

Luke 1:46-55 (Preaching on 46-49)
The Magnificat – God is Personal – “Family Resemblance”
December 1, 2019 (Advent I)
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Music and a mother’s voice bears influence on the development of a child, and that power extends to the womb before the child takes his or her first breath in the world. Studies have shown, for example, that fetuses can sense audio vibrations and rhythms early in pregnancy — so much so that the baby is able to recognize the parents’ voices right after birth. When a mom sings to her unborn child, particularly when she sings the same song over and over, the maternal crooning can lower the fetal heart rate and calm the child in utero.

The data suggests that even reading a story many times to an unborn child can result in a newborn’s preference for that story throughout childhood. In other words, a song or a story can imprint a child’s mind even before he or she is born. A familiar song or story, sung and repeated over and over, can have a lasting influence.

In the church, we engage in a similar phenomenon each year, it is a time when we become familiar or re-familiar with God’s birth story – which is, in reality, our birth story – we call it Advent – it is a waiting season – a season of expectation – a season of wondering – a season to re-connect with God’s hope, peace, joy, love – a season when we welcome God’s heartbeat entering this world – in a very personal, life-altering way – as a baby.

And it all begins, today – for us and for Mary – with her Magnificat – a song she sings to her in-utero child...

It’s a celebration song and a stage-setting song for the mission set before her as she will watch this divine & human Son undertake. As a poem I recently found puts it:

In love you came to a stable in Bethlehem
to become one with us.
In love you walked the plains and hills of Galilee and Judea
to teach us how to live.
In love you were nailed on a cross on Calvary
to bear away our sin.
In love you rose from a tomb in Joseph’s garden
to defeat death’s power over us.
In love you ascended beyond the clouds
to be our reigning Lord.
You came to love us so that we need never feel
unloved, deserted, alone, condemned.

It’s also – if we’re honest – a bit un-nerving – the “irrational season” as Madeleine L’Engle describes it:

“This is the irrational season when love blooms bright and wild. Had Mary been filled with reason there’d have been no room for the child.”

Let's back the story up briefly to recall how Luke's writer begins this writing: He starts with a Dedication to Theophilus (friend of God) to "write an orderly account...so that you [Theophilus – 'friend of God'] may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed." (1:3-4)

Then it moves in a most dis-ordered sort of way.

John the Baptizer's birth is foretold.

His father was a priest named Zechariah & his mother was Elizabeth. They were both getting on in years and without child.

An angel – Gabriel – appears to him during his priestly duties and informs him that his wife will conceive and bear a son – his son will be filled with the Holy Spirit before birth – his son will turn many of Israel's people to the Lord their God – his son will make ready a people prepared for the Lord (*and we thought we put expectations on our kids*). [1:5-17]

And Zechariah asks one simple question, "How can this be so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years."

And Gabriel says, in effect, "I was sent by God to speak this good news to you...but since you don't believe it, try this on for size, 'you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.' (1:18-24)

About six months into Elizabeth's pregnancy, Gabriel stops by a small Galilean town called Nazareth and appears to Mary. He says, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."

A bit taken aback, Mary wonders what kind of greeting this might be. Gabriel tells her, "Don't be afraid. You've found God's favor. You will conceive and bear a son and you'll name him Jesus. He'll be great and God will give him the through of his ancestor David. He'll reign over Jacob's house forever & of his kingdom there'll be no end.

Mary wonders how this can be – and Gabriel describes to her how God will fulfill this through the Holy Spirit – and guess what else? Your relative Elizabeth in her old age has conceived a son; and is in the sixth month and she was said to be barren. Nothing's impossible with God.

Mary responds, "...let it be with me according to your word." Then Gabriel departs.

Mary goes post-haste to visit Elizabeth. When Elizabeth hears Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaims, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. Why has the mother of my Lord come to me? As soon as I heard your voice, the child in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

And in the midst of this topsy-turvy "orderly account" – Mary sings a song of praise – I like how Eugene Peterson depicts it in *The Message*:

BURSTING WITH GOOD NEWS

The Magnificat: a passionate piece of poetry, a visceral song of occupation and liberation.

*I'm bursting with God-news;
I'm dancing the song of my Saviour God.
God took one good look at me, and look what happened—
I'm the most fortunate woman on earth!
What God has done for me will never be forgotten,
the God whose very name is holy, set apart from all others.
His mercy flows in wave after wave
on those who are in awe before him.
He bared his arm and showed his strength,
scattered the bluffing braggarts.
He knocked tyrants off their high horses,
pulled victims out of the mud.
The starving poor sat down to a banquet;
the callous rich were left out in the cold.
He embraced his chosen child, Israel;
he remembered and piled on the mercies, piled them high.
It's exactly what he promised,
beginning with Abraham and right up to now.*

I'm not so sure, I would have responded the same way.

I'm a teenager.

I'm pregnant.

I'm speaking to angels.

Yet, amid personal crisis, Mary relies on the personal God.

The God – yet to be born within her – the incarnation of God's heart – the flesh & blood Savior God.

While it doesn't sound much like orderly account, as it does, irrational season...we can somehow identify.

This is the season when things that have never happen – happen!

When things we could never have imagined – when mixed with imagination – take place!

God's spirit moves over us – and through us – and changes us – and we soulfully magnify the Lord.

And yet, let us not forget, that – if I read the text correctly – this song came early in the pregnancy – Mary still had another 8 months to get ready – and so, during this holy season of advent as we await the birth of the One who “looks with favor” on the creation into which he will bring gracious, life-giving redemption – that there is expectant waiting...

Mary's song is the song of a young woman shyly placing one hand upon a swelling belly to touch the miracle unfolding within her; it is also the song of Israel's rewarded longing for a

savior to welcome in the promised age; it is the universal song of the oppressed and disempowered which proclaims God's favor on their behalf; it is a cosmic song reverberating with truth that divine life permeates, animates, [infiltrates, and enlivens] the hidden depths of matter. (Wendy Wright, The Vigil: Keeping Watch in the Season of Christ's Coming, Wendy Wright, Upper Room Books, Nashville, TN, 1992, p.50.)

Mary's song – is our song – speaking words of hope into our irrational seasons – as we expectantly wait for hope to spring forth – knowing we are not alone.

Alleluia & Amen.