

Psalm 96 and Psalm 150 Luke 1:39-56 December 23, 2018

Fourth Sunday in Advent

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

LET IT ALL BE PRAISE

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Will Berger was a seminary classmate and has been a good friend for almost forty years. In addition to being an ordained Presbyterian minister, Will is also an accomplished musician and organist. He used to entertain us in the lobby of the seminary dining hall by playing almost anything we requested – usually with his own fanciful interpretation. Recently Will became the music director at the Trinity Presbyterian Church in Nashville, Tennessee, where his wife, Sally, is the pastor.

Last week, Will posted on Facebook a brief excerpt from one of his sermons. He called it a “sermon quote for my musician friends.” I’m going to substitute our musicians’ names for Will’s friends, but the meaning of the piece is the same. Here’s what Will wrote: “The thing is, and I mean this with all due respect to Karla and Vera and the choir: there’s no real purpose to singing. We could take the hymns out of worship, and still have prayers and liturgy, valuable things, valuable worship. We don’t have to sing, it’s not required, and many people don’t. Even if nobody sang, factories would still produce, fields would still grow, the earth would still turn. If you’re cold, singing won’t clothe you, if you’re hungry, singing won’t feed you. There is no purpose to singing, by which I mean, there is no purpose to singing except to sing. The purpose of it isn’t to be really productive with it, or to see how much money you can make with it, or to make sure it’s valuable enough. Singing is its own purpose. Singing is there to express something in a unique way.”

A wonderful hymn at the back of our *Glory to God* hymnal is #821, “My Life Flows On.” The subtitle is “How Can I Keep From Singing.” The song dates from the mid 1860’s, and first appeared on the front page of a weekly Presbyterian newspaper. Even though the song ends with references to the peace of Christ and Christ being Lord of heaven and earth, it’s not too hard to imagine that Mary might have sung this song when she got the news from Gabriel that she was going to have a baby boy. The words go like this:

*My life flows on in endless song;
Above earth’s lamentation,
I hear the sweet, though far-off hymn
That hails a new creation.
Through all the tumult and the strife,
I hear the music ringing
It finds an echo in my soul
How can I keep from singing?
What though my joys and comforts die?
I know my Savior liveth*

*What though the darkness gather round?
Songs in the night he giveth
No storm can shake my inmost calm
While to that refuge clinging
Since Christ is Lord of heaven and earth
How can I keep from singing?
I lift my eyes, the cloud grows thin
I see the blue above it
And day by day this pathway smooths,
Since first I learned to love it.
The peace of Christ makes fresh my heart
A fountain ever springing
For all things are mine since I am his
How can I keep from singing?
No storm can shake my inmost calm
While to that refuge clinging
Since Christ is Lord of heaven and earth
How can I keep from singing?*

Mary's song of praise to God her Savior is known as "The Magnificat," from the first words, "My soul magnifies the Lord . . ." Whenever I read a song in the Bible (and there are plenty of them, including the 150 psalms), I wonder what sort of tune was sung. It's one thing to read the words off of the printed page, but it's quite another thing to hear the lyrics sung to a particular tune.

So, instead of just relying on hearing a male voice reading this beautiful and powerful song this morning, I've asked Vera to play again the tune of our second hymn, "My Soul Cries Out with a Joyful Shout (Canticle of the Turning)." Before she starts to play, I'd like to ask you to get a pew Bible or use your own Bible (share with your neighbor if you need to), and turn to the gospel of Luke, chapter 1, verses 47-55. As Vera plays through the tune twice, I encourage you to read the words of Mary's "Magnificat." Try to imagine how Mary felt as she was singing this song. Notice that, other than two passing references to herself in verse 48, the whole song is about God, about praising God for what he has done and is about to do. The song is not about producing food or any other end, other than praising God. It's all about praise.

[Vera plays Hymn #100 twice.]

I doubt Mary sang her "Magnificat" to an Irish tune, but I also doubt she sang it in a monotone while sitting still in one place. Mary's song is a lot like Miriam's song in the Old Testament book of Exodus. After God had delivered the Israelites from Pharaoh's army at the Red Sea, "the prophet Miriam, Aaron's sister, took a tambourine in her hand; and all the women went out after her with tambourines and dancing. And Miriam sang to them: 'Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.'" (Exodus 15:20-21)

Mary's "Magnificat" is a lot like Hannah's song in the Old Testament book of 1 Samuel. After years of praying to God for a son and bearing the ridicule and scorn of Peninnah, her husband's other wife who had sons and daughters, Hannah finally

conceived and bore a son named Samuel, which means “He who is from God.” Hannah’s birth announcement about this baby boy reads like Mary’s song to God about the pending birth of her own son. Hannah cries out, “My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in my God.” Like Mary’s song of praise to God, Hannah’s song is all about what God has done – “The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength. Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry are fat with spoil. The Lord makes poor and rich; he brings low, he also exalts. He raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap. . .” (1 Samuel 2:1-10) And the list goes on and on. It’s as if someone pulled Miriam and Hannah and Mary aside before they started singing and told them, “Let it all be praise!”

It might seem strange to hear Mary’s song on this fourth Sunday of Advent, two days before Christmas, and realize that her song doesn’t say anything about the baby Jesus or a lowly manger or a star in the east. There is no little Lord Jesus asleep in the hay. There is no “still, still, still” night. There is no little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie. There is no “silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright.”

