

ADVENT FOUR, YEAR C, DECEMBER 19, 2021

Music! More than any other time of the year, we are inundated with music, specifically Christmas music, and we have a variety of choices to sing or listen too. We have everything from classical, country, rock, religious, contemporary, secular and novelty songs. I dare say most people know the words to, at least, one Christmas song despite their religious or non religious background.

Music has existed from the beginning of time and has always been a part of humankind so I feel music is in our DNA. All of nature have their songs too. We talk about whale songs, and the clicking sounds dolphins make. All animals and insects use different sounds or notes to communicate with each other. We even use the music of waterfalls, and trees and other nature sounds to lull us to sleep. It all points to the fact that music is so very powerful. We listen or play music or sing songs when we are happy and even when we are sad and in times of national tragedy. Why? Because music has the ability to elevate, humor, strengthen, and even heal people. Truthfully, music brings communities together and reminds us that our connection to one another is more powerful than fear. It's no wonder that even Steven Spielberg used music in *Close Encounters of the third kind* to communicate with the aliens.

Through music we can celebrate a moment with irreverence and reverence, with wackiness, love, and beauty. I truly believe music can reach places words alone can never find because music has a way of reaching the deepest depths of our souls. A friend of mine who moved to France a few years ago was attending a Christmas Choral concert at a local church when a complete stranger next to her just reached over and held her hand through one of the pieces. As she said music unites us so that even language differences dissolve. It's true music can't solve the world's problems or fix what is broken but it can make a difference and sometimes that is enough.

The Bible is also filled with many such songs, and it is clear why music was an early feature of the Christmas season given all of the songs Luke uses in the first several chapters of his story about Jesus. Mary sings when she is greeted by her cousin Elizabeth (today's reading). Zechariah sings when his son John is born and he can finally speak again. The angels sing of peace and goodwill when they share their "good news of great joy" with the shepherds. And Simeon sings his song of farewell once he has seen God's promises to Israel kept in the Christ child. These songs and other Christmas carols speaks to the deep places of our wondering about God.

Now looking at the song in today's Gospel – Mary's Song also known as the Magnificat is one of those songs that is well known and has been put to music by numerous composes such as Bach, Vivaldi, Mozart and John Rutter. They're soaring pieces of majestic beauty and joy. However, in many cases Mary's song has become sentimentalized not from the musical portion but from the art that has surrounded this song. You can probably see in your mind's eye a painting that you have seen about Mary or Mary and Elizabeth together. Most artists have depicted Mary as being subservient, or afraid, or gentle with an angel overlooking her. It is probably a peaceful and pastoral scene which has contributed to diminishing the words of her song.

When I go back and look at all of the songs Luke wrote I realize that the songs on the lips of these people are ones of resistance. Yes, sometimes they are of joy and sometimes of camaraderie, but Luke sees singing as an act of resistance.

Mary's song is anything but sentimental. "He has shown the strength of his arm, he has scattered the proud in their conceit. He has cast down the mighty from their thrones and lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things: and the rich he has sent empty away," Mary's song says the haves and have-nots, the powerful and weak, business and economics will be turned upside down. It sounds political or some would say it sounds more like a socialist revolution and it is.

Mary is talking about a revolution in how we understand God, how we understand our lives, and how we are meant to live with each other. We are so accustomed to a certain set of arrangements—power is best, success is the whole point, wealth is essential. But Mary's song is the honest expression of what God has been about all along—caring especially for the poor, the left out, the vulnerable. Jesus came, he said, "to bring good news to the poor." The song she sings has the power to change the ways we live our days. Maybe it's time to embrace our own flawed, limited humanity. Maybe it's time to embrace our need for peace and connection and belonging. And maybe it's time for Mary's Magnificat to make us so uncomfortable with the poverty of the world that we find some way to respond. You see singing is an act of resistance and the world has known this from the first song that was sung.

African American slaves knew this. When they sang their spirituals they were both praising God and protesting the masters who enslaved them but couldn't keep them out of God's promise of deliverance. And the civil rights leaders knew this, too, singing songs like "We Shall Overcome," when so many in the society didn't give them a chance to advance their cause of justice, let alone triumph.

Many of you might remember the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 or read about it but there is an element that many people don't know about. That element was called The Monday Demonstrations. The people in Leipzig did something unusual. For several months preceding the fall of the Berlin wall, the citizens of Leipzig gathered on Monday evenings by candlelight around St. Nikolai church – the church where Bach composed so many of his cantatas – and they gathered to sing. And over two months their numbers grew from a little more than a thousand people to more than three hundred thousand, over half the citizens of the city, singing songs of hope and protest and justice, until their song shook the powers of their nation and changed the world. Later, when someone asked one of the officers of the Stasi, the East German secret police, why they did not crush this protest like they had so many others, the officer replied, "We had no contingency plan for songs and singing."!

Mary and Elizabeth knew this as well. I think, they probably knew how little account the world would pay them, tucked away in the hill country of Judea, far from the courts of power and influence. And they knew how hard life was under Roman oppression. Yet when faced with the long odds of their situation, they did not retreat, or apologize, or despair, rather they sang. They sang of their confidence in God's promise to upend the powers that be, reverse the fortunes of an unjust world, and lift up all those who had been oppressed. When you're back is up against the wall and things look pretty grim, one of the most unexpected and powerful things you can do is sing.

Let us give thanks for our voices raised in song announcing that Jesus Christ is the light of the world, that light that shines on in the darkness, the light the darkness has neither understood nor overcome. It is a song worth singing - for a child is about to be born. Mary is saying that 'God wants to do something new, healing, life-giving in you, and

with you.' So, raise your voice in song and join in because the revolution of God's love and mercy begins with you and your voice. Amen