

“Radical”

Luke 1:46-55/I Corinthians 1:18-31/Isaiah 61:1-3
FPC/December 11, 2011/3rd Sunday of Advent: Joy
By Rev. Dr. Glenn Hink

I. Scripture in Song

(“Holy Is His Name” by John Michael Talbot is sung by female soloist and simple music a compliment):

“My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, and my spirit exalts in God my Savior. For he has looked with mercy on my lowliness, and my name shall be forever exalted. For the mighty God has done great things for me, and his mercy shall reach from age to age. And holy, holy, holy is his name.

“He has mercy in every generation. He has revealed his power and his glory. He has cast down the mighty in their arrogance, and has lifted up the meek and lowly. He has come to help his servant Israel; he remembers his promise to our fathers. And holy, holy, holy is his name.”

II. Scripture Reading

There is power in music. There is power in song and verse. There is power in the tunes that we hum, and the lyrics we silently sing. Let this song by John Michael Talbot echo in heart and mind as I read the full text of this song found in Luke 1:46-55, called the “Magnificat,” or “Mary’s Song.”

Read Luke 1:46-55.

III. Brief Exegesis

I am glad we can hear this text in song. It had its start as poetry and music. It was something to be heard, and remembered, and sung, and hoped. As we hear it we experience some of what the text is about. With a clear, simple tune, and the gentle voice of Mary, we are invited into the beauty and wonder of God’s salvation. And as I went around humming quietly and singing this song this week, I came to realize that this song is.....radical.

Biblical theologians who ponder such things as the origin of this text think that parts of it were first sung in the 2nd C BCE, when the Jews defeated the Seleucid Empire, and for a brief window of time were free. It was a song celebrating a military victory. And in it the singers proclaim the activity of God in their war, bringing down the mighty (their enemies), lifting up the lowly (them), and scattering the proud. It is a theology of salvation that proclaims God’s will and favor worked out on the battle field. It is a theology of nationalism, politics and war.

But within about 200 years this song became transformed. With editing and additions and a different theology the song is reshaped. Within the story of Jesus, and on the lips of Mary, it becomes deeper and richer.....and I think, more radical. Within the story of Jesus Christ there is a new way to understand God's salvation in this world....a way different than military conquest and battle.

The song begins with Mary's humility and praise. She magnifies God because God's plan of salvation for the world is coming to pass through her, a woman who is lowly on the social ladder, but willing to serve God. It is a signal that God is about something different. The salvation of God does not come through military might and political power, but through the faithfulness of the humble and lowly. And it also is a signal that the humble and lowly will have a special place in God's salvation plans.....while the rich and powerful and proud struggle. It is a radical song in a world that equates power with success.

In the song Mary next praises God, singing of God's nature. It is a clear glimpse into the nature of God's revelation to us. The mighty God who called creation into being, is also the same God who brings a mighty work to pass in the Savior Mary bears. God is also holy....and not "the big guy," or "the man upstairs," or the "white bearded benevolent grandfather." God is the Holy Other, worthy of worship and praise. And finally God is merciful.....forgiving and never giving up on us.....not on any of us. Mighty, holy and merciful.....it is a radical song in a world that sings regularly "it's all about me."

But what's most radical is the work of God's salvation in the world. God's plan of salvation for the world turns things upside down, and inside out. In the verse of poetry and song Mary sings of God:

"Scattering the proud;"

"Bringing down the powerful from their thrones;"

"Lifting up the lowly;"

"Filling the hungry with good things, and sending the rich away empty."

This song of God's salvation is not just about "going to heaven." It is about the work of God "to bring heaven to earth." It is about God's justice. This song of God's salvation is about making things that are wrong right. It has a bit of the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street in it, as it announces the end of corruption in government and in the economy. It is a warning to the powerful, and good news to the humble. The song is radical because it proclaims the salvation of God in the Savior will change the world....and most powers in the world like things just as they are.....thank you.

Before Mary's Song there were the songs of the Hebrew prophets. In Isaiah 61, our Call to Worship this morning, we hear Isaiah share a vision of God's coming salvation:

"Good news to the oppressed;"

"Release to prisoners;"

“Comfort to those who mourn;”

“A garland of joy instead of the ashes of repentance, oil of gladness instead of mourning, a mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.”

