

“Singing Ahead of Time: Mary’s Song”

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A Sermon Preached by Reverend Debbie S. Osterhoudt

About 600 years before the birth of Jesus, the people of Israel were driven from their homes, from their farms, from the land which had been promised to them by God, from the place where generations of Jews had lived, worked, worshipped and raised their families. And since that time of the exile, the prophets encouraged them to not loose heart, to hang in there, a savior was coming, a Messiah, the one who would be chosen by God to lead them back to their homeland.

Hear what the prophet Isaiah has to say to these displaced folks:

Prayer for Understanding:

Read Isaiah 9: 2,3,6,7

The prophet Isaiah promises: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined. You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest. For a child has been born to us; a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore.” (Isaiah 9). Isaiah paints this

image of restoration and renewal as if it had already taken place, so confident is he that God will make good on God's promises of life. Isaiah also proclaims that this Messiah will be born to a young woman and she will name him Immanuel, which means "God with us". Every Jewish child for 600 years – that is more years of memory than for us Americans to remember the birth of our nation, was taught to expect the coming of the Messiah to save the people of Israel.

But who would have ever imagined that it would happen in this way.... Let's listen to how it all began.....

Read Luke 1: 26 – 56

For the past several weeks one of our multitude of television channels has been airing some of the classic Christmas movies, which I love. This past week, I watched "A Christmas Vacation", starring Chevy Chase and Beverly D'Angelo. Chevy Chase plays the role of Clark Griswold, a nice looking, average sort of fellow, who tries so hard to provide for his family; he wants to give his family the perfect Christmas. The movie begins with Clark taking his family into the wilderness in search of the perfect Christmas tree. After a road rage accident, which ends with the family station wagon crashing into a snowbank, the Griswolds set off into the forest on foot. Clark finally identifies the "perfect tree", only to discover that he has forgotten the chain saw. From wrestling with hundreds of strands of Christmas lights that won't work to suffering through extended visits from abrasive relatives, the Griswolds continue to face experiences that would prompt most of us to say "been there, done that". I love this

movie because the Griswolds' Christmas is anything but perfect, except in our consumer-focused marketing and Victorian Christmas traditions. In the biblical birth narratives God chooses to come to us – and this is the miracle of Christ's birth – in our less than perfect, many times very painful and dark world. Jesus – or Emmanuel – literally means “God with us”. Our lives – 364 days out of the year – are anything but perfect. We struggle through illnesses, death, divorce, unemployment, bank accounts that don't quite stretch to cover expenses, dysfunctional family members, family members that are not even on speaking terms with each other, aging parents, children making bad decisions, and pandemics. And the meaning of Christmas is that God chose to come to us in the midst of our mess. No matter what you are struggling to overcome, no matter what issues have come your way, God promises to show up. And this is how it happens....

We know the story: The angel Gabriel appears out of the blue to a young maiden, Mary, who is engaged to be married to a young Jewish man, Joseph. Biblical scholars suggest that Mary is probably the age of our middle schoolers – 13 or 14 years old. Gabriel's message: “Mary, you are God's chosen one. You will conceive and bear a son and you shall name him ‘Jesus’, which means ‘God saves.’” Of course, this message must not have been particularly good news for Mary. She has not yet married her beloved Joseph – the betrothal period usually lasted a year or more, and of course he will wonder how she got pregnant. And according to Jewish law, Joseph could have her stoned for infidelity. Gabriel's message not only shattered Mary's world, it was literally life threatening. But sure enough, just as Gabriel had predicted, Mary becomes

miraculously pregnant.

Her response: she journeys with haste to visit with her friend and beloved cousin, Elizabeth, who is also miraculously pregnant. When Elizabeth runs out to greet Mary, she echoes what the angel Gabriel has already said: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb”, confirming what God was doing in Mary’s life. I want to share a few things about this encounter between Mary and Elizabeth. These are two women who are connected not only by family ties, but who share a common experience and they lift one another up in their shared waiting. God always gives us traveling companions!! God never intended for us to handle what life throws at us alone. It is why God gave Adam a helpmate in the person of Eve, at the dawn of creation. In their shared experience, Elizabeth and Mary are able to understand more fully what God was doing in their lives. One woman, Elizabeth, is old and her son, who will become John the Baptist, will close an age. The other woman, Mary, is young and her son will usher in a new age. Both Mary and Elizabeth have important roles in bridging the past with the future. How they respond to what God is doing in their lives is crucial for the furtherance of God’s kingdom.

And then, it is Mary’s turn to praise God, right there in Elizabeth’s living room: “My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God, my Savior.” Now what I want to know is, how in the world does she do that? I mean, praise God, even rejoice in God, when she is in the most desperate of situations? How can she sing, when the darkness is enveloping her?

Mary *sings* with joy and hope. And did you notice her verb tenses? “God has looked with favor, the mighty one has done great things for me, he has shown strength, he has scattered the proud and lifted up the lowly.” All past tense verbs. Mary is speaking as though what is clearly a future hope has already come to be. It is incongruent with her current situation. She is singing, as Barbara Brown Taylor says in one of her sermons on this passage, ahead of time.

Barbara Brown Taylor says, “If there are any big changes going on in your life right now, if your stomach is heaving with your own version of morning sickness, if something is underway you cannot predict the end of, then you and I might try considering how Mary is able to sing ahead of time.” How she can hope in the midst of what appears to be a hopeless situation, how she can sing when she might not feel like singing, how she can move forward with her life when it might be easier to feel like a helpless victim? I wish Mary would just be direct and tell us how she does it. But, like most of God’s story, God expects us to dig around and struggle with what it means to be a child of God, living in this ole world which is filled with darkness and despair; God gives us space to wait.

I have excavated two things that might give us a clue as to how Mary sings ahead of time. The first, is memory. Her song echoes the song of another woman, one who lived some 1000 years before Mary’s time - Hannah. A Jewish woman who was barren and wanted more than anything else to give birth. Her story is recorded in the Old Testament book of 1 Samuel. God blesses her, she miraculously conceives, and she

becomes the mother of Samuel; a very special child of God who will grow to fulfill God's promises for Israel. Memory. Remembering God's gracious acts of love in the past. We can trust that God will continue to act in our lives today, because we remember how God has encountered you and me in the past. Memory.

The second clue to how Mary can sing ahead of time is hope. Hope is based, in part on imagination. Being able to imagine new possibilities for ourselves. St. Augustine wrote that "Mary conceived of Christ first in her heart before conceiving him in her womb." Imagination. Imagining a wide range of possibilities. Will Willimon, one time chaplain at Duke University, wrote in a sermon on this Lukan passage, that when people fail to lean forward into the future with a sense of expectancy, our bodies, our lives, adjust to its cage. We can thank God, he says, that because there is a God, circumstances of the worst broken heartedness, captivity, imprisonment and mourning do not have the last word. There is always more to come. Stay tuned. We are beckoned out beyond the world of predictability into another world of risk and gift. During this Advent season, I challenge all of you and myself, to lean into the future and wonder what we might become with the influence of God's grace.

And it is Mary who teaches us how to sing ahead of time. And her song grows out of the prophetic assurance of Isaiah, that even though we are a people who often walk in darkness, and we sure live in a messy, broken and hurting world, we have seen a great light and that light continues to shine in this world. May we have eyes to see and ears to hear and hearts open to new understandings.