

Sung into Being

Menno Mennonite Church

December 19, 2021

Purpose: To imagine the surprising incarnation of God with us.

Message: The working of God with us overflows our very imagination as we marvel at the glory and hope of God with us.

Scripture: *Luke 1:39-55 [Sermon text; I will read]; Psalm 80:1-7 [Please read—Person TBD]; Micah 5:2-5a; Hebrews 10:5-10;*

Synopsis: Incarnation is one of those things that outstrips our imagination. Despite encountering it year after year, when we imagine God in human form there is that which simply does not compute. Yet, here we are, standing with Mary contemplating precisely that, and the imagery overflows in these words and work of praise. We are invited to join God's song that is the melody of the kingdom coming beyond even what we can imagine.

Music Notes: I have a request for the playback of a version of *Rejoice greatly* which could be an offeratory or other element. Also reference and setting of the Magnificat would be welcome.

Luke 1:39-55

³⁹ 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 lowliness 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 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 thoughts 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 helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

We have all been there. At the life altering moment of inflection where everything changes. They are the high moments of life. Becoming engaged; learning for the first time that you will become a parent, or become a parent again, the moments of wonder and of awe. These are the moments that we treasure in our hearts and keep well no matter the season. But there are other points of departure that are equally life changing. The moments of loss, of change, the unexpected diagnosis or condition, the life-altering reality of life not proceeding as planned. Sometimes, these categories will not stay neatly in their columns. Sometimes the best news of life is received under circumstances which are anything but welcome, at least at the time. But it is a point of life-turning all the same as new chapter is launched, a new way is found, and new joy, heartache, or just plain change finds us along the way.

Let me give you a for-instance. I am not quite sure where, anymore I heard this particular story anymore, but there are any number like it out in the wilds of the internet. But that doesn't mean it is not real, impactful and meaningful all the same. It was a story of bride to be who had come to the last week prior to her fairy-tail wedding with all the fixings, only to find out definitely that her espoused was not being faithful to her. Faced with the crumbling of her relationship, the plans she had made, and the outright fury of the moment, she had to respond in short order to the demands of disassembling what had been so carefully and thoroughly planned. Quickly realizing that it was too late to cancel the reservations and preparations that had been made, especially the full on reception meal, she altered course, inviting friends and family to come and celebrate life together—albeit life without the same demands of a romantic relationship, nor the damage it can harm. And yes; she and her mother enjoyed the honeymoon together.

I go here not for the sake of one more meme like story, though it is. Rather it is this turning point moment where life was never going to be the same for her—there is no pretending there would be. Having a wedding fall apart like this is, culturally, right up there when it comes to personal tragedy. The day of hope and plan, white dress and all, was not to come to be. It is a trauma that many are not expected to recovery from, ever. Yet this woman, at least for now, was able to re-frame the tragedy into celebration, finding at least a glimmer within a bad situation. For what ever reason, she was able to tap into the song of the world happening around her, despite what was, and now could embrace what is, and even do some singing along the way.

My life flows on in endless song, above earth's lamentation. I catch the sweet though far off hymn that hails a new creation. No storm can shake my inmost calm while to that rock I am clinging. It sounds an echo in my soul. How can I keep from Singing?

There is a pronounced grace to finding a way to sing in the moments of faith. There is something in the simplicity of musical expression that allows our in-most realities to be spoken of and spoken to. But when we hear it, we all admire its faith and its fidelity to the life we know; the life we live.

Mary's song, like many songs of hope and perseverance, is widely under read, and even more undervalued. We satisfy ourselves with the Mary with the 'Blessed' part, the mother of Jesus was a meek and mild child of faith that simply contemplated all things in her heart. We fail to grasp how critical a challenge this pregnancy was for a young woman of this time and place. Her identity, her security, her future is tied up in her betrothal to Joseph, a marriage most likely brokered by the economic ties of one family to another. And now she's has been visited with this blessing of being pregnant out of wedlock by the holy spirit with the rather vague promise of everything will be alright in the end. She's in trouble here. There is no DNA test that she can produce to confirm her child's identity as son of the Most-High; no way of providing for her future should things go badly. She goes to Elizabeth to be with family, yes, but also I think to get out of town for a little while until the heat dies down.