It is a radical message...a life disrupting message....and it is also Jesus’ message as he begins his ministry (Luke 4). And as Jesus lives God’s plan of salvation out in the world the proud and powerful are threatened, and the humble and lowly experience the good news. God’s salvation is radical in this world, so Jesus and the way of salvation also include betrayal, arrest, passion, a cross.....and resurrection, the most radical thing of all.

And as Paul writes to his friends in Corinth he reminds them of the radical way of Christianity in the world. It is not the way of power and war. Rather, it is the way of the cross.....the way of service, and love, and forgiveness, and humility, and trust. It looks foolish to the world.....but it is the power of God that changes the world....and God’s salvation for the world. Mary’s Song of God’s salvation turns things upside down in this world when believers live the way of the cross. It is radical.

IV. Reflections

As I went through the week humming the simple, beautiful tune of the Magnificat, I came to see some of the powerful contrasts in this song:

The mighty God, and the lowly Mary;

The established powers in the world, and the promise in a baby to be born;

The loud and grinding noise of the world, and the gentle voice of a young mother;

Military and political power, and the power of God’s love.

This song that began as a chorus celebrating a military victory has become transformed into a song of quiet trust that God’s salvation will save the world through love, one person at a time.

This song is radical because it is about living out salvation in the world. It is not an anxious human effort to create a better world. Rather it is a confident expression of the truth that God’s salvation in Christ will finally overcome evil, sin and death. It is not a fearful attempt to restore a broken world. Rather it is a joyful assertion that the new creation has already begun. It is not a nervous effort to bring people together, but rather a discovery and celebration of the fellowship God has already established in Christ. (Henri Nouwen, The Lord is Near, p.11) It is not activism. It’s something better; it’s living salvation.

One of my favorite more recent Christmas movies is “Joyeux Noel,” a French film with English subtitles. It tells the true story of the WWI “Christmas truce.” The truce began on Christmas Eve in 1914 along a front line in Belgium when German soldiers decorated their trenches with Christmas trees and candles. The soldiers then began to sing carols, including “Silent Night.” The British troops in their trenches responded by singing carols in English, including “Silent Night.” The soldiers sang for each other,

back and forth. The soldiers from both sides then did a crazy thing; they came out of their trenches, and greeted each other in the No Man's Land that stood between them. A place of death became a place of friendship. They exchanged simple gifts, brought fallen soldiers back for burial, and shared a Christmas Eve Mass together.

In the days that followed the truce continued. Despite orders to fire on each other, they refused. Finally the soldiers on both sides who shared that "Christmas truce" had to be transported to a different area, as they would not fire on each other.

The powers of world politics and war were stopped by a simple song and people who dared to sing it and believe. And I'm thinking... Silent Night sung in a WWI trench sounds a lot like Mary's song... the proud scattered and the lowly lifted up... guns are silenced and soldiers exchange greetings in No Man's Land... it's God's salvation.

And, of course, I started to think about my favorite Christmas movie, "A Charlie Brown Christmas." (Show Charlie Brown Christmas tree). In the story Charlie Brown looks for what Christmas is all about. He doesn't get any Christmas cards, talks to "counselor Lucy" for advice, watches his dog Snoopy go over the top in decorating his dog house, helps his sister Sally write a letter to Santa requesting money, and struggles to direct a chaotic Christmas play. Finally Charlie Brown is sent out to get a nice Christmas tree. "Try to do something right," he's told. "Get something shiny and bright, pink and plastic."

Charlie Brown, of course, returns with the smallest tree on the lot, with many of its needles having fallen off, but living. Ridiculed by his friends, Charlie Brown asks again, "Can anyone tell me what Christmas is all about?" Linus then steps into the spotlight, and tells the story of Jesus birth. The little tree then becomes the symbol of Christmas. It cuts through the Christmas cards, and bright decorations, and gift lists to Santa, and crazy Christmas plays. The little tree is transformed by the love and care of Charlie Brown's friends. And in the end, Charlie Brown and his friends who were stumbling toward Christmas, are together singing "Hark! the Herald Angels Sing," and for a moment all the other things of Christmas have fallen away. And for a moment you just know you are seeing something real. A humble little tree, and the voices of children in song..... I'm thinking it sounds like Mary's song... the humble are exalted, the hungry are filled with good things, and God is magnified.

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit exalts in God my Savior"... it is the song of those during Advent who would see the world changed.