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When Mary Sings a Song of Protest at Pentecost

St. John's Lutheran Church, Northfield, MN

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Luke 1:46-56

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."

First Reading

Acts 2:1-21

1 When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ²And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. ⁵Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?" ⁸And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." ¹²All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" ¹³But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine." ¹⁴But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. ¹⁵Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. ¹⁶No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: ¹⁷"In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. ¹⁸Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. ¹⁹And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. ²⁰The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day. ²¹Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

Come Holy Spirit, our souls inspire and awaken us with your refining fire. We pray this in the name of Jesus, the Crucified one. Amen.

I love to go swimming. Not to swim laps for exercise, but simply to be in the water, swallowed whole, by the ocean, or the lake, or the public pool. In fact, my favorite thing to do in a body of water is to dive deep. To just swim around, beneath the surface.

It's so quiet. And just as the noise of the world grows distant, the noise in my head is hushed, and I can find myself. I can wake up to myself again. But, of course, I cannot stay there. I have to come back to the surface.

When the world is chaotic and heart rending and uncontrollable, and the pools are shut down, music is my ocean. It is that place that can hush the dizzying sounds that are both inside and outside myself, and it takes me deep. Deeper into the moment of whatever is going on around me. And I can find myself again.

I can remember on September 13th, 2001, two days after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, some friends and I had tickets to the Minnesota Orchestra. And like musicians do so well, they pivot to their context, to the moment. And even though the programs had been printed days earlier, the Orchestra scrapped the first piece, *Symphonic Metamorphosis* – it just wasn't right. Not for that night. No, instead at the orchestra's request, the musicians entered the stage in silence and performed Edward Elgar's *Nimrod*. With its fluctuating dynamics, its unresolved tension, and laden with anticipation, it sent each one of us deep down into our grief, and fear, and anger, and just let us stay there for a while. And when the piece was over and we came back to the surface, we were by no means healed and whole, but we were different. More awakened to ourselves and to each other.

That's the power of music. Of a song.

On Thursday morning, after the first night of a city burning down, during a Press Conference, Minneapolis City Council Vice President Andrea Jenkins was invited to speak. And she began....by singing.

Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.

And for 25 seconds, she took us down deep. To the quiet. To the place where we can find ourselves, our hearts, our voice again in the midst of it all. And I'd find it hard to believe if not everyone in that room had a lump in their throat at that moment.

That's the power of music. Of a song.

This morning, I want to talk with you about another song. Mary's song.

Today is Pentecost, which tends to be a loud Sunday. Our clothes and paraments would be loud with red shoes, red stoles, red sweaters, and red bowties. Our service would be active and loud with a children's processional at the beginning and maybe a red helium balloon slowly and accidentally floating to the rafters. Our Acts 2 reading would be loud, as we invite multiple readers, speaking multiple languages, to take us into the cacophony of sound that was that Spirit-led Pentecost so many years ago, a powerful moment with the disciples in that house that filled with the rushing wind of God, and the devout Jews from every nation hearing a personal word from God for each one of them, in their own language. It's a loud Sunday – this Pentecost.

But today is also Feast of the Visitation, which sounds....churchy. But May 31st is the day the Church commemorates when young mother Mary, pregnant with Jesus, the Incarnation of God, came to her cousin Elizabeth, pregnant with John the Baptist. I imagine it was a quieter day. But a day still filled with power. Because on this day, Mary doesn't host a gender reveal party. On this day, she doesn't have a baby shower. On this day, she sings a song. A song about the world she wants for her child.

This morning, I want to talk with you about this song. Mary's song. Too often, by our Christian art and Christmas pageants, we've been led to think of Mary as sweet, and meek, and mild.

At the center and heart of Mary's song are these words, "God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; ⁵³God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty."

If that does not sound like a song of protest, I don't know what does. A protest and a plea for things to be different than they are. That the world is not as it should be.

And this is song is Mary's song. Mary, who will give birth to Jesus. Jesus who listened to this song from the studio of Mary's womb, letting those words sink into his ever growing divine and human body. Jesus the incarnation of God, the promise and proclamation of God with us. Jesus, the one who will stand up to empire with Holy anger, but not holy violence. Jesus, who will call out the injustices of the world, *and* tell Peter to put away his sword when the fear gets the best of him. Jesus, an unarmed brown-skinned Palestinian Jew, whose own neck will be crushed by the knee of an empire in the form of a cross.

The cross, which the late Dr. James Cone calls the ancient symbol of lynching.

