

Providence Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. David Pettit
December 11th, 2022
Luke 1: 46-55

In this season of Advent, which is a season of memory and anticipation, Mary's song strikes a different note in this season of lead-up to Christmas. In the other readings featured in this season, those of prophets, Elizabeth and Zechariah, John the Baptist, the shepherds, magi, the focus is always turned toward the Christ-child. Their words and attention always direct our attention toward the Christ-child. While various figures get attention for being in the story, the spotlight always pans towards the messiah. Even in the case of John the Baptist, who gets attention for his words, dress, and demeanor, his message constantly speaks of the one who is coming after him, the one whose sandals he is not worthy to untie, the one he is a forerunner of.

But at this moment in the biblical story, the spotlight comes onto Mary with full beam as the Angel comes and informs Mary of her station. All we see is Mary's face, as the Christ is concealed for the moment, hidden deep within her, yet to even take a discernable shape. The spotlight falls on Mary, and we hear her voice, a song accounting for what it is like to be chosen. A song about what it is like to be found among the shadows and given a role. A song about the upending of a prevailing social structure that, on her own, Mary could never put a dent in. A song about how God chooses the lowly, about how God will, in time, bring down the proud.

It does not take long perusing Christian art down through the centuries to observe the heightened interest in the person and role of Mary. She is not just a figure in the story but often an object of admiration and reverence herself.

Here she stands, as the house lights go down, and her voice pierces, "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." In this moment, the focus falls not to the Christ but to the young mother called to bear him. They will call "me" blessed, she sings.

Testimony fills the air. The testimony of Mary. The testimony of one of the last people we might have turned to as the vessel for the messiah, as the one to play a special role in bringing about God's redemption in the world. But while the

community elders sit at their banquet tables around torah debate and midrashic sparring on a side stage, the light pans toward Mary

How can it be? Surely there are many people more worthy. Indeed, many have been more than willing, more prepared, more qualified, and more attentive to the signs over time. These questions haunted me when I first began discerning my calling to ministry. These questions made me all the more hesitant to speak up as a young adult, to step forward, to admit out loud that I felt called to ministry, to insinuate that I had something to offer others. I was voted the class quietest in high school. I was better in math and science than in writing and reading. I didn't dress cool. I contained little for charisma. What did I really have to bring to the table? I remember those insecurities being encapsulated well in a very frank question with my first YL supervisor when he wrinkled his face and asked, "how are you going to reach kids?" [side note - I never cared for that guy].

I think also of the common motif in scripture of what is called the call narrative. Among the common patterns of the call narrative is the protest of unworthiness. When God calls someone to play a role, they protest, saying I am not worthy, call another. Like Moses who protests, "who am I that I should go to Pharaoh," I am slow of speech. Or Isaiah who says "I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips." Or even Peter when Jesus performs a miraculous catch of fish, he says, "go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man." But that is not Mary's response.

Whatever insecurities, fear, and panic that may have come over Mary when she realizes that she is with child, that is not what we hear. Those are not the thoughts and emotions that get ensconced for us to read and recite every Christmas season. Yes, there is much in Mary's world that is being upended. There is great cause for consternation. She will no doubt be scrutinized, maybe even accused or threatened by others for being pregnant outside the normal sequence of things. There is much cause for alarm, for protest, for lament. But these are not the words or emotions on Mary's lips. A joy exudes from her.

The words that carry forth are those of joy and praise, celebrating her place in the story, even while the story is still full of travail. Her words celebrate her role in birthing and nurturing the messiah. She demonstrates a willingness to speak and to celebrate the call that comes to her, to celebrate God's goodness towards her. A willingness to let her story become part of Christ's story.

So in this moment when the Christ is hidden from the spotlight, nestled snugly within Mary, a song of joy goes forth. It is a song that rejoices in the burgeoning

redemption and hope that this baby represents, but it is also a song that celebrates the recipient of God's favor.

When I think about how much attention and focus Mary has received over the centuries, I wonder why. She has been iconified, literally and metaphorically. All this focus can make her seem exceptional and unique. However, I wonder if it is her relatability that contributes to this elevated interest. You see, this lowly girl is not just a side character, not just a pawn in the story, but her emotion and voice come through. Her song allows the spotlight to fall on those whose lives God has changed by calling them out from the shadows, by giving them a meaningful place and role in God's dream of shalom.

