

Songs of Resistance
Luke 1: 39-56
December 23, 2018

On a hot sunny day Gail and I watched the long stream of people winding their way up to a house located on a hill above us outside the ancient city of Ephesus. Why so many people and why there? Apparently, unknown to us at the time, this was a pilgrimage to what was believed to be Mary's home. Jesus had put her into John the disciple's care at the cross; tradition tells us that John was active in ministry in and around Ephesus, and that this was the home of Mary until her death.

Roman Catholics of the Western tradition and Orthodox Christians in the East both revere Mary as the mother of God. The Eastern Church calls her **Theotokos**, the God bearer, or the mother of God. After the 11th century and during the rise of the religious awakening of the 12th and 13th centuries, Mary's influence increased significantly. Prayers to Mary became a regular feature of Roman Catholic theology and practice. Given the male hierarchy of the church, the laity probably found Mary to be much more approachable than the male dominated church. In both traditions, east and west, Mary became an extremely important mediator between Christians and Jesus. Hymn and poems were written in her honour and many churches were and still are named after her; pilgrimages to sacred sites associated with her life, like the one we witnessed in Turkey, became increasingly popular. In the 19th century her importance was pushed yet further in Western Catholicism. The Catholic Church in 1854, through Pope Pius IX, officially defined the doctrine of the *Immaculate Conception* to mean that Mary was without sin throughout her life.

For many of us, especially Protestants, this is a peculiar idea that we find hard to square with our interpretation of Scripture. But that is a story for another day!

For millions of people in the world this is not a season of light and joy. Millions have been forced to flee their homes. Now they live in refugee camps. For them and for the millions displaced by war in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Myanmar, Honduras, and too many places to enumerate, life has been dark and brutal. They live in a place

described by the prophet as gloom and darkness. For thousands on the streets of our cities in prosperous Canada life can also be harsh. And yes, even for some of us perhaps, this holiday season can serve to hide the depth of our spiritual and emotional emptiness. It is or can be the most difficult time of the year for many folks. Isaiah the prophet proclaimed that those who live in darkness will see a great light and that gloom will be melted away by the birth of a child who is for us.

What do Elizabeth and Mary in our Gospel have to say to us today? What can we learn from them?

When we think of Mary, Jesus' mother, we might think of a young, girl who is "meek and mild", a somewhat naive teenager. She is certainly young and a person of faith with a limited grasp on life beyond her village community. Yet from her song she is much more than this. She is unmarried, pregnant, surprised by a heavenly vision, and vulnerable to the rejection she might face in her tiny village community. She goes off to visit her cousin Elizabeth who is also unexpectedly pregnant. On Mary's entrance Elizabeth sings:

Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.

Both these women knew just how ridiculous their situation was—one too old to bear a child, the other so young she is not yet married, and yet called to bear the child of promise through whom God would change the world. And they also knew that within a mighty Roman empire, tucked away in the villages of hilly Galilee, they were of no consequence in a world dominated by the rich and powerful. Yet, in spite of their circumstances, these women of faith sang powerful songs that reflect an inner strength belied by their social position.

Mary's gives us a powerful song of faith. Listen again to her lyrics:

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely,

from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. 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.

Protestants have tended to play down Mary in our liturgy and theology. In reaction to Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox's strong emphasis on Mary as mediator and queen of heaven, we have neglected her spirituality and powerful influence within the disciples and early Christianity. And unfortunately we are the losers. Mary has much to teach us and her example is one we ought to follow.

Mary sings a protest song that is in keeping with a long tradition of male and female voices in the Jewish tradition. Miriam sang praise to God for their victory over Pharaoh and the sea while she also played her tambourine and danced with the women.

Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea

Hannah was barren but God opened her womb and gave her a child who would be famous in Israel: Samuel. She sang a song of resistance and deliverance:

*The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength...
The Lord makes poor and makes rich, he brings low, he also exalts.
(1 Samuel 2:4-5, 7)*

All these songs, including Mary's, are powerful reminders that God's faithful stand opposed to the status quo of empire. God's servants sing of a world turned upside down where the weak overturn the world of the strong and powerful.

At this point I would like us to sing three verses of the song, O Come O Come Emmanuel. And when we sing, especially the third stanza: think of the words:

O come, Thou Day-Spring, come and cheer^[L]_[SEP]

Our spirits by Thine advent here^[L]_[SEP]
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night^[L]_[SEP]
And death's dark shadows put to flight.^[L]_[SEP]
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel^[L]_[SEP]
Shall come to thee, O Israel.^[L]_[SEP]

Think about the dark shadows that hang over the families who have lost loved ones not only due to war and acts of terror, but here at home in our community. As we sing we use these words to pray for the gloomy clouds of night and death's dark shadows that hang over so many today. Perhaps some of those shadows and gloom are what you are feeling during this season of Advent. Rejoice for Christ will come to you, we sing.

Mary's song is more than beautiful words put to music. It speaks to us of God's desire for justice in the world. The powerful are to be brought down from their thrones, the rich sent away empty, the proud scattered. These are fighting words that Mary sings. She sings about resistance to the powers that rule and who oppress the weak, gouge the poor by imposing taxes, and enslave the populous to build their empires.

The Gospel is not really about Crosby's "White Christmas", or "Jingle Bells", or any other sentimental songs that fill our airwaves this Christmas. Mary would be aghast at how far we have come down this road of the domestication of her Son's truth. Jesus' birth signals a change in the world order. It is a song of resistance to the powers of empire and the injustice and untruth they embody. Let's remember Mary's song this season.

Amen