

Luke 1:39-56
20 Dec. 09

“A Song to Sing”

Mary sings The Magnificat. (“My soul magnifies the Lord”). In fact, there’s a lot singing in the early part of the Gospel of Luke. (Too bad they didn’t make a CD.) When John the Baptist is born, his father Zechariah sings what we heard a couple weeks ago: Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people, and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David. And you, child, will be called the prophet of the most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death.” That song is part of the service of morning prayer called matins.

When the old man Simeon sees the child Jesus he sings, “Lord, now let your servant go in peace according to your word, for my eyes have seen your salvation which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.” When I was growing up, we sang that after Communion each week.

Mary sings her song today, “My soul magnifies the Lord.” And, of course, there are the angels who sing to each other and to the shepherds, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!” You know that as the hymn of praise, still used as an alternate to the hymn from Revelation, “This is the feast of victory for our God.” There’s just all to of singing in these first two chapters of Luke.

Why? I read recently that organists are theologians of the sighs too deep for words. That’s a reference to the letter to the Romans which says that God’s Holy Spirit prays for us in sighs too deep for words. I would say it a bit more broadly: musicians are theologians of sighs too deep for words. Because words are not enough. Oh, yes, we are people of the book, people of the Word of God. But the Word of God is much more than words. The Word of God is God’s divine plan of salvation; the Word of God is Jesus come in flesh; the Word of God is Jesus come in bread and wine; the Word of God is in song and lives and prayer with sighs too deep for words. Musicians are theologians of this Word, of these sighs.

Songs are powerful things. Laments express our grief and fear so as to honor these deep and difficult emotions and simultaneously strip them of their power to incapacitate us. Songs of praise and thanksgiving unite us with God, bring us into God’s holy presence in a joyful way. Songs of hope bring hope. Songs are powerful things.

We recently observed the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. Char one asked me if I thought the wall would ever come down, and I said probably yes, but not in my lifetime. The Soviet and East German police states seemed so air tight. Those inside them who opposed them seemed so weak. So when it fell I was certainly surprised. So were many others. Maybe we were surprised that what brought about its fall was not some strong military action but the opposition of those weak people inside those police states. And do you remember what they did in the months leading up to the wall’s fall? Do you member what they did to bring the wall down? They

gathered in places like Leipzig, in the church of Johann Sebastian Bach, and they sang. By candlelight they would gather to peacefully and prayerfully protest. As their numbers grew to thousands and then to more than 300,000. And they sang songs of hope and protest and justice until their singing brought down the East German regime. Songs are powerful things.

The powerful are mentioned often in the beginning of Luke's Gospel. "In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled. This was the first enrollment, when Quirinius was governor of Syria," etc. The powerful are mentioned often. But the powerful don't sing the songs. Instead today it is two pregnant cousins commiserating on what their pregnancies are doing to their bodies and what God is doing in the world.

And what is God doing in the world? Powerful things: casting down the mighty from their thrones, lifting up the lowly, filling the hungry with good things and sending the rich away empty perhaps because being fully self-sufficient they have no need for what God is giving out. The rich and the powerful are mentioned. But it is not the rich and the powerful who do the signing. Why is it, do you think, that Luke keeps emphasizing this as he writes his story for his rich patron Theophilus?

One more question before I close: What if God is also a singer of songs? What if this is God's way of bringing down the police states. In somebody's sci-fi world the creator creates by singing. I can't remember if that's C. S. Lewis's *Perelandra* trilogy or something else. But it's the harmonious resonances of the song that bring creation into being. What if God is also a singer of songs?

That might explain why Mary's God delights in bringing about such strange revolutions that come not from mighty armies but from weirdos like John the baptist out in the wilderness preaching his baptism of repentance and eating his locusts and wild honey. And maybe it would explain why when God chooses to take the earth by storm, God does it by being born as a helpless infant who lives in the butt end of the empire and dies a death designed to humiliate. We, the feeble few gathered here this snowy morning still sing songs about them, remembering that God delights in taking what is small and insignificant in the eyes of the world to do extraordinary things.

What if God is a singer of songs? Then maybe being a Christian means to sing in harmony with God's song. Maybe being a Christian means to join Mary in her revolutionary song of magnifying the Lord who scatters the proud in their conceit and lifts up the lowly, because, like sighs, songs are powerful things. In the name of the Father and of the son and of the Holy Spirit, amen. Now let's sing.