

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 lowly state 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 indeed, 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 imagination 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 come to the aid of his child Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.

The contrast in the OB/GYN waiting room was as clear as could be. A pregnant teenager sat under a television tuned into a morning talk show. She looked scared and stunned. Too overwhelmed to flip through the magazine in her lap. The mother who sat beside her seemed torn between the love she had for her daughter and the brutal reality of what an unwed teenage pregnancy would mean to her daughter, and herself, and their future.

On the other side of the room, full of gratitude and anticipation, I was feeling so thankful to have made it to my second trimester. I was starting to show. We were getting ready to tell our friends and family about the miracle that was coming. A child. We just wanted to get confirmation from our new doctor that all was well.

We were getting older. We had wondered if it was too late. We had been trying for a couple of years. Medical tests and hormones and blood draws. The doctors said I was a healthy person. Medically, I should be able to have a child, but it wasn't happening, despite the precise scheduling of medications and procedures and scientific monitoring of my internal organs. We had experienced several non-pregnancies and a miscarriage and were so cautious about our emotions, but this latest attempt seemed to be working, at least so far, and we had reached a milestone that we hadn't hit thus far. The second trimester. So the medical team that had been journeying alongside us for two years released us into the care of a recommended OB/GYN, and we were about to meet her.

But in that moment, I was struck by what was happening in the waiting room because, for me, what I saw was a living embodiment of Mary and Elizabeth. One young woman surprised by the news of a pregnancy she wasn't expecting. Her family rattled. Her relationships in jeopardy. The other an older woman who had longed for a child but was not having one naturally.

If I had known her name, known her situation, known that her baby was healthy and that she wanted to raise the child, and if it hadn't have been socially inappropriate, I would have crossed the room to the young lady and said, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will have. We are going to be mothers! Can you believe it? God

loves us. No matter what the world tells us about our pregnancies, and how we got to be where we are today, God loves us. God uses the most unexpected people and unexpected circumstances to do great things. Do not be afraid.”

But I didn’t know her or her situation, and so I followed the waiting room courtesies and kept my eyes on the talk show host and guest celebrity who I didn’t recognize and when it was my turn to go to the back, I just smiled at her and walked to room two.

I’ll never know what happened to that young lady, but on that day, I got to have an ultrasound and saw the baby in my own womb leaping for joy. She was feeding off of her parents’ joy. We were all ecstatic. God was working a modern-day miracle. A child was to be born.

But enough about me. Last week, we talked about how, occasionally, hearing from the prophets in our scripture is important - how the loud and unusual voice of the prophet is needed to shake up our routine. This week, the children (are going to act out/have acted out) the scripture as if it is a screenplay, and for our sermon text today, we have yet another out of the ordinary scripture genre - song.

I think that’s one of the reasons Advent is so special. For most of the year, you hear scripture as prose. A narrative story, with some dialogue. Over and over and over again the same format, but one of the things that makes Advent special is that you get all these different genres of scripture which make things exciting and interesting.

So, today’s scripture is a song. A powerful song of faith and hope and resistance against the world order. In our Bibles, it’s formatted like a poem to help readers understand that this is different. It requires a different rhythm and breath. It’s similar in that way to other songs in the Bible. You might have just thought of them as poems, but for the most part, if you see scripture formatted as a poem, you can guess that it was originally a song lyric and we’ve simply, sadly lost the tune.

For example, the psalms – they're songs. Exodus 15 - the song of Moses and Miriam. Judges 5 - the song of Deborah. Deuteronomy 32. Isaiah 38. Oh, and there's a whole book in the Bible called Song of Solomon. All Songs.

It makes me wonder what they sounded like originally. How long did the tunes get passed down from generation to generation? When did they stop singing the text and start reading it or chanting it in a different way?

Well, while we don't have the original scores for the tunes, we can still hear the Hebrew scriptures sung. As I mentioned, the Catholic church still practices chanting of scripture. In Conservative and Reformed Jewish congregations, there is often a staffed position called a Cantor - a religious musical leader, similar to Andy. Cantors have to go to school for five years to learn to lead their congregation in singing the scripture text. They are not claiming to know the original tune, but they do sing it, and they are also responsible for singing the prayers and teaching the congregation how to sing the scriptures and prayers themselves.

