Singing Joy

A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington

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Text:

Luke 1:46-55

And Mary said,

‘My soul magnifies the Lord,

and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,

for he has looked with favour 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.’

Prayer

Sermon

I have been dreaming about Mary and Elizabeth and the songs they sang. I have been daydreaming and letting myself imagine...pondering my way through the song of Mary, and the words of Elizabeth. Those who dream….our theme for this Advent….those who dream have songs and poems, lullabies and prophecies sounding in their hearts.

Mary rubbed circles on the back of a baby, older than eternity and in those days made new.[[1]](#footnote-0) What lullaby do you sing to a child as old as time? What stories do you tell? The old, old stories, the songs whose refrains are courage, hopefulness, and joy. You sing the songs that teach: God is with us, has been with us since promises made to our ancestors, God has lifted up the lowly; when you’re afraid, be brave, for you are strong, and God is doing a new thing in you.

Mary might have learned these songs from Anne, her mother.[[2]](#footnote-1) I’m imagining, you see. I’m calling up an ancient melody.

Perhaps Anne and her sisters heard these songs from their mother, and perhaps their whole family, all the way through to cousin Elizabeth, heard these songs.

Imagine, young Elizabeth, rocked to sleep on her mother’s lap, and what was the song she heard?

When she was afraid, what was the song that made her brave? When she could not see her way forward, what ancient melody emboldened her? Did her mother sing Deborah’s ancient song, from Judges 5 or tell her how their ancestress Jael saved the people?[[3]](#footnote-2) “

Did Elizabeth’s mother tell the tale of Judith, “O daughter, you are blessed by the Most High God above all other women on earth…”[[4]](#footnote-3) Did she cradle Elizabeth in her lap, rubbing circles on her back in the quiet of the Judean night, and whisper in her ear: be brave? Have hope. Live with joy. You are strong. God is with you.

These, I imagine, were the songs that Elizabeth heard, as she and Zechariah waited. These are the songs she might have sung, on those days when Anne asked her to put baby Mary to bed. And maybe she sang to Mary the song of Miriam, Miriam who danced and played the tambourine, joyfully welcoming the Hebrew people to the safe side of the Red Sea:

‘Sing to the Lord, for God has triumphed gloriously; (Exodus 15:21)

Little Mary, Elizabeth might have said, remember your namesake and the joy she sang to our people when their freedom came.

Did Anne sing to young Mary the song of her namesake, Hannah? Little Mary, when you are afraid, remember the songs of our ancestors and be brave?

“‘My heart exults in the Lord;

my strength is exalted in my God.

...I rejoice in my victory.

2 ‘There is no Holy One like the Lord,

...4 The bows of the mighty are broken,

but the feeble gird on strength. (1 Samuel 2)

When Mary is greeted by the Angel and told not to be afraid, well, what a thing for a young woman to be told. But perhaps, having heard the ancient songs she knew she was not the first in her line to be called by God into great things. I imagine she took courage in these ancient songs. And still, she hurried to see Elizabeth.

Did she run to her cousin to hear those songs of courage and comfort, those songs of God’s love and mighty deeds?

When Mary showed up on her doorstep, Elizabeth drew on those old songs:

‘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 fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.’ (Luke 1)

And I imagine, once again, even if Mary was afraid, these were the words that made her brave, that gave rise to her own song:

‘My soul magnifies the Lord,

and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour…”

She knew the songs and stories of her ancestors in faith. Her words in this Magnificat draw upon the ancient traditions of her people. Mary was a biblical interpreter.[[5]](#footnote-4) Was she literate, did she have access to the ancient texts to read? We don’t know. But she was steeped in them. Matt Boulton makes the point that when Elizabeth greets Mary as blessed, it calls to mind these ancient songs:

“Mary [is] a liberator, too — and as she sings, a great chorus sings with her: the generations of women throughout the ages with crucial roles in salvation history…. Mary is a young woman of vision, learning, artistry, and chutzpah. She interprets her life according to ancient patterns of divine action, and her song encourages us to do the same.”[[6]](#footnote-5)

And then, there was her child, baby Jesus, born to set the people free, the strength and consolation they had waited for, hope of all the earth, joy of every longing heart.[[7]](#footnote-6)

What was the lullaby that put him to sleep each night, as Mary and Joseph rubbed his back in the twilight? What were the words she sang to him when he was afraid, what was the song that made him brave?

Did she sing,

O little one, baby Jesus, hear my song to God:

“49 For you, the Almighty, have done great things for me, and holy is your Name. 50 Your mercy reaches from age to age for those who fear you. 51 You have shown strength with your arm; you have scattered the proud in their conceit; 52 you have deposed the mighty from their thrones and raised the lowly to high places. 53 You have filled the hungry with good things, while you have sent the rich away empty.”

Did she sing: You shall go out in joy?

Mary and Joseph were the first people to teach Jesus...and I imagine he was listening, I imagine there teaching and the songs they sang to him gave him courage, because in his very first sermon, he preached of the same God, whose mercy and justice and love were for all people:

‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,

because he has anointed me

to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives

and recovery of sight to the blind,

to let the oppressed go free,

to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.’ (Luke 4)

I wonder. I wonder what songs give you courage?

1. When you heard the anthem this morning, were you convinced there will be shouts of joy?

I wonder. What were the words whispered into your ears as you fell asleep as a child, words that reminded you that you are loved, that you could be brave?

I wonder. I wonder, what are the songs you most need to hear today - ancient melodies and new words of courage?

I wonder. I wonder, what are the songs of joy, the songs of courage, the songs of tradition, the songs of promise, that you sing to others now - when they most need to hear them?

‘My soul magnifies the Lord,

and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,

for God has looked with favour on the lowliness of God’s servants....

for the Mighty One has done great things...

and holy is God’s name.

God has helped us, according to the promises God made to our ancestors.

Sing the song. Someone needs to hear it.

Amen.

1. This phrase comes from Lucy Shaw’s poem “Mary’s Song.” <https://www.circeinstitute.org/blog/potw-lucy-shaws-marys-song> [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. We don’t have biblical evidence for Mary’s parents’ names, but in one of the non-biblical early gospels, Mary’s mother is said to be Anne. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_Anne> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. Judges 5 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. The apocryphal book of Judith, 13:18 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. This idea is shared by many commentators including Kathleen Norris, Isaac Villegas and Matthew Myer Boulton. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. Matthew Myer Boulton, https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2017/12/11/magnificat-lectionary-commentary-for-advent-week-three [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. From: Come Thou Long Expected Jesus, words by Charles Wesley. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)