

Mary's Battle Cry

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church, Rev. Anne Fisher

December 8, 2019

Luke 1:46b-55

Sometimes how we picture things is not what actually might have happened. That is true of the Christmas story. Even when we hear the familiar story of Christ's birth, it has a way to flip it on its head. For example, the Christmas manger scene is forever altered because of my trip to Africa. I have not spent much time on a farm. Prior to my trip to Africa, I had never heard a donkey bray. It is not a gentle hee-haw but it is a terrible sound. In fact, the first time we heard it, my sister and I thought that some poor animal is meeting a very cruel end. Not only do donkeys sound loud and obnoxious, they come alive at night. As we tried to sleep with the village donkeys only a thin fence away from us, we heard the donkey snort and chomp on the grass, with the occasional but poorly timed discordant bellow. There is noise of some other things that I will not say in polite company. In fact, sometimes the donkeys have to be shooed away in the middle of the night because they have a habit of snacking on the thatched roof of the hut. My tranquil peaceful scene of that first Christmas in the stable is transformed forever. The night Jesus was born must have been chaotic. How could Mary have gotten any rest, with munching, braying, clucking, chomping, animals all around? And we haven't even begun to think about the smell!

Another aspect of Christmas that is upended for me is the Magnificat. In all my experiences at Christmas, Mary's response to Elizabeth has been melodious. It is something to enjoy. Whether it is in Canticle of the Turning that the Oak Collective will sing or played by a full orchestra and choir, Mary's words are set to beautiful amazing music. When I hear it, I am lifted high upon the wings of angels.

We see Mary in a Christmas card setting, young, innocent yet tranquil, modestly averting her eyes. She has the perfect words to say in response to this incredible event. Mary is never portrayed as still and peaceful in the

Bible. She is either travelling dangerous grounds, giving birth, worrying about her son, or standing at the foot of the cross.

When we read Mary's words when hear the words she speaks this Christmas season, it is then that we discover the power of those words. These words are a battle cry for the world absolutely to know of God's majesty and might. A reading from Luke 1: 46b-55:

⁴⁶And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, ⁴⁷and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, ⁴⁸for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; ⁴⁹for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. ⁵⁰His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. ⁵¹He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. ⁵²He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; ⁵³he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. ⁵⁴He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, ⁵⁵according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

This is the Word of the Lord; Thanks be to God.

A tragedy happened to a very family close to us. Their beautiful bright, talented, athletic, daughter was out jogging on a familiar path in an upscale suburb in the middle of the day and was attacked. She was left for dead. Although, over time, healing has occurred, the scars remain and most are unknown to all of us. It was a brutal unjust crime. There were very few "she should ofs..." that would have avoided this. Our friend was a victim of daring to be outside in a "safe "neighborhood in daylight, and she was over powered.

After this incident, our daughter-in- law, MaryAnn, who is a Presbyterian minister, wrote a note to our friends. In it, MaryAnn quotes the Magnificat. She writes, "The song that Mary sings does not simply ask God but demands that God be strong in the gathering, the filling and the lifting up"

As our friend continues to work through her terrible trauma. As she continues to build up her strength and embraces her life, we begin to see her not as a victim but as victorious.

Mary's song becomes a call upon God on behalf of all of us who have been hurt, and battered and demeaned, and overpowered. It is a song for all of us who have not had the voice or are afraid to stand tall and come forward. Mary's Magnificat gives us that voice. She breaks the silence in a way that does not say that she alone carries the power and strength but it is in God where the ultimate power rests. She sings of God's mighty acts. It is God who listens to the cries of the lowliest.

Our friend, who was over-whelmed by the evil force of another, will not be defeated by that brutal act. She will rise up from it with God's mighty help.

It is in Mary's words, we find the strength to defeat the forces in life that overwhelm us. It is in the words of an unknown young girl, we find the call to God to be with those who are outnumbered; over powered; and unsung.

The God of whom Mary sings is not about a fragile china nativity divinity that we get out on special occasions. Divine intervention into the world is a familiar theme to the world that Mary knows. Roman and Greek mythology is filled with their gods coming to earth and impregnating young maidens. This is different. This is different because the angel sought Mary's permission, and the miracle is that Mary, very human Mary, said yes!

Mary sings a song of faith and defiance. The world will be turned on its end because of what God has just done. This is not a feel good just God and me personal praise; it is not a, "look what god has done for me" song; it is a testimony on how God's presence disturbs the status quo and rocks the foundations of social order.

Mary's song is a cry from the heart, for all the broken spirits and all who suffer injustice. Mary's song is for all of us who are frightened, and the insecurity that we hide inside. Mary's song touches on the anger that comes

when others dismiss or demean us. Mary's song is for the countless victims in our world who have done nothing to deserve their fate. This song is for the children at the border, separated from their parents. This song is for the families in Syria torn from their homes as political pawns. Mary sings for those who have been afraid to speak out and are finding their courage after years of feeling ashamed. Mary sings for you and for me.

God is present with us and knows our pain. God is walking with our dear friend and her family God's presence is with all who are touched by tragedy or whose worlds are turned upside down in an instant.

This is the other Christmas story that we do not talk much about. It is the Christmas Story that turns things on its own head. It is the story of how we need a mighty God to lean upon and to right the wrongs. This story takes a young girl from the farthest end of the greatest Empire known at that time, and lifts her up as an equal in bringing Immanuel to us. If the Romans had been listening carefully, they should have been very afraid. This story is subversive to those who think they hold all the power and are in control.

Because an order from the government declared a census to get more tax money, this Christmas story places Mary and her betrothed in a stable far from home -- with loud and smelly animals -- so that she can give birth to the savior of the world. A baby who will truly be the Savior of the world not because he will overpower the world through might, as all would think, but our Savior will over power the world through love and non-violence.

Like Mary, as we are in a world that is overwhelming and out of our control, we too demand that God be present with us. God's presence may not necessarily be in the form of a quiet cooing of a dove but more like the harsh and dissonant bray of a donkey. It may not come in the peace of the moment but at a time when we are laid most vulnerable and feel completely powerless. For God has a way of intruding into our lives in God's own time and way, not ours.

When the drums of war beat around us, God's power can turn things upside down and God's might bends those weapons of war into instruments for good. When we listen to what God is saying, the hungry will be fed and the powerful will be brought down. In our hearts, we know that God has the power to have the last word.

MaryAnn, my minister daughter-in-law's note, has been transformed into advent mediation and she ends her reflection this way:

“Why do we bid the savior to come? Not to create some false dramatic buildup to December 25 (will the baby arrive again this year? of course, he will, and right on time too.) no, we bid the savior to come because we still need a savior. The world still needs healing and hope. The stories of hurts, violence, and oppression that we carry within us remind of us of this reality. And so, we sing. We sing defiantly, expectantly, confident in the God who shows strength and mercy, in hope for the day when all will be free, we sing.”¹

It is with Mary's battle cry on our lips that we sing. We are called to give voice to God's mighty deeds and lift up God's mighty acts and to sing for those who have no voice and who cannot find room in a just world.

Thank you, Mary for giving us the words to call upon our God. For great is our God through our Lord Jesus Christ. That is why you, Mary, an unlikely young, country girl are called blessed by all generations. Thanks be to God.
Amen

Because

¹ MaryAnn McKibben Dana used with her permission 2005