As Christians follow a crucified Savior, yet "when lynchings and Christianity were so much a part of the daily reality of American society," Dr. Cone says, "white Christians were silent."¹

So let's not be silent. Our Savior Jesus was lynched. And if that disturbs you, it should. But it should not surprise you. Every Sunday your preachers stand up here beside Jesus on the Cross,

¹ James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, pg. 96.

a man killed by hanging on a tree, the book of Acts says. And we dare to point and say, “There’s our God.” And yet, as the late Reverend Dick Dalin said on the Sunday after Martin Luther King Jr was assassinated, “We keep building crosses.”²

Make no mistake – we all watched Christ be crucified this week. Christ was put on the cross we built for him once again. It was Christ’s face pressed against the bruising concrete, sponging George’s blood. It was Christ’s lungs that could not breath as the weight of empire and power and privilege and deeply systemic racism knelt on his neck. It was Christ body that was carried away, lifeless.

And will we dare to say, “There’s our God.” Not in the unflinching, cold, embodiment of abusive power, but in the broken and powerless one who cries out for his mother and also for a glass of water. “I’m thirsty,” Jesus cried out from the concrete cross.

And so when Mary, the mother of Jesus and the prophet of hope, announces that there is a divine stirring inside her, ready to be born into the world from her body, she does so with a song, that sings ahead of its time.

*God **has** brought down the powerful from their thrones. God **has** lifted up the lowly. ⁵³God **has** filled the hungry with good things. God **has** sent the rich away empty.*

In a moment, we will sing this song in the form of a hymn, “The Canticle of the Turning.” And I’ll admit – when I first suggested this hymn for this Sunday, I had no idea how connected it would be to the events of this week.

“My heart shall sing of the day you bring. Let the fires of your justice burn.” Those are hard words to sing today, when fires have both grabbed our attention and illuminated injustice, but have also been co-opted by those threatening life and community and progress.

“From the halls of power to the fortress tower, not a stone will be left on stone.” Those are hard words to sing today, when those halls of power do need to be ripped down stone by stone, but then we distort the image of God in ourselves and in others when we heave those stones at one another..

“Mercy must deliver us from the conquerors crushing grasp.” Those are hard words to sing today, when we’ve watched the conqueror crush yet another black body.

And my first impulse was to protect you from this hymn. To do a last-minute hymn-exchange, to something more palatable. But then, with the help of my brilliant colleagues, we discerned that maybe it is just the right song to take us to the depths and back. To help us dive down from the surface of everything, the noise and the fray, to hear our own heart beat again. To find

² <http://naomikrueger.com/2016/03/21/palm-sunday-1968/>

ourselves, and the Spirit of God alive and at work in us, calling us to the work of justice that is before us.

Maybe it is just the right song because there are also words of this song that are not hard to sing.

“My spirit sings of the wonderous things that you bring to the ones who wait....could the world be about to turn?”

“Though nations rage from age to age, we remember who holds us fast.”

“Wipe away all tears, for the dawn draws near, and the world *is* about to turn.”

Mary’s song takes us to the depths of ourselves. This song holds within it the horror and the hope of our faith.

So many voices are telling us we can only hold one thing in our hands. It’s either this or that. It’s either rage or compassion.

When so much of our faith asks us to hold multiple things at the same time. The gospel of John says Jesus was full of grace *and* truth. As people of faith, we are ones who hold onto the horror of the cross *and* the hope of the resurrection. As people of faith, we are the one who know what it is to be both sinner *and* saint at the same time. We know our need for the law – that protects and preserves the sanctity of life- *and* our need for the gospel – which restores us to try again when we’ve failed.

We can hold two things at once.

So, we can raise our voices and move our feet at the murder of George Floyd by someone who was called to serve and protect life, *and* we can stand against the death threats made to local police officers.

We can both check in on our black and brown friends *and* we can check in our law enforcement friends.

We can be awakened and illuminated by the fires of rage at centuries of injustice while same time working to put out the fires of outside agitators seeking to confuse and consume our communities.

What we *cannot* do is let injustice distort us anymore than it already has such that it becomes our knee on the neck of another.

Let us stop building crosses. And it begins by dismantling the racism and white supremacy, that lives in our communities and in our own hearts.

If you, like me and so many others, are new to this, and that all sounds really daunting, then do not be afraid. We all begin somewhere. We will do this together. Reach out and we will find a place to start with you.

And yes, this is an altar call for those who wish to give their life to the Crucified Jesus and to do the work of dismantling the crosses we build.

Come, all you who are ready.

And so on this day when Pentecost and the Feast of the Visitation collide, let us sing Mary's song, trusting that the Holy Spirit stir in each one of us.

I want this song to take us all down. Down into the depths of ourselves. Beneath the fray. Let it stir us and stir within us. Let it refine us so that we might find ourselves again. The core of our faith rooted in the horror and truth of the cross *and* enlivened and inspired by the resurrection of God's undying love for you and for every single life in this world.

And when we come back to the surface, may we be different.

Lord, could the world be about to turn? Dear gracious and loving God, I sure do hope so. Come, Holy Spirit. Come.

Amen.