

# *“The Sound of Grace”*

*Sermon IV in the Series on Grace*

Advent IV

*Luke 1:39-55*

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From the Pulpit

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There is a lot of singing in the first chapters of the gospel of Luke. Zechariah sings when his son John is born and his tongue is finally loosened. The angels sing of peace and goodwill when they share their “good news of great joy” with the shepherds. And Simeon sings his song of farewell once he has seen God’s promises to Israel kept in the Christ child.

In today’s reading, Mary sings. It’s called the Magnificat and it is sung by a very pregnant Mary, who goes to see her cousin Elizabeth. Elizabeth is to give birth to John the Baptist. What kind of a song do you think Mary should sing under such circumstances?

I’ve always thought that she should sing a song about how hard it is to be the mother of the savior of the world. I will be honest. I sometimes get a little too focused on the relationship between Mary and Joseph. Starting off as a young married couple is hard enough but throw a virgin birth into the situation? Mary is most likely a teenager who finds herself in a situation that – at best - is filled with mystery and wonder and – at worst – must have been downright terrifying.

The messenger of God comes to her to announce that she, though not married, would conceive. Her son would be the Son of the Most High. Now that’s a dilemma. The neighbors will gossip and what is she to tell her parents and her fiancé?

Mary should sing a song about her troubles – a lament, perhaps – maybe even a country song about how God done her wrong.

But, Mary doesn't sing a song about her personal challenges. The story she has to tell is bigger than that. This is not just a story nor song about Mary and Joseph.

Mary knows that – she knows that this story – this birth – this one she will bring into the world – is bigger than her family. So when she sings a song it's not about her own struggles. She sings about the baby – she sings about the one who will be named Jesus.

Then her song should be a lullaby, right? Shouldn't she sing a sweet and soothing lullaby? That would be nice to hear today. Something reassuring and soft, full of hope and promise, a song easy on the ears, with words calming and comforting.

Oh, today, we could use such a song. In a world that feels increasingly uneasy and volatile, from Syria, to Yemen, to Washington, DC, we could use a good lullaby.

That's not what we get. It's not what Mary sings. This story is bigger than that. Jesus is bigger than that.

Theologian and pastor William Willimon writes about this particular moment in the Biblical story: “Mary breaks into

song. But it is not a lullaby she sings. . . . The pregnant girl looks out across the Judean hills bathed in winter twilight and sings. She thinks she hears kingdoms fall and the earth rock beneath her feet. She feels the child within her move and she hums a little tune of liberation.”<sup>1</sup>

Why, Mary? Why sing such a song? You sing of things that are supposed to be outside the scope of religion: things like politics and economics. You sing about someone who is going to upset the political structure and challenge the economically powerful. Your song covers a lot of territory.

Because this story is big. She sings of a story that is big enough to contain the pain and sorrow of so many.<sup>2</sup>

Mary sings about God in the past tense - she describes what God thoroughly completed. But in this context, with new life inside her, she also amplifies the message about what God will do through Jesus.

This uneducated teenage peasant knows. She knows that things aren't the way they are supposed to be. She knows all about poverty. She knows all about occupation. She knows

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<sup>1</sup> William Willimon, *On a Wild and Windy Mountain*, p. 21.

<sup>2</sup> Amy Miracle, *The Singing Revolution*, December 17, 2012 BSPC.org

about violence. And before this story is over she will know what it is to lose a child.

She also knows that God wants things to be different. She knows that God cares deeply and passionately about the political and economic conditions of the people of the world. Mary knows that God is concerned about people who, in this plentiful world, are hungry. Mary insists that God is paying attention to injustice and inequality and suffering.

“The Magnificat ought to make us—the ones who celebrate the birth of God’s son so intentionally—permanently uncomfortable with the reality of poverty and homelessness, the reality that millions of our own children go to bed hungry every night... As we welcome the Christ child, we ought to be made uncomfortable about the way the current economy exacerbates and increases the gap between the rich and the poor—uncomfortable in light of his mother’s confidence that God will fill the poor and send the rich away empty.”<sup>3</sup>

Maybe this morning you’re thinking---It’s just a song after all. How much power can one song have?

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<sup>3</sup> Rev. John Buchanan, Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago. Sermon on “Mary and Her Song.”

Singing can have a powerful impact on a community, on a people, on the world. Singing brings people together. Sometimes it's an act of joy and sometimes of camaraderie, but singing can also be an act of resistance.

Sometimes singing **IS** an act of resistance. When people find themselves with their backs against the wall, against oppressive forces that keep them down....people come together to take a stand, vying for their freedom....and they sing.

In 1989, the people in Leipzig, Germany knew this as well.

Have you heard of the "Peaceful Revolution?" In the months preceding the fall of the Berlin Wall, citizens of Leipzig, gathered on Monday evenings by candlelight in and around the 800-year-old St. Nikolai church. They came to sing. Over two months their numbers grew from a little more than a thousand (1,000) people to over three hundred thousand (300,000), over half the citizens of the city, singing songs of hope and protest and justice. They poured out of the churches and into the streets, they sang of freedom. They sang until their song shook the powers of the nation and changed the world.

No one knew it at the time, but the peaceful Leipzig demonstrations exerted irresistible pressure to reform the East German regime -- and led directly to the fall of the Berlin Wall five weeks later. "It was a self-liberation. [They] did it without the dollar or the DAX, without the US or Soviet armies. It was the people who did it."<sup>4</sup>

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!"<sup>5</sup>

I think Mary and Elizabeth know Mary's song was an act of resistance as well. I think that they know just how ridiculous their situation is – two women, one too old to bear a child, one so young she was not yet married, yet both called to bear children of promise through whom God would change the world.

And they probably knew how little attention the world would pay them, tucked away in the hill country of Judea, far from the courts of power and influence. And they probably knew how hard life was under Roman oppression. Yet when faced

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<sup>4</sup><http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/we-are-the-people-a-peaceful-revolution-in-leipzig-a-654137.html>

<sup>5</sup> David Lose.net (2014), weekly blog called "In the Mean Time."

with the long odds of their situation, they did not retreat, or apologize, or despair, they *sing*.

They sing of their confidence in the Lord's promise to upend the powers that be, reverse the fortunes of an unjust world, and lift up all those who had been oppressed. When you're back is to the wall, and all looks grim, one of the most unexpected and powerful things you can do is sing.

Just like Mary, we too, need to sing of God's promises to be with us. We need to sing of a world that the prophets foretold. We need to sing of the world being set aright. A song of God's promise that God will never let us go.

The claim of our faith echoes down the corridors and canyons and it changes how we see and hear. It amplifies the message of a world that is desperately in need of something new, something bold, something radical.

Mary magnifies her joy in God. Out of this joy she sings of the grace she receives. In difficult circumstances--in more than an impossible situation--Mary proclaims her joy. She recognizes the grace of God.

Her joy is grace recognized. Think of this definition----Joy is grace recognized. I love that definition: **Joy is Grace Recognized.**

The sound of grace this day----from Mary-- is pure joy.

Once you hear Mary's song, it's hard to get it out of your head. Today, tomorrow, and in the days ahead, may we hum a little tune of liberation. Sing a song of hope. May we sing with Mary. Mary needs us to sing with her and magnify her voice. The world needs us come alongside Mary and sing--a song of resistance, a song of change, a song of transformation.

We sing and wait, for the world is about to turn.

Thanks be to God.

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