

Sermon – “Spirit Rejoicing”
Scripture – Luke 1:39-45, Luke 1:46-55
Sunday, December 20, 2015
Rev. Hannah Dreitcer
Westminster Presbyterian Church
Springfield, Illinois

We are delighted to present a portion of Handel’s *Messiah* under the leadership of Dale Rogers at each worship service this Advent. For this fourth week of Advent, as we draw ever closer to Christmas Day, our quartet presents “Glory to God in the Highest,” those well-known words from the gospel of Luke sung by the angels on the night of Christ’s birth.

But before that night of awe and wonder, we have the story from the first chapter of Luke, verses 39 through 45, of an unmarried teenager, trying to come to terms with the news of her impossible pregnancy. Hear now God’s holy Word.

39 In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, 40 where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. 41 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit 42 and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. 43 And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? 44 For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. 45 And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." Amen.

Our second reading continues the first chapter of Luke through verse 55, with Mary’s response to Elizabeth, that beautiful proclamation of God’s Word known as the Magnificat.

46 And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, 47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, 48 for God has looked with favor on the lowliness of the Lord's 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 God's name. 50 God's mercy is for those who fear the Lord from generation to generation. 51 God has shown strength with God's arm; God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. 52 The Lord has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; 53 God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. 54 God has helped God's servant Israel, in remembrance of the Lord's mercy, 55 according to the promise God made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever." This is the Word of the Lord.

The title of the sermon: “Spirit Rejoicing”

Text: “And Mary said, ‘My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior...’” Luke 1:46-47

Let us pray: Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit, that as your Word is proclaimed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. And may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

There’s something about Mary. She is, I think it’s fair to say, the most famous woman in the world, and the most beloved. The Catholic Hail Mary is said to be the most prayed prayer in the world. Even

in our Protestant tradition, which threw off Mary worship hundreds of years ago, we feel like we know Mary. In my time here at Westminster, I've come to feel like she's a friend of mine, since from my usual seat in the Chancel I look right at her, and always feel that her stained glass eyes are looking right back at me, gently smiling at me each Sunday morning, as if we're sharing a joke, or the same glory in gathering for worship and lifting our voices in praise.

We feel like we know Mary. She is one of a handful of named, vocal women in the Bible, and is the only woman we return to year after year. For this is as much Mary's season as it is Jesus'. We hear her story again and again each December, in Scripture and song and pageant, watching and imagining this one day in her life over and over. She is so loved, so comfortable, so safe, this Holy Virgin Mother, quiet and still in her clean stable, graciously accepting whatever comes her way, smiling silently at her child and all who come to worship him. This is the Mary we know. This is not the Mary of today's text.

Immediately before today's reading, Mary has been visited by the angel Gabriel and told she will conceive and bear a son, Jesus the Messiah. In response to her shock at this impossible thing, the angel tells her of her barren elderly relative Elizabeth, now miraculously and impossibly six months pregnant. So when the angel leaves, Mary sets out to find Elizabeth and see this other impossible pregnancy for herself.

The Gospels, though abundant with God's Word, are not rich in detail. We don't know why Mary left, or who she told her extraordinary news to, or how her parents reacted. We know only that Mary is young, very probably in her early teens, unmarried, and now pregnant. And what is the first thing she does upon finding out she's pregnant? She runs away! Okay, maybe that's a bit of creative license. We know that she sets out in great haste. Maybe she was sent away in immediate disgrace to this little town in the Judean country, handed off to elderly, pious, impeccable relatives before her pregnancy begins to show.

But the woman she sets off with great haste to visit is the other woman in the midst of an impossible pregnancy. The text says that Mary set off—not that she was sent off—so whether she ran away or got permission, Mary—this pregnant teenager—is stubbornly making her own choices.

And over in the house of Zechariah, Elizabeth's pregnancy isn't the only spectacular thing happening. Her husband, the devout Zechariah, is mute, and has been ever since he refused to believe the angel Gabriel's message that the barren Elizabeth would bear a son. I remind you of Zechariah because our text today ignores him. Our reading takes place in his house, yet he is entirely absent, trapped in the silence of his disbelief. Instead, it is Elizabeth who is filled with the Holy Spirit—Elizabeth who feels her child leap within her and who exclaims with a loud cry—who shouts out to Mary the blessing at the heart of that so oft-repeated Hail Mary: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!"

