

Sermon Advent 4C

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There comes a time in every young person's life when they begin to question some of the things they took for granted as a child. I don't know exactly when it happens - maybe it's when we reach that "age of reason," but some of the *magic* of childhood begins to fade, and we begin to become wary of the things that never once bothered us when we were younger. For me, the thing that I became skeptical of during that trying age, of all things, was Musical Theater. Because, you see, in every work of this genre, the characters in the story will be going about their business when all of a sudden, someone just bursts out into song. "Nobody would just start singing like that!" I would say, "It's silly!" I never questioned the premise before - in fact, if you count things like Mary Poppins, the Wizard of Oz, not to mention Disney Movies - it would be nearly impossible to pinpoint a time before stories and song were intertwined - It was just a part of life growing up.

I can remember sitting there watching a Musical on stage as a preteen, arms crossed, thinking "This is totally unbelievable." But thank goodness, it was just a phase, and I once again learned to embrace Musical Theater as a creative expression, and once again allowed myself the freedom to enjoy the fact that some things are just better off sung than said.

Well today, we are witness to a bit of Advent Musical Theater. This fourth Sunday of Advent, as we stand here, trembling with excitement for the arrival of Christmas, our gospel scene opens with the young mother Mary entering into the home of her cousin Elizabeth. And to the delight of both, they each find the other (one young and one old) to be in the same expectant 'condition.' Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, feeling the child within her leap for joy, proclaims the blessing of the Lord's favor on Mary, and then Mary, in turn, bursts forth into song!

She sings: "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. 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..."

To us modern empirical thinkers, this might seem a bit unlikely. "Come on," we might think, "did she really just start singing all these words right then and there?" Well, we have to remember that there were no stenographers present there at the home of Elizabeth taking shorthand of their conversation in real time. We don't know if Mary's Song, the Magnificat it's called, was composed at a later date, or whether it was indeed a prophetic utterance which poured out forth right there in the moment...But what we do know is that the song of Mary echoes a genre of biblical writing that shows up time and time again throughout the Bible. The

stories of God's people often included these types of victory songs extolling the goodness of God who favors the lowly over the might of the proud - they were simply a part of the tradition of the faith.

The song of praise, extolling the mighty works of the Lord, was an expression of faith passed down from generation to generation, from fathers to sons and from mothers to daughters, daughters like Elizabeth and Mary. So however it was that this dramatic scene unfolded, it continued to be true for people of faith in the Biblical tradition that some things are just better of sung. So it turns out that in today's drama, Mary's Song is not a solo, but instead, her voice joins in the chorus of the faithful who have uttered before her prophetic victory songs showing forth the goodness of our faithful and merciful God. She sings, "All generations will call me blessed..." And indeed they will - yes, for her openness to God's will- but also because SHE GETS IT - She UNDERSTANDS with a prophetic wisdom, before even meeting her son, that he is sent to tear down the powers of oppression - the powers that bind us - and set God's people free. And Elizabeth speaks this blessing over Mary, saying: "Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

The message of Mary's Song is a message about FULFILLMENT of the promise. Mary proclaims, in the coming of her son, the end of a long night of waiting and the dawning of a new day, one where God's mercy is no longer something yet to come, but is a new and present reality. Fulfillment. God is now acting "in remembrance of his mercy," Mary sings, "according to the promise he made to our ancestors." She says, "God has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant."

Mary is a young woman. So young, in fact, that today, we would not consider her yet a woman. When the Angel Gabriel visited her, she was not even old enough to have been married. And in those days, you know that was young! So why would she consider herself so lowly? She wasn't barren, scorned among women, like her elder cousin Elizabeth. She wasn't forgotten. When she says God remembered her with mercy - well, she wasn't really old enough yet to have a "past."

So what's with this language about "remembering" the "lowliness of God's servant"? Well, these words aren't really about her - Although she, too, is the recipient of God's promise, these words of Mary are more about God's servant, Israel his chosen people, who had found themselves oppressed, held captive, made lowly - not only by their foreign occupiers - but by a bondage to sin and the powers of this world that their adherence to the law of Torah alone could never set them free. These words are not simply the words of a pregnant young woman, they are the words of her people, The song her people had been singing since the days of Hannah, and Deborah, and Miriam before that, the prophets from whose lips came the songs of victory for our God.

God's people had long been awaiting his mercy. God's people had become scorned among nations. God's people had been hoping, expectantly, for the day the Lord would put an end to their shame, an end to their barrenness, when Israel would finally bring forth the Son, a

shoot rising from the stump of Jesse, who would be called Wonderful Counselor Mighty God, Prince of Peace. God's holy bride had been waiting her fulfillment, to give birth to the Son of God who would finally make Israel a light to all nations, through him, the Messiah, the King of Kings.

The Magnificat was a message of hope for those in waiting. And like the songs of the prophets before her, they speak not only to the circumstances immediately surrounding her, but are messages of living hope still today for all those who are waiting... waiting for the fulfillment in the promised Christ.