And yet she sings. She sings not as one sure of the world, the outcomes for the child she bears, or her security in such troubling times. Instead she sings simply as one amazed by that which is going on around her and within her. Often it is our songs which say the most about us and speak most clearly of our times and our temperament. It can be amazing the way that the hymns of the heart can appear at the most opportune times without, even, our willing them to come. But come they often do, and we can sometimes have a song on our lips even when we don't plan on it. It is a very human response to want a sound track to go along with our lives, and Mary is no different. She wants to sing a simple song, a happy song, and she comes out with this remarkable hymn of faith and hope which rings and resounds yet today.

"My soul glorifies the Lord
⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
⁴⁸ for God has been mindful
of the humble state of servant of YHWH.

From now on all generations will call me blessed,

⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me—
holy is the name of God.

This voice of one of questionable background in a highly questionable situation pours forth what is least expected when faced with daunting circumstances; a vision of faith, hope, and love that far exceeds the voice we expect from one such as she. The song takes over. Theologian Barbara Brown Taylor writes: "She is no longer singing the song; the song is singing her, and what music, what verse!" This teenager is "no politician, no revolutionary; she simply wants to sing a happy song, but all of a sudden she has become an articulate radical, an astonished prophet singing about a world in which the last have become first and the first, last. Elizabeth and Zechariah are the first to hear her song, but it was not just for them, but for every son and daughter who thought God has forgotten the promise to be with them forever, to love them forever, to give them fresh and endless life"¹

Mary sings this song not out what is, but will be, as a matter of faith and an ambition of hope. I think this is why we rightly called her blessed. Not because she has been given a title and a reverence, but because she finds the grace—the ability to endure beyond what is expected—to see hope in the midst of what might seem to be a hopeless situation. She sings not only of what can be, or shall be, but in mid-prophetic passion, she switches the verbs around and start speaking of things in the future as past tense of the having been fulfilled. She speaks about that which will be as though it has already been. She declare all things as possible where YHWH God is concerned.

Through all the tumult and the strife, I hear that music ringing. It finds an echo in my soul. How can I keep from singing?

What about us, I wonder. What do our songs say about us? Where do our playlists, personalized and programmed as they are take us as a matter of proclamation, and not just setting the atmosphere and casting a mood? What, I wonder, keeps us from singing time and again of that which we know to be true: the God in love comes to us, dwells with us, and embraces us no matter what, forever more. This is song that Mary cannot keep from singing is a song whose impact goes far beyond the importance of a single singer in the hills of Judea but has a profound impact far beyond the words recorded by Luke and read yet again here. It is a song of rejoicing,

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor sermon 'Magnificat'

yes, but it is also a song of revolt. In the 1980's, during the civil war in Guatemala, this song of Mary was forbidden to be spoken or sung, lest, the government feared, what it declared might truly come to pass. It would seem that sometimes our governments pay more attention to our hymns than what we do ourselves. The word of God, the promise of God to come and right the world is dangerous stuff. If we dare to listen, to really listen and fully hear the story, we cannot help but sing of all that God is doing and all that God has done, is doing, and will do with full voice and full heart. Yet often we choose to pick a much quieter key; preferring the silent night to the song of the Magnificat with its words of promise realized and hope sustained. I wonder why that is?

It took hope for Mary to sing. Hope is not an easy word to be tossed around lightly, dismissing it as quickly as it comes. It's a quality that is not valued in our world, and strikes amazement in those who see it. Hope is not optimism. Rather, Hope is a CHOICE, as much as a choice as faith and love. Hope founded in the reality of God with us, and Christ resurrected will not, cannot easily be swayed by the failures of our politics and policies in this world, but points us again to a truth larger than our selves; that God's promises and purposes are working still, as they always have been, and always will, to the completion of all things in the end. And with such a hope, such a promise, such a purpose, how, indeed, can we keep from singing, declaring, praising, and acting on the Good news of the Magnificat and all that it represents.

Christmas' hope is this; that the Love of God with us holds all things, in all places, for all time, and all people. With such a message, such a reality and such a promise, how can we, like Mary, keep from singing?

My life flows on in endless song, above earth's lamentation. I catch the sweet though far off hymn that hails a new creation. Through all the tumult and the strife, those freedom bells come ringing . It sounds an echo in my soul. How can I keep from Singing?