

## **The Fourth Sunday of Advent December 23, 2018**

One of the activities my wife Britt and I enjoy during the holidays is going to the movies. Over Christmas and New Year's, we try to see as many new films as possible. We've made a list of the films we wish to see and right at the top of the list is "Mary Poppins Returns." Our hopes are high for this one. The original set the bar high. Based on the review I read in Friday's *Seattle Times*, it looks like we will not be disappointed. I think the reviewer called the movie "perfect in every way."

One of the reasons I like films such as *Mary Poppins* is that I really enjoy musicals. A good musical works magic, bringing a story to life in ways that cannot be captured by mere spoken dialog.

Who knew that *Hamilton* would be such a hit? The making of America is a great story, but if it's only imbedded in text books it runs the risk of being boring. But to say it with rap music is an altogether different story. Even a story with an incredibly thin plot like *Mama Mia* comes to life with the power of music.

When I read the first two chapters in the Gospel of Luke, I feel like I'm watching a musical. In the story it seems like everyone is singing. When Zechariah's tongue is finally loosened, he sings a great song to God, and then blesses his newborn John, saying that he will prepare the way for the Savior. When the angels announce the good news of Jesus' birth to the shepherds they light up the sky singing "Glory to God in the highest!" When Jesus is presented by Mary and Joseph at the Temple, old Simeon takes the child into his arms and praises God for the child who reveals God's long-awaited light and salvation.

The song that precedes all of these is the one sung by Mary, the *Magnificat*. Mary has learned from the angel that she will give birth to Jesus. At first, she cringes in disbelief and wonders: "who me?" Then she consents to the angels' word, for it is a word from God. And then she runs across the Judean hillside to greet her cousin Elizabeth, who is pregnant with John. This meeting of Mary and Elizabeth, famously called the Visitation, is filled with blessing all around, and when Mary speaks she breaks out in song.

"My soul magnifies the Lord ... the Mighty One  
has done great things for me and holy is his name..."

Mary sings praise to God in a hymn of unadulterated joy. What a great way to express trust in God's mercy and mystery. Sometimes all we can do is just sing.

In her sermon a couple weeks ago, our Vicar suggested we “choose hope” this Advent. Over these last few weeks of Advent, I’ve been nurtured with a sense of hope and expectancy, and that is due in large part to the abundance of gifts shared in and through this community. One of these gifts has been the opportunity to pray with you on Wednesday evenings. The part of Evening Prayer that has touched me the most is the Magnificat. It’s a stunning song of praise. Mary’s Song has been a staple in evening prayer for centuries. Small wonder. The song wallows in praise.

That’s what I like about the musical numbers in Luke’s Gospel and the Song of Mary in particular. God is the subject and object of the song. By making God the object and subject of her song, Mary teaches us something of what it means to worship.

Mary begins her song with gratitude to God for choosing her and doing a great thing in her life, but she doesn’t linger there. Notice how the song may starts with “me” but soon expands beyond “me” into a hymn praising God who has and does and will do amazing things for all the world that God loves so dearly. I fear too many songs shrink faith into a private deal where gratitude is expressed for what God has done for me and me alone. Mary’s Song enlarges praise and faith to describe the Creator who redeems the world and has kept faith and covenant with God’s people. Mary is so confident in God’s saving work that she speaks about as an accomplished fact:

“God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of the hears.  
brought down the powerful from their thrones.  
lifted the lowly, filled the hungry with good things,  
sent the rich away empty. Has helped his servant Israel,  
remembering his own mercy, holding fast to the promise  
made to Sarah and Abraham and their descendants.”

Like many of the hymns we sing on a regular basis, God is the subject and object of Mary’s prayer, Mary’s song.

Mary’s Song rekindles hope, for it reminds us that God is alive and well and doing something in the world, something transformative and life-changing. It’s not only for Mary or for you or for me, but a merciful thing that continues to change the world by reversing the pecking order of tyranny. What Mary describes is God’s revolutionary work.

When Mary sings of the God who topples arrogant powers, lift the poor and forgotten ones, she knows of what she speaks. God chose her - a poor peasant girl. In her culture

as an unmarried pregnant woman, Mary could expect to be treated with shame and judgment and exclusion, but the fact that God chooses to work through Mary – and all those the world regards as little, and those the dominant powers seek to intimidate – says that God’s work of overturning the systems of the world has begun! God’s power, as Pastor Van Kley reminded us last Sunday, is the power of love, and it turns the well prescribed and well-ordered powers of hatred and domination on their head. We sing with Mary this song of praise to God in the confident hope that this God who works silently and with mercy is at work subverting the systems and hierarchies of domination.

Yes, daily we hear of the machinations of this kind of power – unchecked greed, war, oppression, government shutdowns, terrorism, high crimes, and so on. Take these things seriously, but do not give them too much power. The Gospel’s stubborn insistence is that we trust in the power of Jesus, whose way of love has been and is and will be the first and lasting and everlasting word.

God is changing the world. Now, don’t count on this making headline news. It never does, for the work of God is hidden; but the great promise is that one day it will be all-in-all. Through our baptism we’ve been enlisted to participate in this holy work of healing. One way we continue to be part of this subversive work is through song. Even if you think you can’t carry a tune in a bucket, your song counts. You’re part of the song to God and around the throne of the Lamb. To be caught up, with your sisters and brothers, in worship and praise to God is, in and of itself, a sign of resistance to those arrogant powers. In worship we claim our true allegiance to Christ.

There’s no rule about it all. If you feel grumpy this Christmas, that’s okay. You can still join our common song to God. If you are filled with gladness and glee, that’s okay too. If you’re feeling the pangs of grief or sadness, that’s okay. If you’re sick in your body or feeling sick in your hearts because you or someone you know is suffering mightily or close to death, you can sing too. And if you’re feeling on “cloud 9,” sing.

You don’t have to feel a certain way and all manner of circumstances are welcome. For regardless of where we are or who we are, we are united in song to God, for our hope is in the one in whom we trust always and in all places. So we sing with Mary, with Simeon, with Zechariah and Elizabeth and all the angels a song of defiant hope, deep mystery, an unaltered praise for the advent of Jesus, the child in the manger, outshines the deepest darkness of sin and evil and suffering. That’s why we join Mary and Elizabeth and all the saints and angels and all the church in singing and making music, for God has done marvelous things! The Christian life is something of a musical, and the God of Jesus Christ is the subject and object of our song. Join your voices to the eternal hymn of praise. Amen.