

"My Heart Shall Sing"
December 22, 2019
St. Paul's UCC Church
Rev. Mary Beth Mardis-LeCroy

Luke 1:39-55

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "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 leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor 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 forever."

*My soul cries out with a joyful shout that the God of my heart is great,
And my spirit sings of the wondrous things that you bring to the ones who wait.
You fixed your sight on your servant's plight, and my weakness you did not spurn,
So from east to west shall my name be blest. Could the world be about to turn?*

***My heart shall sing of the day you bring. Let the fires of your justice burn.
Wipe away all tears, for the dawn draws near, and the world is about to turn!¹***

I have always loved Mary's Song. I like to imagine Mary singing this song at the top of her lungs. When we first hear it, Mary's song may seem like it's this great, happy, joyful song – exuberant even. But this song that Mary sings, it's actually more than that. It's a lot more than that: it's complex, prophetic, even dangerous. If we start to pay attention to some of the stuff Mary is singing about – the rich oppressing the poor,

¹ Words by Rory Cooney, tune: "Star of the County Down."

hungry people, powerful people taking advantage of their power – we begin to see that there is much more to this song than simple unfettered joy.

*From the halls of power to the fortress tower not a stone will be left on stone,
Let the king beware, for your justice tears every tyrant from his throne
The hungry poor shall weep no more, for the food they can never earn;
There are tables spread, ev'ry mouth be fed, for the world is about to turn.²*

Now, don't get me wrong: Mary's song *is* a joyful song, to be sure. Her joy is real, even exuberant. But I have a hunch that Mary had to find her way to that joy; I have a hunch that Mary had to go through some darkness first to get there.

“In the sixth month [that is, in Mary's cousin Elizabeth's sixth month of pregnancy], the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary.” So begins Mary's story in the Gospel according to Luke. Gabriel is sent by God to a town in the region of Galilee, a town called Nazareth. Now, in *our* minds, Nazareth is a pretty important town. Mary's from there, and of course, Jesus will be from there as well. But, back in Mary's day, Nazareth was a back-water, insignificant, irrelevant, mostly-ignored little town. Probably didn't even make it onto the map. Nothing good could come from Nazareth, or so everybody said.

So the angel Gabriel arrives into this back-water town, finds Mary, and exclaims, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” And then, he drops the big news, the whole reason he was sent to Mary in the first place: “So, Mary, here's what's going to happen. You're going to have a baby, and he's going to be a boy, and he's going to be named Jesus. He's going to be great – not like what most parents mean when they say their kids are great – I mean, really great, like divinely great, like Son-of-the-Most-High great. He's going to reign over the house of Jacob forever, and his kingdom will never end.”

And Mary, so practical, says, “How is this even possible? You know I'm a virgin, right?”

And Gabriel says, “The Holy Spirit is going to come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.” (As if that clears it all up).

As Mary is trying to take all of this in, Gabriel adds, “Oh, I almost forgot! Your relative Elizabeth, who is as so very old, whom everyone thought was barren, has also conceived a son. You see Mary, nothing will be impossible with God!”

I don't know how much time passes before Mary next speaks. For all we know, she and Gabriel converse throughout the whole night, as she struggles with this seemingly-impossible news. But at some point in that dark night, Mary surrenders,

² *Ibid.*

believes, trusts – even though the mechanics of this still make no sense – as she declares, “Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

*Though I am small, my God, my all, you work great things in me,
And your mercy will last from the depths of the past to the end of the age to be.
Your very name puts the proud to shame and to those who would for you yearn;
You will show your might, put the strong to flight, for the world is about to turn.³*

This story is fraught with a lot of stuff – and it’s not all happy, easy stuff, either. Take the pregnancy of Mary’s cousin, Elizabeth. Remember Elizabeth from last week? Elizabeth is old. And not only that, she has been barren all her life. It’s important to keep in mind here that barrenness could cover a lot of things: it could mean she has never conceived, or it could mean she has gotten pregnant before (possibly several times), but has lost her babies through miscarriages or still-births. So I would imagine that Mary’s cousin Elizabeth is a just a little bit nervous about her pregnancy – how could she not be?

And then we go to Mary, the star of this story; and in a strange, reverse way, Mary’s situation is very similar to Elizabeth’s. In general, we believe that having a baby is a good thing, right? It’s a blessing to be pregnant... right?

Not necessarily. Mary’s pregnancy would have most definitely caused a scandal. Mary is, after all, just a teenager – most scholars think she is only about 13 or 14 years old – and (this is really important to note here), *she is not married*. She is engaged, but she’s not yet married. There is a big difference in Jewish culture between the two. The book of Deuteronomy even stipulates that a woman is to be stoned to death for getting pregnant out of wedlock. This is scary, awful stuff. So, like Elizabeth, even though her reasons are different, Mary’s pregnancy will not be easy either. She will be shunned and rejected; her very life may even be in danger because of it.

...And yet, in the midst of all of this, Mary sings this beautiful song. How in the world is she able to do it?

*Though the nations rage from age to age, we remember who holds us fast:
God's mercy must deliver us from the conqueror's crushing grasp.
This saving word that out forebears heard is the promise which holds us bound,
'Til the spear and rod can be crushed by God, who is turning the world around.⁴*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

If Mary were alive today, and heard about the hard things some of you go through – death of loved ones, *untimely* death of loved ones, sickness, anxiety, pain – I know she would weep with you; but I also don't think she would be surprised by your pain, by our pain. This world can be a harsh place. Mary knows.

Mary tells the truth about the world we live in. She doesn't sugar-coat it. She knows about the pain. But she also knows this: *Though the nations rage from age to age, we remember who holds us fast.* Mary knows. She knows that God holds us through the deepest darkness. She knows we are never alone. Mary knows, in the words of the Psalmist, that "Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning."

And one more thing: this kind of joy, the joy that Mary sings about, cannot be forced. Through dangerous pregnancies, in the midst of fear and judgment, oppression and violence, the kind of joy that Mary has, and sings about, cannot be forced. Mary can't make happen on her own terms. It's joy that comes only from God, as a gift. "Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning." The night may be long, very long; the night may take years. But eventually, morning will come, and with it, a joy that passes all understanding.

***My heart shall sing of the day you bring. Let the fires of your justice burn.
Wipe away all tears, for the dawn draws near, and the world is about to turn!⁵***

Thanks be to God.

⁵ *Ibid.*