

The Message – Subversive Advent: A Song of Justice

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The Text – Luke 1: 39-56

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'

And Mary said,
 '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.
 His mercy is for those who fear him
 from generation to generation.
 He has shown strength with his arm;
 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.
 He has helped his servant Israel,
 in remembrance of his mercy,
 according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
 to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.'

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

What are your favorite Christmas songs? Not just those we sing in church, but the ones you have probably loved since you were a kid. Jingle Bells? Frosty? White Christmas? I have to admit that I have a particular affinity for the slightly darker, melancholy, even subversive Christmas songs. One of my favorite is "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day," written during the Civil War, which includes this less-than-merry verse: "*Then in despair I bowed my head – there is no peace on earth I said, for hate is strong and mocks the song of peace on earth, good will to men.*"

There are also the secular standards like *Blue Christmas* and *Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas* — both of which were written to acknowledge that Christmastime isn't always merry and trouble-free for many of us. Similarly, there is [Coldplay's Christmas Lights](#) — a tune that admits that sometimes even when it is supposed to, it doesn't feel very much like Christmas — that something is just not right with the world. All of these are, in a sense, subversive in that they subvert the typical message many Christmas songs send this time of the year. And I would add at least one more song to that list: the song of Mary from our scripture text today.

This is one song that definitely subverts many of the “merry” messages we seem to hear in the yuletide season. So often we think of the Christmas story as sweet and cuddly and comfy and fuzzy and non-threatening. Those pastoral images of the holy couple journeying to Bethlehem fit nicely with our dreams of a white Christmas, egg nog, beautifully wrapped gifts, and those static nativity scenes in our homes with meek and mild Mary right there in the center of it all.

And yet...all we need do is look at this Song of Mary to see that there was something subversive in the Christian story from the start. Something that promises a stirring up of trouble, an unsettling of the status quo. And it all comes from Jesus' mom. His mom!

The trouble starts with the writer of Luke who decides to fly in the face of cultural expectations and tell his story from a woman's point of view (Matthew, on the other hand, sticks with the playbook of the time and puts the focus on Joseph). Luke puts Mary front and center — the story doesn't happen without her and her decision to trust the message from the angel that she will give birth to the Messiah, the one her people have been waiting for to bring them out of bondage and to bring down the Roman oppressors. In our text today, she has gone to stay with her cousin Elizabeth and Mary shares with her this beautiful song, sometimes called “The Song of Mary” or “The Magnificat” (from the Latin translation.) It is the longest speech by any woman in the New Testament. It is also the very first Christmas carol and it is a subversive one. But don't take my word for it.

In the 1900's, several governments banned *The Magnificat* from being expressed in any way in public. When the British ruled India, the song could not be sung in churches for fear it would stir up the people. In the 1980's, the Guatemalan government realized the song had the potential to cause the poor to believe that change was possible and so they banned its public recitation. During the military dictatorship in Argentina in the 70's and 80's, a group called the Mothers of the Plaza De Mayo, whose children had been abducted, tortured and killed by the military, distributed posters with the words of Mary's song all over the capital plaza, resulting in the song being outlawed. And no less a figure than German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer saw the revolutionary potential of *The Magnificat*, including it in his final Advent sermon of 1933, shortly before he was executed by the Nazis for sedition.

But what is it that makes this song so subversive. Hear these words again:

“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.”

Do you hear it? This is a song sung by a young, peasant woman – an ordinary woman as far as the culture was concerned – a woman facing the threat of shame of being “with child” but without legal husband. A woman about to bear a child into a world ready to oppress that child simply because he is of the wrong ethnicity, the wrong culture, the wrong religion. A world full of violent power — where the strong rule by might and force. In the face of that world, she dares to sing this song – a song declaring that God is about to subvert the status quo, subvert the power structure of the world. Through the vulnerability of a baby born into poverty, God will:

scatter the proud.

bring down rulers from their thrones

lift up the humble.

fill the hungry

send the rich away empty.

In fact, Mary’s song claims that not only will God do these things but God is already doing them. Think of the faith it takes to truly trust this...in the face of all evidence to the contrary!

As one person put it: as songs go, *The Magnificat* is more along the lines of “Rage Against the Machine” than “Silent Night” But...I have to wonder if it is hard for us to hear this song, and trust it for ourselves...or take it seriously. After all, we know that we still live a world:

where the proud are not scattered but wield great power
Where ruthless rulers still sit on their thrones
where the humble are still trampled
Where the hungry know little relief
And the poor are seen as insignificant

Given that...What are we to make of this song of justice? Is it just pie in the sky? A naive dream of a peasant girl? A cruel joke? Or is it possible that God is challenging us this day to realize that the song is not finished? That there are more verses to be written, more of the song still to be sung?

I would suggest that Mary's Song stands as a signpost in the season of Advent to remind us that the whole story of Christianity begins with a song for justice — a song that dares to suggest that things aren't the way they should be — yet! A song that trusts that God, working through us, can bring about a reversal in this world, bring about hope...bring about peace...bring about love...bring about joy...bring about justice for all.

Which raises the question: If God can call an ordinary young peasant girl to sing a song of justice, who else might God be calling to sing such a song? In other words: What song is God calling each of us to sing? For we stand in a long line of spiritual ancestors who dared to sing God's song. The Israelites sang a song of freedom from bondage and exile. The prophets sang a song of God's justice and peace. Jesus sang a song that welcomed all as God's beloved children. The early Church sang a song of a new way of being in the world, as one fellowship, one community of God's family.

So, what song are we going to sing? Who will we share it with? What will the words be? Will it be like a quiet lullaby, soothing to the ears of those who have known little peace? Will it be a loud protest anthem, challenging others to rage against the status quo? Will it be a song celebrating diversity? Will it be a song daring to question why there is still inequity in the world? A song calling for the end of bigotry, indifference, hatred? A song of lament? A song of love?

As we prepare to enter the Christmas story of God's love for the world, let's remember that the quiet, meek, mild and silent Mary of our nativity scenes is not the Mary of scripture. The Mary of scripture dared to sing a song. A song of justice. A song lifting up a different vision of what God's world could be. **God calls us to sing that song too...** in our own words...our own melodies...our own unique way...so that we might finally give birth to the world Mary dares to dream of in her song. Amen.