

WGUMC December 17, 2017 Luke 1:46-56
"Singing Mary's Song"

There are a lot of things I like about the Catholic Church: the beautiful liturgy, the grace-filled theology, and the rich cultural diversity. And there are some things that I don't like, namely the hierarchy and the intense devotion to Mary. Don't get me wrong; I'm glad that in Catholicism, at least, a woman gets a little credit for her role in the drama of salvation. But the portrayals of Mary in religious literature and art tend to be pretty drippy.

Mary is held up as a role model not only for women but for all Christians, and yet she comes across as being impossibly pure and dangerously submissive. She doesn't seem to have a will or a personality of her own. And I can't help but think that she is so often painted as a weak, fragile thing, because that's how the tradition has perceived women all along.

The real Mary is lost to history. But one thing we know: this image of "milk toast Mary" doesn't jibe with the song she

sings in Luke's Gospel. Scattering the proud in the thoughts of their hearts, bringing down the powerful from their thrones, lifting up the lowly, filling the hungry and sending the rich away empty: these are not the words of a wimp! So what do we make of this song and its singer?

Mary's Magnificat, as it is known by the first word of the Latin version, is not the only song sung by a woman in the Bible. Moses' sister, Miriam, sang a song after crossing the Red Sea in Exodus 15. [15:21] And one of the oldest writings in the Old Testament is the song of Deborah in Judges 5. Deborah was one of the judges of Israel, a warrior princess kind of like Xena. She led the people into battle and she won! [Judges 5:1-31]

But the immediate model for Mary's song is the song of Hannah in First Samuel. If you remember Hannah's story, she was upset about being childless so she prayed to God and nine months later gave birth to the Prophet Samuel. After Sammy

was weaned, she sang a song that sounds very similar to the one Mary sings:

My heart exults in the Lord;
my strength is exalted in my God."
...The bows of the mighty are broken,
but the feeble gird on strength.
Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread,
but those who are hungry are fat with spoil.
...The Lord makes poor and makes rich;
he brings low, he also exalts.
He raises up the poor from the dust;
he lifts up the needy from the ash heap,
to make them sit with princes
and inherit a seat of honor.... [1 Samuel 2:1-10]

Though their circumstances were very different, all these women—Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, and Mary—sang about their struggles with the forces of evil. For Miriam, it was Pharaoh's army. For Deborah, it was the Canaanite king. For Hannah, it was all the women who ridiculed her for not having children. For the unwed Mary, it was everyone who was going to question her story. Here is my question: how could these women do

battle every day with the evil and injustice of life and still sing for joy?

That was the question that author Douglas Abrams asked the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Abrams was in India with these two great spiritual leaders to facilitate a discussion about joy on the Dalai Lama's 80th birthday. He wanted to know: how is it that the Dalai Lama could be so joyful after more than fifty years of living in exile from his home in Tibet? And how is it that the Archbishop could have such an infectious sense of humor after so many decades of struggle against the violence and oppression of apartheid?

The Book of Joy is the fruit of their discussion and it is the study book that our Tuesday morning group is reading now. Together, the Dalai Lama and the Archbishop talk about joy and suggest many practices to help us clear away the obstacles and strengthen the pillars of joy in our lives.

I especially wanted to read what Tutu had to say because he is well known for his ability to bring joy into any situation, a talent that served him well in South Africa. Here's an example: One day the government canceled a rally against apartheid. So Desmond Tutu had people gather in the church instead. The sanctuary walls of St. George's Cathedral were lined with soldiers and riot police with their guns and bayonets, ready at any moment to disperse the congregation. Tutu mounted the pulpit and began to denounce the evils of apartheid. He assured the people that the powers and principalities that were propping up the system were doomed to fail. Then he pointed right at the police and told them, "You may be powerful—very powerful—but you are not God. God cannot be mocked. You have already lost." No one in the room breathed until Tutu flashed that famous smile. Bouncing up and down with delight, he said, "Therefore, since you have already lost, we are inviting you to join the winning side." And, as the story goes, the

crowd roared with laughter, the police faded away, and the people got up to dance. [story told in *The Christian Century*, Aug. 9, 2003]

Archbishop Tutu learned to sing Mary's song, but you don't have to be a living legend like him to sing along. Let me tell you about three ordinary people in this church that make me sing for joy.

Jolene Jones is a woman who is well acquainted with grief. Both of her parents died of cancer when she was a young adult. Last year, her sister died of cancer as well. And she has her own share of health problems. Now you know how hard it is to live here on a full-time salary, but Jolene's condition only allows her to work part-time. So when I met her, she was couch surfing. For a year, she lived with Ruby Goodnight. Then she lived with the Quigleys. But a lot of people in this church advocated for her until she was strong enough to advocate for herself. After a very long wait, she finally got into affordable

housing and has since become a champion of the unhoused. If you are an elected official in San Jose, you have probably run into her. She is one of the founders of the Winter Faith Collaborative that encourages houses of worship to become homes for the homeless. This year, she received an award for her work from the Junior League. Every time I think about how far she has come and what she has accomplished and what God is doing through her every day, I sing for joy.

Linda Yepiz is a member of this church who has quite a story to tell. When she was a young woman, she had some terrifying experiences and didn't have anyone to help her cope with them in healthy ways. She has struggled with substance abuse and she has known both joblessness and homelessness. Linda has a daughter who is now in her late teens and determined to live her own life and make her own mistakes. Right now, Lucy is in a very scary place. But in the midst of this struggle, God has put a call on Linda's heart and she has been

listening and praying about where that call might lead. For now, it has led her to Village House, our women's shelter, where she is working as a night supervisor. Back in April when Village House was here, I shared a few night shifts with her. I got to watch her way with the women. There would always be a few who couldn't sleep and she would sit up and talk with them. She knew just what to say, what they needed to hear. She almost always got a smile and a hug out of them. Linda is a true minister of grace to our homeless guests and she is another one who makes me sing for joy.

Finally, David Forderer. He used to be a member of Los Altos UMC, but started attending here. So he decided to move his membership several years ago. Then he joined the Board of Trustees so he could work on us to do something about the lift. At that time, it was working, but it was way out of compliance with safety standards and he didn't like using it. As a board, we talked about trying to make it safer, but we never got around

to doing anything about it. David had every reason to be frustrated with us. But he chose to be faithful, instead. He just kept after us.

When the lift finally broke down, it was almost a blessing, because it forced us to do something about it. But as you know these things take a lot of time and progress is slow. It has been months now and we are just getting to the point where we are ready to go to the city with plans and drawings for approval.

David has been wonderful and all the while has kept his sense of humor about it. A couple of weeks ago, we set up a local radio broadcast so he could at least listen to the service in the library. Last week, after coffee hour, as we sat waiting for the paratransit to come, we started talking about the party we would have when the lift finally got replaced and he could join us in the sanctuary again. David got all excited and broke out in a very big smile that made me want to break out in song.

So, you see, we don't have to invite the Dalai Lama to teach us how to be joyful in the midst of struggle. We don't need Archbishop Tutu to learn to sing Mary's song when everything is going wrong. We have teachers right here. They may not realize it, but for me, their souls magnify the Lord and they make me want to rejoice in God our Savior. Whenever things look bad, they remind me that the Mighty One is doing great things for us and showing incredible mercy on us. Because of what they have been through, they convince me that one day God will lift up the lowly and fill the hungry with good things. When I see them or anyone of you who are fighting the good fight, running the race, and keeping the faith, how can I keep from singing? Thanks be to God for all of you.