the-sky idealistic to you, you're not alone. In the words of G K Chesterton, “Christianity has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and not tried.” So I want to give you a real-world example. Something you've probably heard of, and some of you know a fair amount about. Creekside has been given a Community Ministry Grant by the Center for Congregations. For the past six months, Jeff Vance, Karen Kohler, Judy De Pue, Cary Kelsey, Karen LeWallen, Diane and Tim Lund, Ron Nicodemus and I have had some of our previous models of ministry challenged. Instead of us deciding what our community needs and giving it to them, we have had to assess what strengths and needs we have at Creekside, talk to ministry partners in our community, and try to develop relationships so we can hear about strengths and needs in their community. In the midst of this, we've been trying to share information and have conversations with you here at Creekside while we're still trying to figure this out ourselves. I don't know if the Community Ministry Grant team would say that we are pregnant with the presence of God, but we have experienced some nausea and

discomfort. This grant would be so much easier if we had all the answers and someone would just give us a bunch of money and leave us alone, but that isn't how it works. New things don't happen if we do only what we have done before. Transformation is the work of God, but it helps if we are willing to consider doing things differently.

Part of this grant process is regular meetings with other congregations in our region who are part of the same Community Ministry Grant. At our last on-line meeting, we shared joys we've discovered and challenges we've encountered. One pastor shared an analogy about her congregation which showed a lot of insight: it was a musical analogy, so I think it's fair to consider it with this text of Mary's song. This pastor said the challenge she's encountered is that she wants to lead a jazz band and the people in her congregation want to play in an orchestra. Both ensembles can create great music, but they do it in different ways; orchestra players are trained look to the conductor to show them how to play, and jazz musicians develop skills to improvise over a harmonic framework. Practice, good technique and listening to the folks around you are going to be valuable skills in either ensemble, but if you've only ever played jazz, an orchestra might feel pretty limiting, and if you're a jazz player who starts riffing on the orchestra tune, the conductor isn't going to be very happy about that.

I believe that we play with the most joy and will do our best and most effective ministry in our community when we begin with something familiar and stretch ourselves to take that in a new direction. Even virtuoso musicians have to learn and practice. Maybe you have never participated in outreach at Creekside or anywhere else, so anything you try will be new: there is a place for you to practice in this ensemble. Maybe you've been part of outreach ministry at Creekside and through other organizations for years: there are probably still new ministry styles to try; even if it takes some trial and error and doesn't sound like great music at first.

In either case, we cannot set out with the goal of transforming our community without acknowledging that we ourselves will be transformed in that process. Mary said Yes to a small beginning, a willingness to be pregnant with the presence of God. That willingness changed her life, her family, her community and the world.

As we prepare to sing our final hymn, Angels We Have Heard on High, I hope that you will feel the joy of being with your faith community as we prepare for Christmas. But there is other music which calls to us this season: the song of a young woman who was brave enough to say Yes to a small beginning; who rejoiced in the presence of God within her, and shared a song of transformation and revolution, because God has already transformed the world. Amen.