

"Mary and Joseph Show the Way (Message Music)"

10:30 AM Service, Love Sunday/Christmas Eve, Season of Advent, December 24, 2017

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

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Luke 1: 46-55, 68-79

Mary's Song of Praise

⁴⁶ And Mary said,

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

⁴⁸ for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

⁵⁰ His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm;

he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,

and lifted up the lowly;

⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things,

and sent the rich away empty.

⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,

⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors,

to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

Zechariah's Prophecy

⁶⁷ Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy:

⁶⁸ "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,

for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.

⁶⁹ He has raised up a mighty savior for us

in the house of his servant David,

⁷⁰ as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,

⁷¹ that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.

⁷² Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,

and has remembered his holy covenant,

⁷³ the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,
to grant us⁷⁴ that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,
might serve him without fear,⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness
before him all our days.

⁷⁶ And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,

⁷⁷ to give knowledge of salvation to his people
by the forgiveness of their sins.

⁷⁸ By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,

⁷⁹ to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

Message Music

Aristotle maintained that music was the most moral of all the arts.

Music and the message contained therein have the power to inspire.

Never underestimate the power of good music and a good message
to inspire God’s people to lead good lives.

When Mary’s relative Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah were well on in years,

God blessed them with a son, whom they named John.

The Scriptures say,

“Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son.

Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord

*had shown his great mercy to her,
and they rejoiced with her.” (Luke 1: 57-58)*

We can well imagine the people of that time and place,

living in community in a small village,
gathering regularly in the temple,
knowing one another, knowing each other's kinfolk.

Here in the South we know well enough

to never say anything bad about someone
because you might be talking to their kin.

Folks today or 2,000 years ago are no different in Nazareth and the areas of Judea.

Stories were told and songs were shared in community.

Folks sang the songs of their lives,

and the songs they sang shaped lives.

Zechariah was so grateful for the gift of his son John

that, even though he had been struck mute,
he went to the temple, and to everyone's amazement, sang aloud.

His song included verses and insights from Micah 7

and Psalms 41, 105, 106, 111, and 132.

He strung together his favorite phrases and poetry,

which helped him to sing his faith in the Lord
who saved him, redeemed him, forgave him,
raised him up and blessed his family.

Zechariah said, *"By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,*

to guide our feet into the way of peace." (Luke 1: 78-79)

The Scriptures inform us that *"all these things were talked about*

throughout the hill country of Judea." (Luke 1: 65)

Our imaginations will not need to stretch very far or wide to imagine

that it is highly likely that Mary and Joseph
either heard Zechariah offer this song of peace
or they heard tell of the song.

Let's see: A mute senior citizen bursts out with message music after having a son...

yeah, they heard about it.

Mary and Joseph would have gotten, grappled with, grasped the message in the music.

Their community was not so large or distant or removed

that such a song of peace and grace would have been lost or ignored.

Hey, we have it, and we had to read it in the Bible.

Mary and Joseph could well have heard the message in the music,

a message of courage, of tender mercies,
of shalom in times of upheaval and chaos, growth and change,
and of the incarnation of God's promise.

Do you sense the musical connection between Zechariah and the young couple?

Do you think the message and the music gave Mary and Joseph a bit more courage,

courage to bear God's child?

Do you wonder if the tender mercies of God

that Zechariah testified to in his song
reminded Mary and Joseph from whence help comes?

Zechariah sings as one filled with the Spirit of the Lord,

giving thanks that the light of God
is dawning "*to guide our feet into the way of peace.*"

Very soon thereafter Mary and Joseph are Bethlehem bound,

carrying the memory of his song in their hearts
as they took steps to give birth to the Prince of Peace.

We know this story, we know this song, for this is our narrative, this is our music.

Message music is transformative.

Message music gets beneath your skin;

it goes to work below the surface, burrowing into your soul;
it becomes a connecting thread in the fabric of your life.

Consider our brothers and sisters who are coping with memory loss.

