

Mary's Song
Isaiah 35:1-10 & Luke 1:46b-56

Third Sunday in Advent/ 11th December

The Third Sunday of Advent is known as Gaudete Sunday, Latin for “rejoice.” Isaiah tells of a day when the “wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom” (Is. 35:1). The highway to Zion will carry God’s people home from exile. “And the ransomed of the LORD shall return and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing will flee away” (Is. 35:10). And Luke invites us to sing Mary’s song, the Magnificat, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior” (Lk. 1:47).

Echoing the prayer of Hannah, the prophetess, in 1 Samuel, Mary’s response of praise boldly declares what the birth of Jesus means for her and the world, especially the rich, the proud, and the powerful. By quoting Hannah’s prayer, Luke wants us to see Mary as a prophetess of liberation who sings a song of high revolt against the powers, who sings a song of high revolt against the oppressors of God’s people, who sings of the power of God that provides for the powerless through Jesus. My friend, Frank Jehle, a Reformed pastor, professor, and theologian who lived in St. Gallen, Switzerland, several years ago, described Mary’s Song as a “New Testament psalm.” (Sadly, I just learned this week that he died at the end of October.) I like Frank’s characterization of the Magnificat because it ties the New Testament with the Hebrew scriptures. In many respects, the entire Old Testament is summarized in Mary’s Song. It’s a distillation of all 150 psalms.¹

As Mary knew, there’s reason to sing. The Bible is loaded with examples of this happening, of people responding to God’s grace with singing and praise. Very often, it’s music that most effectively and accurately expresses our gratitude. In today’s service, with lots of music—the carols, anthems, strings, cymbals, chimes, organ, and piano together “carry” the Word, and they awaken our senses. Perhaps the most natural way our hearts respond to God’s love and grace is through song and music. We become doxological people. We offer *doxa*, “glory”: Glory! Glory! Glory! *Glory to the goodness and faithfulness of God!* This is Mary’s song. So simple. So beautiful. So profound.

In medieval monastic and cloistered communities in Europe, the *Magnificat* was read daily during evening vespers (around 6 p.m.) in the week leading up to Christmas. That’s how much they valued it. And we know that these communities framed the reading of the *Magnificat* with a song, an *antiphon*, a short sentence set to music. These antiphons, known as the O Antiphons, eventually became the Advent hymn we know as “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.” The seven antiphons that make up this hymn, one for each day leading up to Christmas, were sung before and after reading Mary’s Song. Each antiphon or stanza highlights an image rooted in Scripture, which describes Mary’s son: O Wisdom (*Sapientia*), O Lord (*Adonai*), O Root of Jesse (*Radix Jesse*), O Key of David (*Clavis David*), O Radiant Dawn (*Oriens*), O King of all nations (*Rex Gentium*), O Emmanuel (*Emmanuel*).

We're used to singing, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel..." as the first verse in the hymn, but this verse was actually sung last, on the night *before* Christmas Eve. And the titles given to Jesus—Wisdom, Lord, Root, Key, in Latin, *Sapientia, Adonia, Radix, Clavis, Oriens, Rex, Emmanuel*—form an acrostic; the first letters of each title together spell SARCORE, which, when read backward spell the phrase Latin "*ero cras,*" which means, "I come tomorrow" or "I shall be [with you] tomorrow."² Pretty cool, eh? It sounds like something right out of *The DaVinci Code*. The hymn contains a hidden meaning.

When combined with the Song of Mary, the petitions or pleas found in these antiphons heighten the sense of expectation. Something is about to happen. All that Mary sings about is about to happen. Soon. Wake up. Be ready. Someone is about to be born. Simeon later said to Mary, when Jesus was twelve, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too" (Luke 2:34-35).

Yes, the *Magnificat* is a song of praise. And there's reason to rejoice. The *Magnificat* is also a song of protest—which is also a reason to rejoice. Why? Because the birth of Jesus signals God's *grand reversal*, it announces the *great undoing*, the falling and rising of many. The halls of power, the kingdoms and governments, and economic systems of this earth should tremble with his coming. His birth puts the prevailing ways of the world on edge. For, as Mary sang, he will scatter the proud, he will bring down the powerful from their thrones, and lift up the lowly—the lowly that have been put down, pressed down to the bottom by those in power; he will fill the hungry with good things and will send the rich away empty, disappointed (Luke 1:51-53). That's why Mary's rejoicing, because this one, this Jesus, this *Yeshua*, whose name means "Yahweh saves," will save us from all that binds and enslaves us; he will save us from all that separates us from God, our neighbor and ourselves; he will release us from all that oppresses and dehumanizes us, everything that makes us fearful and anxious.

Against all the crass commercialism of the season, against all the sentimentality and domestication of the Christmas story, the Church is called to remember that his birth signals a radical inbreaking of something new. The arrival of this New Age means the complete upending of the *status quo*. You can hear it, too, foreshadowed in the Isaiah 35 text. His birth signals the grand reversal of everything, the dismantling of the powers that be. His birth offers a new horizon of hope and healing for all God's children.

This is the cause of Mary's joy; it's why she's singing. She knew—yes, Mary really did know—her child would mean the end of life as we knew it. Nothing would ever, could ever be the same again. His birth marks the birth of a New Age, a Radiant Light casting its rays upon a New Day. His advent, his coming, his birth, both then and now, always entail a turning—a shift. Metanoia, as we saw [last week](#). Our closing hymn this morning, a contemporary Advent hymn based on Mary's Song, the [Canticle of the Turning](#), beautifully captures the meaning of his birth, the meaning of the turn.³ It expresses many of our hopes and joys and reminds us, as Christians, as people of faith, of *our* responsibility in these dark, uncertain times to bear witness to God's light, joy, and love. At the threshold of the turning, Mary invites us to sing. May her joy be our joy. May Mary's song be *our* song.

¹From an Advent sermon included in Dr. Frank Jehle's 2017 *Weihnachtspost* (Christmas card).

²Mary Louise Bringle & Beverly Howard, *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel: Reflections on Four Seasonal Hymns, Resource for Advent I*. (The Presbyterian Publishing Corporation: The Thoughtful Christian, 2015).

³Roy Cooney, [*Canticle of the Turning*](#), set to the Irish tune STAR OF THE COUNTY DOWN.