

Can They Hear Us Singing?

Part 4 of Sermon Series: *Living In Between*

a sermon based on

Luke 1:47-55 (with Luke 1:39-45)

and delivered on

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at

Cherry Valley United Methodist Church

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“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior” (Lk 1:46b-47) Say that with me, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior... My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.” This is the song of Mary – the *Magnificat* – it should – and can – be our song, too.

Before we go too far, allow me to give you a quick history/language lesson. There’s a reason we call this song the *Magnificat*. It’s the Latin reference (or title) given for this passage of Scripture. In fact that’s where other “official” titles of canticles come from like the *Benedictus* for the Canticle of Zechariah or *Nunc Dimittis* for the canticle of Simeon. All of these are prayers that have been claimed by Christians for our worship and devotion; but all beginning in individual experiences with the God who came to dwell among us as Jesus Christ. Zechariah’s prayer (his blessing upon John – the baptizer) in anticipation of the coming Lord – Simeon’s joy and relief in seeing the unveiling of God’s promise when the infant Jesus was presented at the temple, and Mary’s song celebrating God’s favor in honoring her with the privilege of bearing Jesus to the world – these expressions of joy resound throughout time because they speak to us.

But there’s a reason that we know this song of Mary as the *Magnificat* rather than the “Song of Mary.” Like the *Benedictus* (or Canticle of Zechariah) or the *Nunc dimittis* (the Canticle of Simeon), the *Magnificat* gets its name from the first word(s) of the passage in Latin. But whereas those prayers Zechariah and Simeon are often know as such rather than the Latin, for some reason the Latin *Magnificat* has stuck for the song of Mary even when translated into other languages. There’s a reason for that.

Mary’s spirit rejoices, because the Lord has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Mary rejoices because the Lord has brought down the powerful and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.” (Lk 1:48a, 32-33) The Reformers knew that these were dangerous sentiments. Martin Luther with all of his passion for sharing the Gospel in the language of the people left this part in Latin. Thomas Cranmer – the English reformer – did the same. Why? Because kings and princes don’t take kindly to the thought that they will be brought low, or that the low might see possibility in being lifted up in their stead. And so it is that we still call this song of Mary, the *Magnificat*.

As beautiful as it is, do we hear what she’s singing? “My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior!” It’s a song for all of us.

In it, Mary declares that God has found favor – God has found usefulness – in one who isn’t worthy. She’s not a prominent woman. She’s not even from a proper town. I mean Nazareth? Even the apostle Philip asked, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” when Nathanael invited him to meet Jesus. (Jn 1:46) Sure, she was a descendant of David; but how many descendants of David were there. David had nineteen sons and a daughter. Not taking into account the others, Solomon had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines. Although we know the names of only four of them, we can be certain that he had many.

Mary was a daughter of David, but that was like being 10,000th in line to the throne (if that). Not likely, and not important. She was engaged to a carpenter, not a prince. She was engaged to an ordinary working man, not prominent lawyer or doctor. Yet, she is the one who God favored with the honor of bearing Jesus to the world.

This wasn’t all a rosy experience. When she told Joseph – although he planned to do so quietly to limit her shame and scandal – he decided to leave her. But God was faithful, and sent an angel to straighten out Joseph. Before her pregnancy could begin to show and bring scandal upon her, she came to her cousin Elizabeth – the wife of Zechariah – the old woman who was herself at that moment pregnant with John the Baptist, and received a blessing.

Elizabeth heard Mary's voice and what is her response? "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb." (Lk 1:42) Then Elizabeth tells her that she can feel joy in the child in her own womb – another miraculous birth.

It's in response to God's blessing that Mary sings out, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." I'm not trying to suggest – nor does the Scripture – that Mary suddenly broke into song as if this were some Rodgers and Hammerstein musical. Mary was prone to ponder the blessings and the words that God shared with her through others.

Luke in his orderly account may have asked Mary "How did you feel when all of this was taking place?" Mary may have replied with this song that grew up within her as she pondered her unique relationship with God as Jesus was growing up. Did she repeat it to herself when she saw him led away to the cross? Did she repeat it when she saw him die? We don't know. But such songs bring hope and promise in the midst of challenges when we can remember and rejoice in God our Savior.

A Lutheran pastor shares what happened, when he was growing up as one of eight children in Nazi occupied Austria during World War II. His father was away at war on Christmas Eve. Still, his mother gathered the children and read to them the story about Mary and the birth of Jesus. All of this while the soldiers could be heard outside on their patrols – patrols to enforce the curfew and to enforce the orders prohibiting religious observances. The family listened quietly to the blessed story of the Nativity.

But then it happened. When mother had finished her whispered reading of Scripture, the youngest sister asked, "Mama, aren't we going to sing?" Pausing only for a moment, the mother said, "Of course," as she gathered the children around the piano and they began to sing:

Freue dich Welt der Herr ist da!"

Nimm deinen König an!

Joy to the world, the Lord is come!

Let earth receive her king!

Afterwards they continued with "Hark! the Herald Angels Sing." Then the soldiers came. They came to the door...

And joined them in singing the songs of joy for the Savior's birth.¹

Can they hear us singing? Over the past couple of weeks, I've preached about repentance as opportunity, and about holding onto the joy that God intends for our lives without being burdened by excessive rules but only intention to love him and to love people by treating everyone we meet with the respect and dignity and fairness deserving for one made in the image of God. Do people see that in our lives? Can they hear our joy? Are we willing to engage their joy at songs like "Jingle Bells" or "Silver Bells" with songs that show how our souls have been magnified in the Lord, how our spirit rejoices in God our Savior, the one who says, "Don't let anyone fool you or try to take it away from you. You are worthy of my love." More than that he says, "Just as Mary bore Jesus in her womb. Just as he lived and grew inside of her, by the power of the Holy Spirit, he lives in you. Let him shine through your life."

Let us sing. Let us rejoice. Let all the world hear our joy as earth receives her king.

AMEN.

¹ Amy K. Butler, *A Preacher's Guide to Lectionary Sermon Series: Thematic Plans for Years A, B, and C* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016) 173.

Freue dich Welt der Herr ist da!"
Nimm deinen König an! (Joy to the World... The Lord is come) German