I can relate to her song, though I still don't like the spotlight any more than many of you. I don't like the attention the light brings; afraid it will highlight my flaws. But over the years, from my class quietest days through my years working with Young Life, my confidence increased. Though it was not until my Clinical Pastoral Education year of chaplaincy work and the group processing involved in that experience that I really became comfortable and confident in my own voice. It took great time and effort for me to get to that place, for though it is Christ that I too desire to point people to, when we speak, the spotlight inevitably finds us, and our place in the story becomes part of the story. And we have to sing.

This is the power of Mary's particular role, and these hymnic words on her tongue. A song that lifts up those whom God has lifted up. A song about faith proven true. A song about a life lived by conviction finally proven out by God's faithfulness. A song about how God will right the balances someday for all those oppressed. In this way, Mary speaks not just for herself, but as a figure of all Israel. She sings as a figure of God's people. She is the every-person. She speaks, but her voice takes on a tone that does not befit a twelve-year-old girl. Her words carry a wisdom and a sense of experience that she has not had time to learn from her own experience. She has taken on a voice that does not derive from her personal experience; it is a collective voice.

Mary's song is not just the song of a twelve-year-old girl, for while sincere, it is also a collective song. It is the song of every Israelite who has put their hope in God for redemption, for forgiveness, for the future. She sings the song for every person whom God has called out of the shadows and given a place in God's redemptive work, including you and me. She sings the song for everyone who has waited and prayed and pleaded for the proud to be brought low and the humble lifted up.

Mary's song is an interlude in the story when testimony comes to the fore. Where the voice of the lowly and redeemed gets the stage. Mary's song is an expression of joy that roots joy firmly in the experience of knowing God's favor, God's love, God's call. It is not in the absence of adversity, but the presence of God's grace at work.

What is your song? What are the lyrics? What words do you choose for this moment in the spotlight? And how does your song bring light to how God is at work in and for every-person. And while you may not like the spotlight, this is the way it goes. For you see our place in the story becomes part of the story. And we have to sing. We have to speak.

This is part of what it means to be a disciple, to be one following Christ in the days when Christ is not physically on the earth. For even though, as disciples, we are called to proclaim the Christ, to point to the Christ, and to follow the Christ, the Christ, to the eyes of those listening to us, is concealed. He is, as in Mary's case, somewhere buried inside us, obscured. And so, even as we seek to point the spotlight on the Christ, the spotlight falls on us. And if the spotlight falls on us, what testimony will we bring? What song is it that we will sing? What story is it we will tell, about how our stories have become part of this great redemptive story?

Luke 1

⁴⁶ And Mary said,
⁴⁷ “My soul magnifies the Lord,
⁴⁸ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
⁴⁹ for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
 Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
⁵⁰ for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
 and holy is his name.
⁵¹ His mercy is for those who fear him
 from generation to generation.
⁵² He has shown strength with his arm;
 he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
⁵³ He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
 and lifted up the lowly;
⁵⁴ he has filled the hungry with good things,
 and sent the rich away empty.
⁵⁵ 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.”

The Return of the Redeemed to Zion

Isaiah 35 The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
 the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
 like the crocus ² it shall blossom abundantly,
 and rejoice with joy and singing.
 The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,
 the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.
 They shall see the glory of the LORD,
 the majesty of our God.

³ Strengthen the weak hands,
 and make firm the feeble knees.
⁴ Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
 “Be strong, do not fear!
 Here is your God.

He will come with vengeance,
with terrible recompense.
He will come and save you.”

- ⁵ Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
⁶ then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.
For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;
⁷ the burning sand shall become a pool,
and the thirsty ground springs of water;
the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp,
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.
- ⁸ A highway shall be there,
and it shall be called the Holy Way;
the unclean shall not travel on it,
but it shall be for God’s people;
no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.
- ⁹ No lion shall be there,
nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;
they shall not be found there,
but the redeemed shall walk there.
- ¹⁰ 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 shall flee away.

