

December 23, 2018 Fourth Sunday of Advent

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Peace Lutheran Church – Austin, Texas

GOSPEL

Luke 1: 39-55

The holy gospel according to Saint Luke, the first chapter.

Glory to you, O Lord.

³⁹In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, ⁴⁰where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴²and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

⁴⁶And Mary said,

"My soul magnifies the Lord,

⁴⁷and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

⁴⁸for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

⁴⁹for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.

⁵⁰His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.

⁵¹He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

⁵²He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;

⁵³he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.

⁵⁴He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,

⁵⁵according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

The gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, O Christ.

Today we are so close...to all of it...to what this season is preparing us for...We are almost as close to Christmas as we can be on the fourth Sunday of Advent. (Last year was just a little closer, since Advent 4 was in the morning and Christmas Eve was in the afternoon. I still entertain myself by wondering...At what moment did it stop being Advent 4 and start

being Christmas Eve? If you want a brain teaser...or get bored in a few minutes...you can puzzle over that). But this year, it is Advent 4 all day long...and tomorrow we return to come close again to the mystery of Christmas.

Today we complete our time of getting ready...of counting out the time of waiting... And we have one of the best things in the world to help us be ready. We have Mary's Song...The Magnificat. We sung it a few minutes ago in a way many people here know so well, because we sing it almost every Wednesday of Lent almost every year- just the way we did this morning. It is a song that is truly in our bones - maybe whether we know it or not.

But who really was this person...this woman...this main character of the story at the center of gravity of the whole universe?

And what does her song mean about who she was? Where did these words that poured out of her soul come from? Perhaps you hear turns of phrase in Mary's song and think you may have heard them somewhere else...Isn't that bit from the Psalms? Where else have I heard these words? I know I've heard that phrase somewhere else...

I wondered that myself this year, to the point that I actually went looking for some of these phrases elsewhere in Scripture.

And I can't wait to tell you some of the things I found. Except I'm going to wait...for just a few minutes.

Because first...I want to tell you what I realized Mary's song reminds me of...as a whole.

Among the many amazing things that Mary is...I think...I think Mary sings jazz.

I am in no way qualified to make this claim...because I am very, very bad at jazz. I played keyboard in my middle school jazz band...and that chapter of my musical career ended very quickly.

When I try to play jazz, I am just missing the ability to feel not only where we are but where we are going in the music...to let that flow from my body to my instrument the way great jazz musicians seem to do. I have never fully understood the musical theory of jazz. The scales and intervals. In my voice and my hands...they all feel halting...if I can find them at all.

Not Mary. Mary feels this song in the vibrations of her bones.

One of the most feared songs to improvise on for jazz musicians (or so I have been told) is John Coltrane's composition Giant Steps. It is a rite of passage. The opening chords of that title track became iconic to Coltrane...and they weave through the whole musical universe in a way that is particular to jazz...and particularly difficult to play...because the keys are constantly moving.

There are certain pieces of music that gather a whole universe of sound around them, and resonate through time...as if they pull all of what music is right in close. Coltrane did this.

So does Mary.

The song she sings wends its way through the story of God and the People of God. She gathers it all up...but in the language of her place in the world. We sometimes talk about Mary as meek or mild. She was certainly not thought to be a very important person, in her time, of course. But the rest of it...I think we've made it up. And sometimes, I think, we've erased some of the power with which she could belt this song.

So I want to tell you some of what I found in her song...because there were bits that came from elsewhere...and others that I have never given her the credit she deserved for composing them in her own right.

She opens singing, "My soul magnifies the Lord." We hear this metaphor also in the Psalms (34:3 and 69:30)...and it also feel like an echo of Hannah's song in 1 Samuel...another expectant, rejoicing mother.

She uses these phrases – calling God the Mighty One...who shows strength with his arm...distinctly Hebrew Bible phrases. Mary is one of the *only* voices in the Christian Testament...from the gospels on...who carries on this poetry.

Then she writes this original line...about how God has "scattered the proud." That's pure, original Mary, right there.

She talks about the hungry being filled with good things...like the Psalmist does in Psalm 107...and this refrain will soon be picked up and carried forward by her son...when he preaches the Beatitudes.

When we hear her say how God lifts up the lowly...the memory of Hannah should rush back again with full force...Hannah sang of the poor being lifted up from the ash heap. And again, a forgotten and disregarded one continues to sing the song.

She invokes Abraham – the whole lineage of the people of God...and she claims the fullness of God's promise. Right now. The whole time she is singing about what God *has done*. She is a prophet...a bearer of God's very Word...but not because she is predicting the future...It's not that kind of prophecy...It's the kind of prophecy that speaks into people's hearts the truth of God's dream and promise and love...right now...already...begun at the beginning of time...and true already for us, today.

She carries forward music from the Hebrew Scriptures, that no one else in the New Testament touches...She writes her own poetry...She sings from the depth of her knowledge of her story and the story of her people.

She riffs on the themes that God laid down in the opening bars of Creation's song. Wandering through so many keys and tones of the whole sweeping story. No less. And you can, too.

Mary's soul isn't any different from ours, after all, not really. You might not be called to the same kind of work as Mary. I doubt any of us are going to be called upon to be the mother of God. I know my work in the kingdom won't be to play jazz...and maybe yours won't either. But you also...are a magnifying glass. Your soul...your life...will magnify some things...and not others. And others may even magnify you or not...in their own ways. I can't help but wonder...in these final waiting breaths before the world is turned upside down again. What can we magnify to sing God's praises again...in our own voice and key...for our time? What "Giant Steps" are there for us to take in the direction of praise and love and justice and life?

Because God is laying down a lick that is both familiar...and like nothing else we've ever heard.

Thanks be to God. Amen.