

Rev. Lynne Ogren  
December 23, 2018

Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown, MT  
4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent, Year C      Luke 1:24-56

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

This Advent we have been paying particular attention to the songs that are part of this year's readings for worship. Three songs come from Luke's gospel and Mary's song this week is probably the most well-known. It is often referred to as the Magnificat which is the Latin word for "magnify" found in the first line of the song, "My soul magnifies the Lord."

Mary is a favorite member of the Christmas narrative, especially for those with a Roman Catholic background. Lutherans have been more cautious about how much attention we give to her. Even though we do not pray to Mary, we do not lose sight of her important place not only in the birth of Jesus but throughout his life. John's gospel tells us that she stood at the foot of the cross as Jesus gave her into the care and keeping of one of his most trusted disciples.

But Mary is not the only woman present in this part of the story. Elizabeth, her cousin and the mother of John the Baptist, was there. And there are others, other women whose voices are carried from Israel's ancient past into the present moment. These are women who also sang songs of praise at key moments in the history of God's people. Now, keep your eye on the words of Mary's song as we look at a few others.

The first of these is Miriam, who saved her baby brother Moses from Pharaoh's edict to slaughter the Hebrew boys at birth. Miriam was with Moses and their brother Aaron through each of the plagues that eventually led to Pharaoh releasing them from their slavery. But, we remember that Pharaoh changed his mind and sent his army to chase after God's people. God's power parted the Red Sea, providing a safe crossing for the Israelites, and then crashing in on the Egyptian soldiers.

Safe on the other side it was Miriam and the other women who led the people in praise and worship of God with tambourine, dancing and a song. In Exodus chapter 15 they sing, "The Lord is my strength and my might, and he has become my salvation."

Later in Israel's history we read of the birth of the prophet Samuel who grew up to anoint the first kings of Israel, including King David. Samuel's mother was Hannah. Like many of our key women in the Bible Hannah was not able to have children. She went with her husband to make the annual sacrifice year after year, praying desperately for a child. Finally, the old priest Eli saw her praying and weeping. Eli blessed her and before the next year's sacrifice Hannah gave birth to Samuel, a name which means "I have asked of the Lord."

In her joy, Hannah responds to this gift from God by choosing to give Samuel to Eli the priest to raise as a spiritual leader. When she brings her child to Eli she sings a song. "My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in my God...the bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength...The Lords kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up."

And then we come to Mary's story, a story that begins with another barren woman, Elizabeth, who is given the gift of pregnancy in her older years. Elizabeth has her own words of praise, which I imagine she could have sung in her joy. "This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people."

When Mary arrives, Elizabeth's child leaped within her and Elizabeth perhaps sings a blessing to Mary, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!"

All these women, over the ages, led their people in praise of God's mighty acts of salvation. Even the birth of a child is a mighty act. Time and time again God brought life out of death for women whose bodies seemed to have no life to give.

Each of these songs, from Miriam's to Mary's, is built one upon another. One of the reasons we love Christmas carols so much is that they give us ways to remember and retell a treasured story. It is likely that each of these women's songs were passed along through the generations so that when Mary began to sing, she used words and phrases she already knew, words of God's strength, words of appreciation for God's favor, and words that tell how God upends the expectations of the world.

When Mary is visited by the angel with this amazing and unsettling news that she will have a child quite unexpectedly, she is told to go visit her cousin Elizabeth who is already six months along with her pregnancy.

God knew that Mary would have questions. She would need support. We read that she stayed with Elizabeth and Zechariah for three months. That would have been enough time to have been present for John's birth. Mary could have learned about pregnancy and childbirth from any other woman, but Elizabeth understood that just as she was carrying a special child Mary was, too. They needed one another.

Women are generally good about gathering with one another when the going gets tough. Several years ago one of my friends was anticipating that her marriage was about to end. She knew she would need help to get through that difficult time. Very casually, she invited a number of women to go to dinner together. We started having these nights out pretty regularly. As we got to know one another better we began to trust one another.

We journeyed with our friend through her divorce. We accompanied another through the death of her sister from a brain tumor. They patiently listened to me as I wrestled with my sense of call to become a pastor. Others had trouble with their children. And in between it all, we celebrated births and birthdays, weddings and anniversaries.

Men gather for support, too. Sometimes that looks like going hunting or fishing together. Sometimes it's a round of golf or a hockey game. Sometimes it's sitting around a table having lunch at Poorman's or in the fellowship hall having coffee. At the hospital there is a men's cancer support group. And we have both men and women who serve as Stephen Ministers for those who need a companion through a challenging time.

God has created us to live in community so that we can share the burdens and celebrate the joys that life brings.

It can take a measure of strength to admit that we need a community around us. It is tempting to keep our emotions or our worries to ourselves. We are embarrassed of our tears or we don't want to bring others down with us. That is not the example we receive from Mary and Elizabeth. God draws us into community so that we can share our fears and our joys with others.

Our Lutheran writings teach us that there are three ways we receive God's grace. The first is through Holy Baptism where God claims us as daughters and sons as pure gift to us. The second is in Holy Communion where we receive the body and blood of our Lord Jesus for the forgiveness of our sins.

The third way we experience God's grace is through the "mutual conversation and consolation of the brothers and sisters."<sup>1</sup> In other words, God is present in and among our relationships that are caring and supportive and loving.

In Christian community we learn from our ancestors of the faith, like Sarah and Abraham, Miriam and Moses, Hannah and Samuel, Elizabeth and Mary. We learn to sing their songs so that when we are faced with both the gifts and challenges of life we have words that proclaim our trust in God's strength to carry us through. We remember God's mighty acts and God's promises that have been fulfilled. We learn to lean into their faith and the faith of those who surround us in this gathering of believers.

May the songs of our mothers and fathers fill us with praise and faith and blessing as we gather to receive God's grace and strength through those who sing with us.

Thanks be to God! Amen

---

<sup>1</sup> *The Use of the Means of Grace*, ELCA