

“How Does a Weary World Rejoice? We Sing Stories of Hope” Luke 1:46-55, Luke 1:67-79
First Presbyterian Church of Salt Lake City
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Good morning, friends. This morning we are going to look at the Canticles, these songs of praise that both Zechariah and Mary sing out in the midst of their life changing encounters of God breaking into human history. Mary sings out what we call the Magnificat, named for the word “Magnify” from her first line, “my soul magnifies the Lord.” Zechariah sings out what we call the Benedictus or “blessed be”, taken from his first line, “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel.” So, we ask this morning, how does a weary world rejoice? We sing stories of hope.

Let’s turn to our text this morning. Hear Mary’s Magnificat from Luke 1:46-55 (NRSV) **“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.’**

And now, the Benedictus of Zechariah from Luke 1:68-79 (NRSV) **“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. Thus, he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”** The Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

We are just one week away from the night of Christ’s birth, and I want to draw your attention to the importance of singing in Luke’s gospel account. Following the tradition of their ancestors, when Mary and Zechariah experience God breaking into their lives, they both instinctively rejoice through song. Their singing is important because it shows us that joy is an embodied practice. Joy tends to emerge intuitively from our bodies, it sort of bursts out of us, makes us smile or laugh, maybe even dance or shout, as we instinctively express in our bodies what we feel in our souls.

Now, I have in a previous sermon confessed my love for the Kansas City Chiefs football team. Friends, I married into this, there's nothing I can do about it. Please, just take me as I am. Though I will say, that this Travis Kelce and Taylor Swift romance, has made the games just a touch more interesting. But how many of you are sports fans of some kind? And what happens to you when your team scores a touchdown, or gets a game-winning goal, or crosses that finish-line, or gets that 3-pointer, or hits that homerun? You erupt with joy, right? Friends, I am not a 'high-five with strangers' and 'shout with the cheer leaders' sort of person... but put me in the Real Salt Lake Stadium when a goal gets scored, and I will hug everyone around me and hoot and holler like a fool. I just can't help it.

Or think about seeing your favorite musician live, in concert. We saw the Lumineers in concert this past summer and it was amazing. Several thousand people just radiating joy, singing and dancing. Friends, you all know full-well that I can't sing a lick to save my life... but at the Lumineers show, I didn't even care. I was singing my heart out.

And this is because, when joy erupts from us in these moments, our bodies have to express it. They just have to. This is what is happening to Zechariah and Elizabeth. What the angels have told them is so earth shattering, so incredible, that they simply can't help but sing about it. They burst out in song.

Music has a unique way of capturing us, doesn't it? There is something about music and lyrics that can transport us to a different moment in time, that can make us think of someone we love, that can inspire any number of feelings in us. Music is powerful.

Now because of this, people have very strong feelings about certain music or certain songs. I mean if you start asking people what the best genre of music is, you can cause a riot. Because there are folks that absolutely love country music for that way it can make a story come alive and leave you a bit weepy... and on the other side, folks who hate country music for those exact same reasons. Some folks love hip-hop and rap, it gives them a place to express their energy and even their anger... and then, of course, some hate it, for those same reasons. Some people love classical, and some love rock, some love oldies. But a big part of *why* we love the music we do, and *why* we listen to certain bands over and over, and *why* we have certain songs on our favorite playlist... has to do with what that music has made us feel, what we've been through while listening to that music, how that music has inspired us in formative years.

I mean, think of the music or song or artist that has been part of a meaningful moment in your life—perhaps at a wedding, or funeral, or maybe your first high school slow dance, or a song you heard on an international vacation, or at a friends birthday party, or you sang each day at summer camp, or was part of your kids bedtime routine, or the song that got you through a break-up, or a song of your homeland. Music means a great deal to us. Singing is one of the most profound ways we express what we feel.

This is why I never worry too much when church folks complain about worship or music styles. There are of course folks that prefer the hymns and wish the choir sang every week and then, there just as many folks that wish we'd do more contemporary music and have a band every week. But it never bothers me when people share their preferences about worship style, because here's what I know: It's not that the contemporary people really hate hymns, and it's not that the traditional people

really hate worship songs... it's that they are deeply attached to the style of music that helped form their faith. It's less about complaining and a whole lot more about a deep desire to hear the music that helps them most easily feel close to God. They simply want to sing the songs they know and love in a style that helps connect them to their own faith. So, I'm never bothered by this, in fact, this is why I absolutely love that we do a little bit of everything here at FPC. We make space for lots of different folks in different ages and stages and life experiences to sing their faith in the ways they find meaningful.