As we stand here, approaching the day when we celebrate the coming of Christ, we are given, "a thrill of hope," as the hymn says, "the weary world rejoices." And what we hear this Christmas is that it is the hopeful who will be satisfied. It is expectant who will truly find fulfillment. It's those who come to this day of wonder expecting to be filled who will truly experience the promise of Christmas.

So...is that us? Are we expectant? Are we hopeful? Do we await with faith the fulfillment that only the Christ child brings? Or are we already satisfied by what the world has to offer? Are our lives already filled to the brim with "all the things"? or is there still room for that "something" still missing in our lives? Have we let this season become all about the presents, the parties, the baking, "performing" all the necessary tasks? Have we let the clutter that fills our lives and our homes fill our heads and our hearts as well? Or have we left room for the coming of the Prince of Peace?

If the coming of Jesus at Christmas is, in Mary's words, all about God's promise being remembered, all about the hungry being filled with good things, do we come to the table hungry? Do we still have space for God to remember his promise or are we just about 'full up' already? Well, no matter what sort of clutter is in and around our lives this Christmas - whether that's all the preparations for the holidays, the laundry list of things that have still yet to be done, or the emotional baggage that comes with the collision of the holidays and our own personal or family issues- hear me when I say: there's still time to make room for Jesus this Christmas.

There is still room for the fulfillment he brings. There is still time to make space for the thrill of hope in the midst of this wild and weary world. But opening yourself up to hope can be tough. And making room amidst the business for true fulfillment can be hard...because it takes being vulnerable.

It takes moving aside the things we pile up around us to fill the void. It takes recognizing that fulfillment can never come from the promises of the world. It takes accepting our weaknesses and our shortcomings and our absolute never-ending NEED for God. It takes being willing to come to the manger, heads and hearts bowed, ready to receive the gift he brings. It's humbling - it's tough - and it's counter-cultural - to admit that we DON'T have it all, don't know it all, can't do it all. But only in that admission, can we allow Christ to be OUR ALL IN ALL.

We come to the manger in recognition that, as much as it pains us to admit it, we are not complete, that we are not whole without the fulfillment that comes to us in that child. And the

fulfilment Jesus brings is strength where we lack it, peace when we don't have it, purpose when we doubt it, and redemption when nothing we can do can ever earn it. The fulfilment Jesus brings SETS US FREE from our captivity to the powers of sin and death by drowning them in the waters of baptism, and replaces it with true freedom through the power of God, bought for us once and for all on the cross.

The promise of Christ at Christmas comes fully to us only when we are expectant, when we open ourselves up to be "pregnant" with hope. And like Mary, carrying that promise, means becoming vulnerable to trusting in God saving work.

I heard a story this week shared by Andrew Wright of the Seafarer's Mission: He wrote of a volunteer with the mission who visits incoming ships to offer support to the seafarer's while they're on land. The volunteer had been assisting a deeply distressed seafarer who was far from his home in China. He offered to take him to town to take care of some of the things he needed before his ship left port again. While walking with the man down the main street in his town, the seafarer reached out and took the hand of the volunteer. It seemed that over and above any of the material things he needed, at that moment, what he needed most was a friend. At first the volunteer's temptation was to pull away in embarrassment. After all he was in the midst of his local community. What would they say?! Then he thought again. "If this is what he needs, I'll risk it." So they walked on down the street, hand in hand.

"It seemed to me a wonderful expression of what The Mission to Seafarers is all about," Andrew wrote, "reaching out the hand of friendship and support" to those in need. "At Christmas," he went on, "we celebrate a God who reaches out his hand" to each and every one of us.

Being vulnerable is not easy. In a world where we are so conditioned to "stay strong" and "hold it together," it can feel strange to be invited into a relationship where it's OK to be vulnerable - to accept an outstretched hand - to admit that we are still awaiting fulfillment. But nevertheless, we are invited to become vulnerable, to become expectant for the remembrance of God's mercy.

And when we have that living hope within us - when we allow SPACE for that divine spark to grow within us - then others will want to come and see, and have the spark ignited within them as well. Hope in Christ is something that others can see in us. When we have the boldness acknowledge that fulfillment only comes from trust in something beyond us, others will see that in us.

There's a phenomenon that many pregnant women discover as they progress and they begin to "show" - they begin to be able to spot every other pregnant woman everywhere they go. Often there's a knowing glance or smile exchanged, a mutual recognition of the shared state they're in.

With any luck, it won't be our waistlines that grow this Christmas, but instead I pray that as we live in hope, we would grow in grace, that we would get that "glow," the "radiance" of

being filled with the Spirit, expectant with the hope that the presence of the divine in us will grow and mature, and become more and more evident in us each and every day.

Or like that greeting of peace exchanged in some cultures: “Namaste.” It means, “The divine in me recognizes the divine in you.” May our hope in God be visible to all as we open ourselves up to to carry the Light of the Nations within us.

This Christmas, may each of us reclaim the wonder of childhood. That we would welcome a return to the joy and awe that we once had when we were younger, before we “knew it all.” So that as we open ourselves up to receive the promised gift, we would be blessed to be a blessing to others.