

Hearing Joy

Third Sunday of Advent – December 14, 2003

Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passage (NRSV)

Luke 1:39-56

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."
⁵⁶And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.

The "signs of Christmas" continue to point our way towards the birth of the Christ-child. This journey involves our senses: We continue today with hearing!

Sheer Joy!

Luke is a master storyteller and is in no hurry to get to the story of Jesus' birth. In last week's passage, we saw a befuddled and skeptical Zechariah struggling to use sign language to tell others the remarkable news of the angel Gabriel's visitation and the announcement that Elizabeth, Zechariah's long childless wife, would give birth. When Elizabeth was about six months pregnant, Gabriel made another visit. This time he visited Elizabeth's young, poor, and unmarried cousin, Mary. Mary was engaged to marry Joseph, and she was understandably perplexed by the angel's visit. Despite Mary's virginity, Gabriel told her that God's Holy Spirit would come upon her. She would conceive and give birth to a child to be named Jesus and called the Son of God. Her son would be given the throne of David and a

The Magnificat

Mary's song in verses 46 to 55 is often referred to as the Magnificat, after the first word in the early Latin translation of the Bible (the "Vulgate"¹). In the Vulgate, the opening of the song is "'Magnificat anima mea, Dominum", or, "My soul doth magnify the Lord." As you can see, the NRSV preserves the word "magnify" in its translation of the couplet that opens the song. Other translations use words like "proclaims . . . exalts . . . praises . . . glorifies." Mary knows that this is magnificent!

Over the centuries, Mary's Magnificat has been set to music by many, but certainly the most well-known piece is Johann Sebastian Bach's choral masterpiece, the *Magnificat*. One of the few times that he used a Latin text, Bach's *Magnificat* debuted on Christmas Day, 1723, at the Church of St. Nicholas (really!) in Leipzig, Germany.

1. In about 400 AD, a Christian Bishop, Jerome, translated portions of the Bible into Latin. His work and that of others developed into the standard Latin version of the Bible, known as the Vulgate. This Latin Bible was the dominant Bible for centuries. At the time of the Protestant Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church designated the Vulgate as their only official Bible. It may surprise you to learn that it was called the Vulgate because in 400AD Latin was the common or "vulgar" language!

kingdom that would have no end. To all this Mary would simply reply, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” (See Luke 1:26-38 for the announcement of Jesus’ birth.¹)

So, sometime thereafter Mary went to visit Elizabeth in her home. One woman is old, but now pregnant long after giving up hope. The other is young and unmarried, but now pregnant and carrying the hope of Israel. Joy floods the room. At the mere sound of Mary’s greeting, Elizabeth’s baby leaps in her womb. Elizabeth herself is nearly overcome with the power of it all . . . she knows

Hannah’s Song

More than 1000 years before Elizabeth’s visit with Mary, another Jewish woman struggled with barrenness, for “the LORD had closed her womb” (1 Samuel 1:6). Hannah was the first and favorite wife of Elkanah but, like Elizabeth, she carried the shame of childlessness. In order to have heirs, Elkanah took a second wife, Peninnah, who had many children by Elkanah and made Hannah’s life miserable.

After many years of this, on the occasion of a visit to the priests at Shiloh, Hannah prayed fervently for a child, promising God that she would dedicate the child to the Lord’s service. As the NRSV puts it, “the LORD remembered her,” and Hannah gave birth to a son, Samuel. While he was still young, Hannah took him to Shiloh and dedicated him to God. Samuel grew to be a judge of the Israelites and a great prophet of God. Samuel anointed both Saul, the first king of Israel, and David, the second.

When Hannah came to Shiloh with her young son, she prayed a song beginning, “My heart exults in the LORD; my strength is exalted in my God” (1 Samuel 2:1). There are numerous parallels between Mary’s song, the Magnificat, and Hannah’s son. Both songs focus on God’s turning the world upside down – he “raises up the poor from the dust . . . he lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes” (1 Samuel 2:8).

that Mary is the mother of her Lord. This story invites us to look back on our own lives and find those moments when we were flooded by joy and excitement that seemed to overwhelm, that seemed impossible to contain. Surely, Elizabeth and Mary experience that and more!

