

Luke 1:39-55 - The Magnificat

We have just read the Magnificat of Scripture- also known as “Mary’s Song.” This event takes place in the early months of Mary’s pregnancy as she goes to visit her cousin Elizabeth who is also pregnant with John the Baptist at the time. Here we have 2 pregnant women, both in what were miraculous pregnancies- and in that odd but incredible context we hear these powerfully prophetic words from two women who are filled with God’s Spirit and God’s truth. These two women are models to us today of the strength that women, or any of us can have, when we confront evil and see corruption exposed and cast down.

Mary’s Song – the words of the Magnificat - are spoken by a very young Mary and far from being a sweet, soft and lovely song, this bit of text packs a punch by turning the world as we know it upside down – in the “wondrous reversals” that the prophets are known for throughout the Scriptures. The Magnificat is, in fact, a prophetic and revolutionary text. The famous Methodist preacher E. Stanley Jones called it “the most revolutionary document in the history of the world.” In fact, the Magnificat has been banned three times in three different countries including under British rule in India when it was prohibited from being sung or recited. Later it was banned from recitation in Guatemala by the government in the 1980’s due to its strong association with the social justice movement and, finally, by the military junta of Argentina when they outlawed any public display of the Magnificat after the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo—whose children had disappeared during the Dirty War in the late 70’s and early 80’s began placing the Magnificat’s words on posters throughout the capital. So if we pay attention, we can hear the revolutionary nature of this song that our sweet, young Mary spoke forth in our Gospel.

But what kind of revolution are we talking about? Revolution is, at its heart, about radical and fundamental change. Take the “Scientific Revolution” as an example – modern science as we know it was birthed at the end of the Renaissance -many date the beginning of it to the publication of Copernicus’ work “On Revolution of the Heavenly Spheres” in 1543 when we moved from an earth-centric view of the cosmos to a heliocentric one that culminated in the 17th century with people like Galileo and Isaac Newton describing the laws of motion and gravity: this is when our cosmology changed forever. Revolution in this sense is change whereby that which was before is fundamentally different from that which came after.

As a child I experienced a revolutionary change of sorts- there was a fundamental and radical change when my baby sister was born. As the first born, up to that point I had been the center of my parent’s universe – or so I thought. And then everything changed with the arrival of a sibling, who was, mind you, followed by four other siblings in time. I did not invite the change, I did not welcome the change, and I resisted the change at every turn. My mother tells me that when she called me from the hospital to tell me about my new sister I refused to speak to her I was so angry with her. Life did change but eventually I got used to it...reluctantly. That was one of the first revolutions in my life.

In the Gospels we can see the revolutionary change that Mary’ speaks of in her song in Jesus life and teachings. This is a revolution in which God’s mercy is extended to all people, not a select few. This is a revolution in which the proud are scattered and the humble and lowly are lifted up. This is a revolution in which the hungry are filled with good things and those who have much but share none walk away empty handed. This is a revolution that ushers in God’s Kingdom. A “new order of being” demonstrating God’s love for those in need, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, those who have been cast aside and marginalized, including the people of Israel who were suffering even then under oppressive Roman rule. This is the ushering in of the upside down kingdom of God’s love.

And this is a revolution that first takes place in human hearts –a spiritual revolution by the power and hand of God in and through ordinary people like Mary and Joseph that ultimately changes the fabric of society... and still is changing it. I am reminded of Martin Luther King Jr’s famous quote, “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” This arc rests in a non-violent revolution based in love, but it is revolution none the less. And Mary, young Mary, realizes that she has been called to be a part of the ushering in of God’s Kingdom, of Gods’ revolution. She, the “lowly servant” as she says– a “nobody” in that moment in time – had been chosen and gifted by God with the most incredible honor imaginable – to bear and mother the Christ Child – “God With Us.” And this revolution, this radical change, required her to step out in faith – to say “yes” to the invitation God had given her by grace and to be God’s vessel despite the tremendous cost to herself personally. And yet with that great cost came great joy: Mary’s joy, which we remember today on this third Sunday of Advent, a joy that caused her to say, “My spirit rejoices in God my Savior.”

And Mary's example is our example...all of us share in this invitation of God to participate in meaningful ways in the ushering in of God's Kingdom. And it starts with a revolution in our hearts...a dramatic change in us that is necessary to be all that God has called us to be and do in order to participate fully in God's Kingdom. But change is hard and it can be scary, especially radical, fundamental change. Mary was no less afraid than we are – she had to step out into the unknown and trust God's grace would be with her. And it was with her- Mary – full of grace.

Like everyone one of us here, when that invitation of radical change came to me when I was a young adult, I was afraid, I didn't think I could do it, I didn't even feel worthy or up to the challenge. But God persisted in God's gracious time.

You wouldn't know it today, but throughout childhood, my teen years and into young adulthood I suffered from rather debilitating depression. It became more severe over the years until it became unmanageable in my 20's. And I knew it was going to beat me and probably take my life if I didn't address it. One night I hit a wall and I couldn't go on: I had to admit to myself and to at least one other person that I was severely depressed and that the depression was beating me. I knew I was in real trouble: failing to reach any of my friends that evening I broke down and called a suicide hotline. The voice on the other end kept me talking and kept me going until a taxi they sent arrived at my door so that they could bring me to a mental health clinic. I was terrified of getting into the taxi and talking to a therapist about all these terrible feelings that I didn't want anyone to know about. It was so hard to admit the depths of my depression and then to keep showing up and being vulnerable in therapy over the next several months. But with God's help and with those professionals encouraging me, it was simply a matter of putting one foot in front of the other, showing up, doing the homework they gave me, and working to change my thought patterns every single day. It took about two years to beat my depression. In retrospect I know God had invited me into that revolutionary change and had seen me through it in order to experience deep healing. Healing that ultimately lead to my calling to ordination and full time ministry. Without that change though, I was of no use to anyone. Years later when I went through the intense week of psychological evaluations required of all candidates for ordination, the experts were able to tell me that I was extremely healthy and in excellent mental health. I knew it was God's grace that I had experienced such dramatic change...and my soul

magnified the Lord, and my spirit rejoiced in God MY SAVIOR. I was filled to the brim with joy.

Mary's joy – Mary's faith and confidence in what God could do in and through her as an ordinary and lowly young woman is our faith, joy, and confidence too. Her faith encourages our faith. Most of us have more than one revolutionary change we need to experience in our lifetimes– depression was certainly not the last of mine. All of us have been invited to make difficult but necessary changes. Maybe it is a change in job or career, a relationship, a move, a life situation, an addiction, a bad habit, something that just nags at you to change – which is God's Spirit inviting you into change, a change that may revolutionize your life. For whatever reason, if you have been putting off this change, today is a good day to recommit to it - start by simply saying, "Yes God" to beginning, enduring, or completing the change God has for you. You can do it with God's help and grace and with the support of others on this journey- because when you move into change, you will experience and know the joy that Mary had in the work of ushering in of God's Kingdom, both in your heart and on this earth...when your soul magnifies the Lord and your spirit rejoices in God your Savior.

Amen.