Elizabeth, full of the Holy Spirit, prophesizes. She is amazed and astounded and perplexed, and yet **knows** that this runaway teen mother is the mother of her Lord. Her husband heard the angel's message and did not believe, and so is silenced. Elizabeth sees Mary and recognizes the Christ within her, and shouts out, and blesses Mary for believing "that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." Unlike Zechariah, Mary believed, and is blessed—and she is anything but silent. She lifts her voice and SINGS.

This is not the silent night. This is not the angelic Virgin. This is a determined pregnant teenager, traveling alone to find the one woman who may understand, and whose loud shouts of understanding lead her to proclaim the good news of the coming kingdom, to PREACH the Word of God:

“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior!”

To magnify—to make larger—Mary’s soul is making large the activity of God in the world, just as her body is becoming larger with the reality of God in the world. “The Mighty has done great things for me!” Mary sings, rejoicing in God’s favor.

But what favor, exactly? Who are these women to prophesy and preach with such joy, in a world that does not hear them? What has God done, actually done? Mary is now exposed to shame and disgrace. These women so united in joy will be united again in grief, for both these children will die at the hands of a powerful state. Mary sings of a vision of God’s kingdom where the hungry are filled with good things and the proud and powerful and scattered and brought down—and **we** are STILL WAITING for that kingdom.

It is the fourth Sunday of Advent—this waiting is getting old. We have been waiting and waiting for Christmas, and we have been waiting for two thousand years for the arrival of God’s kingdom. Jesus is LATE. We are still waiting. Mary’s song echoes the ancient song of Hannah, a woman who waited and longed for a child and who knew nothing was impossible with God.

Hannah’s song and Mary’s song both speak of a compassionate God, a God who cares for the despairing and downtrodden, a God faithful to the hurting and heartbroken, a God who will turn the world around for mercy, peace, and justice. Their songs are almost identical—except for one little detail. Tense. Hannah’s song looks ahead to the wonderful things God will do. Mary sings of what God has already done.

Christ has not yet been born! Christmas is not yet here! The pastors won’t yet let you sing Christmas carols! Jesus is not yet born, but he has already been formed and is found within Mary. And Mary knows, oh does she know, that the world has already been changed. And she rejoices with a fierceness that goes beyond comfortable happiness and safe contentment. This rejoicing holds her hope and assurance and also her terror and doubts, for Christ is not **yet** born. But Mary knows that this child barely formed within her is the Messiah, that God’s kingdom has already arrived. The reversals of fortune she sings of—the lifting up of the lowly and the scattering of the proud—have already taken place, for the pious priest Zechariah has been silenced and she, this disgraced pregnant girl, has been glorified and her voice lifted up. So Mary sings of what God has already done.

This is the odd place we live as Christians—declaring that God’s kingdom is coming even as we declare that God’s kingdom has already arrived. We are always still waiting and always already rejoicing. God is about to do a new thing—and God has already made the world new. We still plead for the arrival of Emmanuel; still wait for the new heaven and new earth, still watch for signs of Christ in our broken and fearful world. Yet we cannot, will not be silenced, and lift our voices to sing Glory to God in the Highest Heaven with the angels, announcing the good news of the Word made flesh to the shepherds and all who would hear.

We sing with Mary of what God has already done, our spirits rejoicing at the world made new in this Christ who is NOT YET born, but who is already here. But we still have the labor pains of birth to live through with all their mess and danger—for this labor—this work—is not even close to finished.

And so we live in this tension, rejoicing in what has already happened and preparing for the work to come, declaring that God has already made the world new and longing still for the coming kingdom. And here in this place of contradiction and paradox we must live like Elizabeth and Mary. For with Elizabeth we are called to recognize Christ within others, no matter how unexpected and shocking. With Mary we are called to magnify God—to make God’s activity in the world larger for others, to tell again the good news of this kingdom where all things are new. And with both women we are called to rejoice—not to be quietly happy or comfortably content, but to shout and sing with a passionate ferocity, a loud, exuberant exultation of our fears and doubts held together with and met by our deep assurance and hope.

God’s kingdom is at hand—the work is still ahead of us—the labor is not yet through. But Christ is already in the world. God has already made all things new.

Glory to God in the highest heaven! Holy is God’s name, for the Mighty One has done great things for us!

Amen.