Mary’s Song

Fred Craddock notes that there are a couple of things about Mary’s song that deserve special attention:

- God is praised in terms of what he has already done. All the verbs dealing with the establishment of justice and mercy are *past* tense. Recall that the promises from Isaiah about a child being born, a Son given, were all in *present* tense. As Craddock puts it, “the language expresses what is timelessly true: past, present, and future without differentiation.”² It is a way of expressing confidence in God and the certainty of his promises. Mary knows that God’s promises are as good as done!
- Verses 52 & 53 are the most intense images in the song. They are a classic statement of God’s purposes. God turns the world upside down. He brings down the powerful and lifts up the weak. He feeds the hungry and sends away the rich. Though these can be hard words for us to hear, compare them to Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). From his first choosing of Israel, God had always been the protector of the weak and the champion of the oppressed, and he expected no less from his own people. Mary was oppressed (a woman in a patriarchal culture) and poor and inconsequential – she *knew* that she needed a Savior (v. 47). The difficulty for the rich and powerful has always been that their seeming self-sufficiency blinds them to their own need for a Savior. Unless we recognize and embrace our need to be saved, the Christmas proclamation will never be anything more to us than a nice story about a pregnant teenager, a baby in a manger, and some gift-giving.

There is so much going on at Christmas that I often struggle to keep my priorities straight, to hear the true joy of the season. Perhaps I should spend more time singing Mary’s song. Does my soul magnify the Lord? Do I truly rejoice in God my Savior? Do you?

¹For more on the story of Gabriel’s visit to Mary see the Sermon Background Study for December 22, 2002, “Ordinary People and an Ordinary Name.” It is available online at www.standrewccl.org as are all of the background studies.

²from Fred Craddock’s commentary on Luke in the *Interpretation* series, John Knox Press, 1990.

Daily Bible Readings

(Other "songs" from the Bible . . . like Mary's Magnificat)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 1 Samuel 1:1-2:11 Hannah's story and song</p>	<p>Day 2 Exodus 15:1-21 After crossing the Red Sea, both Moses and Miriam lead songs</p>
<p>Day 3 Luke 1:59-80 Zechariah's song after the circumcision and naming of his new son, John</p>	<p>Day 4 Judges 5 "The Song of Deborah," offered in praise of God for the Israelite victory over the Canaanites</p>
<p>Day 5 Deuteronomy 32:1-43 Near his death, Moses recites the words of this song to the Israelites as they prepare to enter the Promised Land</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

Are You Part of a Sunday Morning Class?

Sunday School classes have always been a vital part of United Methodism. At St. Andrew we offer a wide variety of adult classes on Sunday morning. There are nearly twenty different classes! Whether you are looking for a discussion-oriented class that focuses on the Bible or a class that emphasizes parenting or even a lecture-oriented class, there is something for you! Information on the classes is available at the information counter in the Narthex and also on-line at

www.standrewumc.org

Please visit one next week!

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Can you even imagine the sheer joy that must have been running through Elizabeth and Mary? Luke's Gospel is filled with such stories of joy. What are some joyful stories of your own life? What have been the most joy-filled times in your life? I remember that when my first son was born I felt like I was electrified . . . though, in truth, I don't know that I can really describe my feelings. Perhaps it was one of those out-of-the-body experiences. I simply remember being joyful in every part of my being. Perhaps that is what it was like for Elizabeth and Mary. Discuss what these joyful experiences have in common. How might they point us toward God, especially God as Savior and Redeemer? What does the power of these experiences reveal to us about God?
2. Today's theme focuses on *hearing* joy. The scripture passages for this week are all songs from the pages of the Bible. Some were explicitly said to be "sung." What role does music play in our lives as Christians? Why is music featured so prominently among St. Andrew's ministries? John Wesley's brother, Charles, wrote thousands of hymns. "Hark! the Herald Angels Sing" has the words of Charles Wesley set to the music of Felix Mendelssohn. What is it about music that makes it such an important part of Christmas? What are some important ways in which the sacred music of Christmas differs from the secular music?