

Dec. 19, 2021 Advent 4C
When Mary's Song Becomes Ours
Luke 1:39-56

I'm thinking back to our cantata a couple of weeks ago and one song in particular. You know, Christmas songs are joyful and upbeat and full of good thoughts and good feelings. And in a way, they are almost too nice. We had a cantata song called "Somewhere in Your Silent Night." Some of the words were:

*All is calm and all is bright everywhere but in your heart tonight.
They're singing carols of joy and peace,
But you feel too far gone and out of reach.*

They bring some reality back into some of the sentiment. The song contains phrases like:

*Somewhere in your silent night Heaven hears the song your broken heart
has cried...
Love has come to find you...
There's no distance the Prince of Peace won't go...
When your pain runs deep, His love runs deeper still.*

Those are not the thoughts we generally associate with Christmas. They are a far cry from "Joy to the World" and "Hark the Herald Angels Sing." And yet they are so fitting to the message of Christmas. And to the song Mary is singing in our Gospel reading.

The Rev. Paul Murray once wrote that "hope is a song in a weary throat," and amid this hopeful season, amid this weary age, we would do well to consider what such a song sounds like. It's easy to miss sometimes, the hope-song, because it doesn't always sound the way we might expect. We are too easily distracted by the beautiful arrangement to listen for the soft, tremulous music that hope makes.

Hope is the song that comes from a place of anxiety and worry and sometimes fear. It is the song one sings under the breath. The hope-song is not elegant, but it is faithful. It is honest. It is the song one offers up when the song is all that's left to offer.

Consider this music, then, as we travel with Mary to Elizabeth's house. Forget for a moment the lush choral arrangements of the *Magnificat*. Don't be fooled by the prophetic boldness of the words alone. Remember that there is a fearful precariousness to her position. She is a young woman walking uphill in every sense of the word, seeking the comfort of a familiar face when everything else has suddenly become so very unfamiliar. We might wonder: did Mary sing to herself on the dusty road to the hill country? Was it a song that her own parents once taught her that she practiced on parched lips? Or did she call it up from somewhere deeper within, from the Spirit-infused cells of her very depths, determined to give voice to what was true, even when her life seemed to be caught in uncertainty?

Regardless, she sings, and it is indeed hope in a weary throat, reverberating into eternity: "My soul magnifies the Lord."

Like any hope-song, there is defiance here, along with the joy and the fear. Yes, Mary says, yes, *my* soul, *my* very self magnifies the inexpressible holy name of God. The soul that belongs to this body in all its frailty and in all its uncertainty—this is a place where God is revealed. Obscure, vulnerable, enmeshed in the tragic history of my people—I may be all of those things, but God is disclosed in them, not despite them, and God has chosen to take part in this world through me.

And so, Mary sings!

Mary will sing though she is weary, though she is frightened, because in the singing she can place herself within God's story, not just a circumstance. She sings a song of victory, not of victimhood. And look at some of the words. She becomes a teller of hard truths and the bearer of hard hope, the type that survives—it is God's people's hope, and not just her own.

So we sing at Christmas.

Do we sing to bring a new reality into being or to uncover what is already true? The Kingdom is already, and it is not yet, but either way, Mary knows what must be sung, both because she carries the King within her womb, and because she is herself a blessed figure—a wisdom-figure, worthy in her own deep humanity, as each of us is, to discover and proclaim the hidden, unfolding power of God. Her song belongs to her ancestors, and it

belongs to the child she will nurture. It belongs to all of us. It is ancient, and it is new. It is forever.

And thanks be to God for that, because we need hope-songs now, just as desperately as Mary did then. We need to be reminded of what God is doing in Mary and why—the dream that God has placed therein, the dream that God invites us to bear into the world, the dream which refuses to be dispelled even by centuries of disappointment and degradation.

And it is especially important for us to remember, in the loud holiday season, that the song that tells of this dream is not always the loudest or the most popular. It is, instead, the one borne of deep, soul-stirring circumstance. The one that, when you hear it—even when the throat is dry and the voice is garbled by tears—still the melody is recognizable because we have been singing it forever.

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

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly.

He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

But what do we do with this song of Mary's? How do we make it truly our own in a new and urgent time? Do we put it on a t-shirt or a bumper sticker? Do we write a few more books about it? Host a conference to assess the meaning of the words? Arrange it into a new musical setting?

We could. We do. We protect ourselves, sometimes, by turning Mary's song into an ornament when, in truth, it demands everything we have.

Because that's the thing about the hope-song: you don't really know it, you can't really claim it until you yourself have sung it with a weary throat. You can't grasp the words until life has grasped at you, until you have been forced to walk up a few hills of your own, whether by choice or chance. And so, if we really want to sing the song, if we really want to mean it, we must first ask ourselves how attuned we are to the God-moments of our lives and those of our neighbors. We must examine how vulnerable we are, and how open we have been to the risk of Jesus' invitation to follow him, on the path first trod by his mother.

And in our self-examination, we might find that we have indeed been brought down low by life, that we are hungry for good things, and that this song of hope will lift us up if we have the courage to trust in its promise

and lend our voices to its chorus. For the weary among us, the challenge is to show the world that we are more than our present despair.

Or it may be, for many of us, that we find ourselves to be the ones already in high, comfortable places, the ones who have never relied so much on hope as we have referred to it, because we are ensconced in other, richer melodies—the ones that lull rather than vivify. If so, it is time for us to wake up. It is time for us to come back down to earth and stand on holy ground. Because it is only from there, where Christ abides, that we can truly begin to live in the way God dreams we might.

Either way, Mary's voice is calling out to you. So, whoever you are, wherever you find yourself, follow the sound of the hope-song. Let it guide you into the place of encounter with your most unencumbered self, and into relationship with the Holy One who calls you onward.

Mary has shown us the way, she has shown us the words, and she has shown us that while hope may be well-acquainted with weariness, it points beyond it, too, toward the place and time when a new song will be born—one of hope fulfilled, of rejoicing, and of rest. We are still learning how to sing that new song, but it is coming. And it is now here.