Now I know that the Magnificat and Benedictus are likely not songs that you know all the lyrics to, by heart. Of course, we can read the lyrics in Luke, but we'll never know the tune. And unfortunately, no one like The Beatles or Aretha Franklin ever covered either of these songs to get them into the mix of mass culture. Some great composers like Bach and Mozart set them to music, but I would wager that most folks aren't too familiar with these songs.

I want to just briefly look a bit at the content of these songs. Because what Mary's and Zechariah's lyrics *say*, is incredibly important. They show what hope looks like. Now, I think they do that in three key ways: **Hope from the past. Hope in the present. Hope for a different future.** Let's briefly look at this.

1. Hope from the past. Mary and Zechariah both sing songs that strongly echo themes of Hebrew salvation history. It is abundantly clear that both of them pull the lyrics from the songs they grew up singing from the Psalms and prophets. For example, the Magnificat closely mirrors the song of Hannah from 1 Samuel 2. Their songs of hope and joy, they come from remembering what God has done in the past. They burst out singing about how God is indeed faithful to their people. God has shown strength. God has scattered the proud. God has brought down the powerful. God has lifted the lowly. God has filled the hungry. God has kept God's promises, going all the way back to Abraham. God can be trusted because God has already been shown to be trustworthy. Friends, do not discount how powerful it is for you to remember what God has already brought you through. Mary and Zechariah's songs remind us that on our hardest days, it is a buoy of hope to remember that God has already done so many things that allow a weary world to rejoice.
2. Hope in the present. Both these folks sing of hope for our current situations. They remind us—and the larger world—to let God be the rock on which we stand, in this very moment. To let God lift up the poor and lowly, today, in our own time. To see that God is now, in this moment, bringing new life to the places that we, like Zechariah, feared would always be barren. Both Mary and Zechariah, they sing out about what it feels like for them to be experiencing God break through. Mary, a poor, unknown, girl from a backwater village, sings of how totally bazaar it is that “from now on, everyone in human history will know her name and call her blessed.” Zechariah, after singing about hope from the past, suddenly shifts his song and basically begins to sing a lullaby to his newly born son, John. These songs include their real lives. Friends, whatever it is you face today, in this moment, sing about it. Let your actual life bleed into the lyrics. Hold onto hope in this present moment.

3. Hope for a different future. Mary and Zechariah sing of hope for a different future, for a new world order, for a future reality that they believe God is at work bringing about. Their songs ignite that thrill of hope that awaits us, after too long a silence, after everything has been way too hard for way too long. Both sing of our God, who has something better for all who imagine that the world can be different. What do you hope would be different in our world? For wars to end, for everyone to have enough to eat, for children to be protected, for the elderly to be cared for and honored, for the planet to heal. We could go on and on. Zechariah and Mary, they imagine a different future and they believe that starting with the birth of Christ, nothing will ever be the same again.

As Zechariah sings his prophetic lullaby over John, we see that he imagines a future that he describes like this: **“By the tender mercy of our God, a dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to all those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”** Our God, marked by tender mercy, will guide us into peace. No matter how dark it all seems, no matter how much it feels like death has won, the light and salvation of God WILL break through. Friends, this darkness we face, it is not the end. The light of God’s tender mercy has and will continue to shine.

In Mary’s song, we see that she imagines a future that is less metaphorical... and has far more practical implications. This is a song about equality, about corrupt systems of power and greed finally being held accountable. It’s a song where the poor and lowly are lifted up and the rich and powerful are brought low. It’s a song where abusers and dictators are taken off their thrones and the proud and arrogant don’t get the last word. I mentioned this last year, but it’s worth repeating. Singing Mary’s Magnificat is quite literally against the law in some countries... and you can probably see why. It sings of a world turned upside down. At least that’s what it looks like to us. But to Mary, she has the eyes of faith to see that this great reversal is actually the power of God to turn the world right-side-up. This is how it was supposed to be... God is turning the world right-side-up again.

In a few minutes, we’ll sing together “The Canticle of the Turning,” a hymn taken right from Mary’s Magnificat. In the first verse it asks this hopeful question, “could the world be about to turn?” As it goes through Mary’s lyrics, it begins to declare with new each verse, **“Wipe away all tears, for the dawn draws near, and the world is about to turn!”**

Friends, this is what these songs of hope ultimately declare. We can sing of our hope from the past. We can sing of our hope in the present. And we most surely can sing of our ultimate hope for a different future.

So, if hope feels just a bit out of reach today, the act of singing offers the power to transform us. This is exactly why we sing together each week. So let us embody our joy, let us worship our God, who is turning our world, and each of us, right-side-up again. May we open our mouths and sing.