If a Jewish Cantor heard Mary's Song, I think they would be quick to hear a connection with a song in the Hebrew Scriptures, our Old Testament, because Mary's Song is very similar to Hannah's Song in 1 Samuel chapter 2. Hannah's song begins, with "My heart exults in the Lord." Mary's begins, "My soul magnifies the Lord."

Hannah sings, "The Lord raises up the poor from the dust. He lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes." Mary sings, "He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly." It's almost as if Mary is singing a second verse of Hannah's song. Maybe she is. We don't know the tune, but we know the lyrics are very similar – the same praise and faith and hope for God to bring justice and upend the social structure that has oppressed the weak. It's a timeless tune really.

I think it's quite reasonable to assume that Mary knew Hannah's song, and Miriam's song in Exodus and the psalms that Mary's mother and grandmother likely sang by heart.

In our church tradition, Mary's Song is not sung when we read the text during worship, but many of you may be familiar with a musical piece called the Magnificat.

Putting Mary's lyrics to a new tune has been historically important. Scholars say that in the early church, Mary's Song was one of the first eight hymns of the Christian church. Mary, and her song, remain important parts of our theology and church life for Catholics and Protestants alike.

I also want to point out that Mary's song is just Track 1 of Luke's Birth Narrative Soundtrack. After Mary [sings], Zechariah, the husband of Elizabeth and the father of John, will take the stage to praise God. Andy has told me that he has a particular affinity for Zechariah's song. Then the angels will offer their canticle of peace and good will at the birth of Jesus, and finally Simeon will croon like Frank Sinatra of God's mercy being extended to all the world. Why so much singing? Well, it's because Luke understands . . . songs are powerful.

Of course they are! I don't have to tell you that. We know how blessed we are to have our music program here. It is exceptionally good. Those of you who have attended other churches know how special ours is.

And, of course, there's other pieces of music that evoke a powerful response in us. I'm curious, how many of you when you swim in the ocean hear the Jaws theme song in your head? Or can be moved by the sound of Beethoven's Ode to Joy or Mozart's Requiem? How many of you get excited when you hear the Star Wars theme? Or Leonard Cohen's Hallelujah. I heard from someone a few weeks ago at our Kirkin of the Tartan Sunday that hearing Amazing Grace on bagpipes always brings tears to the eyes. There are some pieces of music that just stir something inside of us. So I want to ask you, what other pieces of music really speak to you in a special way?

Dr. Francis Collins, who started the Human Genome Project, has recently said that one of the most powerful ways we release endorphins naturally is through that kind of music.

Here are some of the findings. Singing with others releases oxytocin, a hormone that increases trust and creates social bonds. If you wonder why the choir is so committed and connected to each other, it's partly through the oxytocin they create when they sing.

And regardless of if you're singing with a choir or by yourself in the car, all singing releases serotonin and dopamine which are the chemicals that increase your happiness.

Singing increases your lung capacity. Want to work some abdominal muscles and improve your respiratory function without hitting the gym? Sing!

Singing uses a different part of the brain than speaking. Have you ever known a person with late-stage dementia who can still sing every verse of a song from memory? They don't know names and dates any more, but they know songs? That's because lyrics and notes are stored in a different part of the brain than historical facts.

For example, I can still remember the phone number for the pizza place we used in the 1980s because it was set to a jingle. Call 459-22-22 and get a Mr. Gatti's pizza delivered! I don't know if the restaurant even exists anymore, but if they do, I could call and get us lunch. It would be here on Wednesday.

And when I was a hospice chaplain, I saw firsthand how powerful music was when the company invested in a music therapist. Stephanie was well trained and experienced. She could work with any age or diagnosis. She could work with a patient or a whole family. And I learned a lot about the power of music. I mean, I knew music was powerful. So do you, but I learned a lot more about the power of music to soothe anxiety, relieve pain, and release pent up emotion, and how it could even create joy in the midst of suffering.

And perhaps that's how Mary used her song. To create joy in the midst of her worry and doubt. And we would do well to remember Mary's Song not as a bit of poetry in the birth narrative, but as a song to be sung. A song whose lyrics get embedded into the part of your brain that dementia can't touch. A song whose tune gets stuck in your head like an earworm. A song that lives for decades, centuries, millennia, because it speaks to our faith that God has done great things and our hope that God is not done yet and our joy that God chose to enter the world as a humble child through a humble child.

Sing for joy, people of God. Sing for joy! Christ is coming. Amen.