What there is is praise! Praise for the great things the Mighty One has done! Praise for God’s mercy from generation to generation! Praise for God’s strength that scatters the proud! Praise for God bringing down the powerful from their thrones and lifting up the lowly! Praise for filling the hungry with good things and sending the rich away empty! Praise for helping his servant Israel, remembering his mercy, and keeping his age-old promises! As the psalmist says, “Praise the Lord! Let everything that breathes praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!” Let it all be praise!

If you pay attention to the lyrics of Mary’s “Magnificat,” you might get a little uneasy. Is this a call to arms? Is this an invitation to revolution? One commentator provides an interesting perspective on this song, especially for all of us who, whether or not we think of ourselves this way, are the powerful and the rich and, far too often, the self-sufficient. He writes, “It is not the voice of the powerful of the earth speaking here, but the voices of the marginalized and relatively powerless early Christian movement . . . But Luke’s motif of God’s reversal of fortunes is not intended to raise violent resistance or to drive the wealthy and powerful to despair; these verses must rather be read in light of the example later in this Gospel – say, of the rich ruler (18:18-30) or Zaccheus (19:1-10) – where the well-off are exhorted to deal with their wealth in a way that brings them into a positive relation with the poor in order to partake in the same promised salvation.”¹

Mary’s song is about a topsy-turvy world, where “the way things are” are no longer. This could be a threat to the powers-that-be, back in the first century A.D. and even today, even to many of us Presbyterians who pride ourselves on doing things “decently and in order.” But Mary is so confident in the Mighty God’s power to make things just and right and equitable, she talks about those things in the past tense – “He has looked, he has shown, he has scattered, he has brought down, he has lifted up, he has filled, he has sent away, he has helped.” Mary knew in her heart of hearts that this is how God had always dealt with his people, so she could confidently sing praises about what she knew God would continue to do with and for his people, especially in and through his Son Jesus Christ.

Maybe it's not too much of a stretch to call Mary's "Magnificat" a "protest song." She's not protesting against God, but she is certainly singing about the undermining and overturning of the powers and the systems that oppressed God's people and defied the kind of life envisioned and promised in God's kingdom. This is a protest song we need to hear today. More than that, this is a protest song that we need to join in singing.

Last week I mentioned my appreciation for the musings of Rev. David Lose about scripture lessons. In some comments about Mary's song which he titled "Singing As an Act of Resistance," he writes about events leading up to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. He says, "It's striking to note that for several months preceding the fall of the Berlin wall, the citizens of Leipzig (East Germany) gathered on Monday evenings by candlelight around St. Nikolai church – the church where Bach composed so many of his cantatas – to sing, and over two months their numbers grew from [just a few dozen to thousands. They were singing] songs of hope and protest and justice, until their song shook the powers of their nation and changed the world." Other historical reports from late fall 1989 noted that the protestors, including the young pastor of the Lutheran church, feared the worst as the militia and the police took up positions on the march route one night. However, as the protestors marched and sang and carried nothing more than candles, the militia and the police didn't attack. They parted and let the marches pass by. Twenty years after that amazing night, the pastor said he knew nothing would ever be the same again. David Lose writes, "Later, when someone asked one of the officers of the Stasi, the East German secret police, why they did not crush this protest like they had so many others, the officer replied, 'We had no contingency plan for song.'"²

At the end of today's worship service, we're going to sing "Angels We Have Heard on High" and join in the angelic chorus of "Gloria in excelsis Deo." Tomorrow night at our Christmas Even Candlelight Communion service, we're going to sing "O Come, All Ye Faithful," "O Little Town of Bethlehem," and "Silent Night, Holy Night." Next Sunday morning (when it's still Christmas!) we'll sing "Angels From the Realms of Glory" and "Go, Tell It on the Mountain." On January 6, we'll probably sing "We Three Kings of Orient Are."

Today, on this fourth and final Sunday in Advent, we hear a different song, Mary's song, but the Christmas message is there for us to join in. What God has done for us and continues to do for us in Jesus Christ is worth singing about. We started our worship this morning with a familiar Christmas carol, but you might have noticed a few different words in the second half of the second stanza. No, no one "changed" the words to the hymn you might have grown up singing. These are the original words that have been restored: "Nails, spear shall pierce him through, The cross be borne, for me, for you; Hail, hail the Word made flesh, the babe, the son of Mary!" One commentator's remarks about this hymn reflect the ideas of Mary's confident song of praise for God's power and might and mercy and help and salvation: "Christ came to stand against sin, death, and the power of the Devil. We can sugarcoat that reality now. But at least one Christmas carol would remind us of the ends to which the son of Mary was willing to go in order to cast the mighty down from their thrones and uplift the lowly."³

As we celebrate the birth of our Savior, let it all be praise! As we think about what our Mighty God has done and always does for us, let it all be praise! And as we are invited to join the song that turns the world upside-down and promises to usher in God's goodness and love and mercy and justice, let us ask ourselves, "How can I keep from singing?"

Let it all be praise!

Let us pray: Our hearts praise you, O Lord, our spirits rejoice in God our savior, for you have remembered us. Mighty God, we celebrate the great things you have done for us— your name is holy! You have kept your promises to us; you have come to our help; you will show your people your love for ever; our hearts praise you, O Lord. Amen.

NOTES

¹Stephen A. Cooper, Luke 1:39-56 in David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors, *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 1* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p. 97.

²David Lose, "Advent 4: Singing As an Act of Resistance," December 14, 2015 at www.davidlose.net.

³Rolf Jacobson, "Commentary on Luke 1:46b-55," at www.workingpreacher.org.