

Luke 1: 39-55

Fourth Sunday of Advent, Year C

December 22, 2024

The Rev. Katherine Bush

I don't sing. Well, that's not exactly true. I don't sing well. I don't sing near microphones. I sing exuberantly when I'm by myself in my car and the right song comes on. And I sing quietly, almost under my breath, in church. As the inheritor of my mother's pretty flat tone, I process in and take my place next to either the sopranos or the altos, and I pretend. (Thanks, y'all.)

Here's another confession: when I was on staff at a church out east which required chanting part of the Eucharist, our own Kristin Lensch, who then served at the same church, made a recording on a microcassette of her beautiful voice chanting *the Lord be with you, lift up your hearts, let us give thanks to the Lord our God* that I practiced and sang along with on my way to church every Sunday trying to match her so that I could lead this part of worship. I thought pretty seriously about just bringing the microcassette recorder to the altar and having my own "Singing in the Rain" moment where I mouthed the words and everyone heard her voice. True story. Never did it, but thought seriously about it.

I've been thinking a lot about singing in this Advent season and the particular songs we sing. Launched by Lessons & Carols and the waves of anthems and hymns, and then you may or may not have noticed that for several weeks of Advent our usual psalm has been replaced by songs: the song of Zechariah, the first song of Isaiah, and this week, the song of Mary - which we also heard spoken in the Gospel reading.

Mary's song, the "Magnificat" for the first verb "*my soul magnifies,*" is a song which she sings to her cousin and confidante Elizabeth, seemingly as she's still standing at the front door, having just arrived in the hill country to seek comfort and solace with this wiser, older, also pregnant companion.

Did Mary compose the song as she walked from her home to the town where Elizabeth lived? If she did, she was weaving together her own thoughts with another song she likely knew very well: Hannah's song. Hannah lived almost a thousand years before Mary, yet Hannah, the mother of Samuel, sang a song inspired by her pregnancy that any good Jewish student (which Mary clearly was) would have known - maybe even known by heart. Whether Mary felt confident already in her story or was still figuring out her path, she layered her gorgeous and prophetic and strident song on the tracks laid by another brave woman who came before her.

Because the world that Mary lived in had a landscape, and she's just made her way through its geography to the hill country ... and the world that Mary lived in also had a soundscape, just like our world does. Our worlds are physical, we can see them and traverse them, and our worlds can also be heard and spoken and sung. We can speak a world into being. Our worlds are created by voices, whether those voices are familiar or strange. We add our own voices, and we decide if we're going to sing along or write our own music, or maybe, most likely: a little of both.

Even Elizabeth, it turns out, is layering and re-mixing her words of blessing with words spoken about Judith and Jael in the earlier scriptures. Both Mary and Elizabeth know the music and the stories of other women who have come before them. And in that way, they know that they are never singing alone.

When I told you earlier that I only sing alone in my car, that's pretty true. The only other time I've sung "solo," I wasn't really alone, I was singing to my little ones - frequently when they were babies, and then later only when one was sick or struggling to sleep for whatever reason. And never "Rock-a-bye Baby," the lyrics always sounded scary to me, but "Blackbird," a simple

song that acknowledged broken wings alongside hope for flight. Mary's song is also about broken things and hope, just like Hannah's song was about brokenness and barrenness turned on its head. *I wonder if their songs ever turned into lullabies?*

Mary draws on a history of anthems about impossible truths to make sense of the impossible turn her life is taking. She leans on the familiar and well-known stories and sees her own, woven into God's story. And all these stories share a powerful refrain about God's love turning the world upside down, or maybe, really, it's God's love turning an upside down world right side up at last.

And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, my spirit rejoices ... God has shown strength and scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts ... bringing down the powerful from their thrones and lifting up the lowly; filling the hungry with good things, and sending the rich away empty. God remembers mercy and the promises made...."

It takes a lot of courage to sing, even more, to sing an impossible song about God's mercy when mercy seems invisible, about justice and promises when the world seems to offer only indifference and empty assurances. Hannah and Elizabeth and Mary find that courage within them, specifically each of them finding the song humming in their bodies while they carry a child into the world.

Think about that, think about those months when a body is at its most creative and powerful, feeling sometimes invincible for what it can do, and is also so fragile, everything is so precarious and risky, it's a time to be careful and gentle. It's not a season that everyone gets to experience or wants to experience, and it's certainly not the only way to learn about strength and courage, yet those trimesters are one window into mystery and growth and hope. Mary, Elizabeth, and Hannah know that their bodies are expanding as surely as their souls are magnifying God.

And Mary, Elizabeth, and Hannah know that while they walk through their days as singular women, they are not singing alone. They are part of a chorus of voices, a choir of storytellers and hope-bearers. Mary sets out with haste to be with Elizabeth, to share her fears, yes, and also to share her joy, to stand in the doorway and sing with her about the new thing arriving. When she sings about this fresh moment in history, she pulls from words spoken over thousands of years ago to make sense of it, so that this stunning, disconcerting story fits into an ancient, recognizable pattern of how God seeks ways to move into our lives and our world.

The two women face each other, listening and speaking about a wild truth. And Mary's words collect some well-worn and well-known images written into her new song so that the songs echo each other: there is a harmony created that carries across time.

And all these words and songs now reverberate in our soundscape. Amid the Christmas carols and news alerts and stories we love to tell and questions we'd rather not answer, these songs continue to shape and reshape the world that we live in.

We can create a world with words. Words aren't the only way, and sometimes they're not enough on their own. We also need to build and embrace and give and plant and so many other tasks, but the old stories, the old songs help us see and hear and compose and sing new worlds into being. Consider the songs you know, the stories that came before your story. We weave together our thoughts and dreams with bits of stories and songs we know by heart. Sometimes we hum quietly or sing softly in the dark, but even then we're not singing alone. Other times, we join in a mighty chorus, encouraged by the sound and swell of so many voices, to see and sing an impossible and outlandish story into being.