

SINGING AGAINST THE DARKNESS
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Text: Luke 1:39-55

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "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." And Mary said, "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. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. 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. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

Have you ever noticed how much singing there is in the first two chapters of Luke?

There's the passage we just read, sometimes called the "Song of Mary," where Mary exclaims, "My soul magnifies the Lord." There's the song Elizabeth's husband, Zechariah, sings when their son, John the Baptist, is born a few months later. There's the song that a whole host of angels sing when they deliver their "good news of great joy" to the shepherds in the fields at night. And finally there's the song that an old man named Simeon sings when Mary and Joseph present Jesus at the temple in Jerusalem.

That's a lot of singing, which makes me think there must be a reason why. There must be a reason why Luke packs all these songs into the beginning of the gospel. So, what might that reason be?

Well, I think it has to do with the fact that singing is often an act of resistance. It's often

a way for people to protest something that's unfair or unjust. It's often a way for people to push back against whatever forces in life are trying to dominate them.

So, for instance, years ago, when I was living in Kentucky, there was an energy company that wanted to build a pipeline to transport natural gas liquids from Pennsylvania through Kentucky and down to the Gulf Coast, and there was a lot of concern about it. There were a bunch of town hall meetings all across the state, and on the one side you'd have representatives from the company telling everyone that the pipeline was safe and there was no danger to the environment. And on the other hand, you'd have community groups pointing out all the things that could go wrong and how devastating the impact would be if there was a spill.

One of these community groups that showed up at these meetings was the Sisters of Loretto, an order of nuns who live in eastern Kentucky, right where the pipeline was supposed to go through. In fact, it was supposed to cut right through their property. And what these nuns did was show up at these town hall meetings, stand in a big circle, and sing “Amazing Grace.” And that was it. They didn’t give any speeches. They didn’t hold up any signs. They just stood there and sang “Amazing Grace,” and it was powerful, and it made an impact. The company eventually gave up. They scrapped the whole idea. And I’m not saying it was entirely because of the Sisters of Loretto, but certainly they had something to do with it. They inspired people all across the state and encouraged them to keep fighting what seemed like an impossible battle.

Singing can be a light shining in the darkness. Singing can give hope to people who have no reason to hope. And no one understood that better than Mary. She lived in a very dark time, in a world dominated by a sprawling empire that exploited the weak and the vulnerable. And she was basically a nobody. She was a young girl, probably fourteen or fifteen; she came from a small town, far from the centers of power; and there was nothing especially remarkable about her.

But out of all the people God could’ve chosen—people with money and connections and credentials—God chose her to bear a child who’d go on to change the world. And being well aware that she was not the kind of person the world normally paid any attention to, she did what she could. She sang against the darkness, and her song is a universe away from the kind of warm, fuzzy Christmas music that’s everywhere we go this time of year.

What comes out of Mary is an explosive celebration of the God who saves—the God who looks with favor on a humble servant;

the God who scatters the proud and lifts up the lowly; the God who leads the hungry to a banquet and sends the rich away empty. This is the God who sets Mary to singing. This is the God she raises her voice to.

Advent is the perfect time to talk about singing against the darkness because right now darkness is literally gathering all around us. The days are getting shorter and shorter, and the light is getting weaker and weaker, even as we’re waiting for the light of Christ to come into the world.

It reminds me of a hymn written by a contemporary hymn writer named Gracia Grindal. The opening line goes, “We light the Advent candles against the winter light.” Not because of the winter light or during the winter light, but against the winter light. It’s an act of resistance, and it reminds me of something else that happened years ago, when I was in Kentucky.

In the church I was serving back then, there was a retired pastor named Charlie, who had cancer, and one day towards the end, he called me up and asked me if I’d come over and see him. He said he had something he wanted to give me.

When I got there, he was lying in the hospital bed that his wife had set up in the living room, and he looked very thin and pale, but he still had a warm smile on his face. So, I pulled up a chair, and we talked for a little bit, and then he handed me a folder. Inside it there were a few sheets of notebook paper, on which he had written out his entire funeral service—all the prayers, all the readings, all the music. And when I looked through it, I saw that for the closing hymn he had picked “Joy to the World,” which seemed kind of strange to me. Why pick a song with joy in the title for a day when people are grieving? Why pick a song about a holy birth for a day that’s overshadowed by a painful death?

But a few weeks later, when I was leading Charlie's funeral service, and the sanctuary was packed, and we were all singing the closing hymn, I finally got it: he had picked "Joy to the World" because he wanted us to sing against the darkness—the darkness that had overshadowed his life in the form of a terrible disease, and the darkness that was overshadowing our lives in the form of sorrow and despair.

He wanted his funeral to be an act of resistance—and it was. By the time we got to the final verse—"He rules the world with truth and grace"—I could feel my heart swelling inside me, and when I looked around, there wasn't a dry eye in the house. But we weren't crying because we were sad. We were crying because we felt those words, and they gave us hope when we had no reason to hope. They told us the world is not ruled by all the forces in life that try to dominate us. The world is ruled by a God who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry; who sets the prisoners free; who opens the eyes of the blind; who lifts up those who are bowed down; who loves the righteous; who watches over the strangers; who upholds the orphan and the widow.

Thanks be to God, and merry Christmas.