They may wrestle with many of the memories of their past and present details,

yet they often remember music.

Our beloved often recall songs,

songs that shaped their lives and gave them joy and meaning.

The memory of music is a new dawn that *"guides our feet into the way of peace."*

Message music is subversive.

Consider the poor people's movements that changed society.

Americans from all walks of life marched and fought nonviolently for civil rights,

singing "We Shall Overcome" and "Down By the Riverside".

Never underestimate the power of good music and a good message

to inspire God's people to lead good lives, to be guided in the way of peace.

Consider that in each generation in recorded history and theology

the oppressed have lifted every voice and sang songs of liberation,

each note and phrase giving strength to the dispossessed and disinherited
while striking fear and doubt in the hearts of oppressors.

To quote Gil Scott Heron, *"The revolution will not be televised; it will be live."*

Songs of freedom and justice will be sung live, in community

– and hopefully in the faith community! --
proclaiming the news the Good News
that God's will for liberation is dawning
"to guide our feet into the way of peace."

The music and the message of protest songs

worked in harmony to give strength, courage and hope.

Consider that in each generation in recorded history and theology

the oppressed have lifted every voice and sang songs of liberation,
each note and phrase giving strength to the dispossessed and disinherited
while striking fear and doubt in the hearts of oppressors.

We are all the better for the message music of the Psalmists and Woody Guthrie,

Bob Dylan and Bob Marley, Miriam Therese Winter and Holly Near,
Paul Robeson and Peter, Paul and Mary,
the Indigo Girls, U2, and Mary's song, the *Magnificat*,
and so many more souls in so many genres
who care for God's people and the planet we share.

Today is Love Sunday.

May every day be a day for creating loving relationships.

Love requires that the whole people of God work and play and sing together, in unity.

There is love

when people are brought together for a common cause,
a common song, a common purpose which benefits all,
including those who are not present
to speak for or defend themselves.

When you sing, dare to ask who is not made welcome.

Whose voices are we missing?

Where is the missing ingredient, the missing descant,

the missing element necessary to create a compound called peace on earth?

And what are you and I going to do about it, together, to make our song complete?

Remember, my friends, that what you win someone with is what you win them to.

Message music can go both ways;

it can be either Good News or news that is ill.

A relative liked to say, "*Garbage in, garbage out.*"

What she meant was, "*If you listen to trash, you are bound to be influenced by it.*"

For example, if you give ear time to music with misogynist messages,

with messages of hate or prejudice or discrimination,
what effect do you think it has on you or on your relationships?

Our sisters at Spelman College recently hosted a national conference

on anti-women lyrics in popular music.

Neither our friends at Spelman nor I nor anyone here are expressing a rant

about any particular type of music;
we do offer to the world and one another a loving word of caution
that the messages you willingly receive on a regular basis
will work themselves under your skin.

You and I have the power to choose what we will listen to

and, in grateful response, what we will offer to the world.

Your song has the God-given power to take on a life of its own,

a life beyond its initial offering.

Never underestimate the power of good music and a good message

to inspire God's people to lead good lives.

How many of us have returned from camps and retreats and worship services

happily humming and hearing again and again the music and the message?

Every time we sing Christmas carols in worship and in our home,

are you like me, so easily able to recall singing carols in another place and time?

Get the Message of Music

When I was growing up in NYC

our church youth and adults went caroling along the sidewalks of East Harlem.

We would go out after the Christmas pageant on a Sunday evening,

some of us still in our costumes of shepherds and kings and angels,
Mary and Joseph showing us the way.

No matter how cold it was nor how dark the night,

we sang as loud and true as we could
so that our voices would carry up, up, up to the top floors
of the low-income projects,

and we would pray for lights to come on,
and they would!

Lights overcame the darkness, and a new peace was created.

Faces and families would gather at the windows

and open them wide – despite the presence of Jack Frost –
to hear the singing, to welcome into their lives the love,
the receive the music with a message that
“Christ, the Savior, is born, Christ, the savior, is born.”

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!