

With Faith to Listen

Advent A3- Joy

Isa 35: 1-10, Lk 1: 46b-55

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Rev. Donna Vuilleumier

Isa 35: 1-10

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the LORD, the majesty of our God. Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you." Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes. A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God's people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray. No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there. And the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

Lk 1: 46b-55

"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."

Country singer Travis Tritt has made a name for himself playing everything from Southern rock to bluegrass to standard country music. In his early years, like most aspiring singers, he played in honky-tonk out-of-the-way venues that sometimes got rough and dangerous. Once, when a bar brawl broke out, Tritt tried something that worked so well it became his standard response when fights started. Tritt said, "Just when [things] started getting out of hand, when bikers were reaching for their pool cues and rednecks were heading for the gun rack, I'd start playing..... 'Silent Night.' It could be the middle of July; I didn't care." Tritt said as he played, grown men would stop everything and calm down. "Sometimes they'd even start crying, standing there watching me sweat and play Christmas carols."*

That calming, gentling effect of *Silent Night* worked very well for Travis Tritt, but the very first Christmas carol had exactly the opposite effect.

Methodist preacher and scholar E. Stanley Jones, called the particular Christmas carol I'm speaking of "the most revolutionary document in the history of the world." William Temple, the Archbishop of Canterbury, instructed missionaries to poverty-stricken India never to read the words of this Christmas song in public because it could incite riots in the streets. One modern writer said that when you read the lyrics of this carol, you "sniff the powder of dynamite."

I'm talking about the song titled "Magnificat," so-named in Latin thousands of years ago because the first word of the song is "magnify." It is the original work of an unmarried teenage peasant girl in a backwater village who just found out that she is pregnant, a girl we know as Mary.**

We are so familiar with the loving beauty of the words of a simple peasant girl each Advent that it is easy to overlook just how revolutionary those words were to be spoken by anyone at that time. It had been hundreds of years since prophets offered such fantastic restoration, and now a young, engaged woman in the insignificant small town of Nazareth in northern Israel is just months away from giving birth to the Messiah, for God has looked with favor upon his lowly servant. God has begun to transform the world of rich and poor, to bring 'down the powerful from their thrones, and lift up the lowly; filling the hungry with good things and sending the rich away empty.' His mercy is unending. God has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his promise made to Abraham and to his descendants forever.'

It has been 700 years since the promise of Isaiah that "He will come and save you." 700 years since Isaiah had promised that God would come to save the people and redeem the world, 700 years to bring about exactly what Advent is, the coming of God to save us. "...everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away."

Now God's chosen servant Mary celebrates the divine child in her womb with a poetic political manifesto. She sings of a world turned upside-down: the haughty and powerful will be brought low, the rich and satisfied will be sent away empty handed. Those who will be lifted up and exalted in place of these wealthy and elite are precisely the opposite: they will be those who are the destitute and downtrodden marginalized people of society. They will be like Mary herself, a girl, a woman, of little worth in the eyes of the world, but chosen, favored and blessed by God.

Is it any wonder that the late Professor William Barclay once wrote "There's a loveliness in the Magnificat but in that loveliness there's dynamite" ... and its dynamite because it turns the world's values upside down.

It is safe to say that most young unwed girls don't burst into song when they hear news like that. But there was something about Mary that made all the difference.

For the unknown journey ahead of her to Bethlehem, to flee from Herod, to experience both the acceptance and the rejection her son would live with, to ultimately watching him crucified, Mary had to be a woman of amazing strength, courage, grace and grit. Her faith in the Scriptures that promised a Messiah in God's own time was certainly known by Mary, and she had trusting, accepting faith that let her listen to the Annunciation from the angel Gabriel, and to joyfully accept what God was asking of her.

This well known and beloved announcement is accepted as the sacred story we have known and cherished all of our lives, yet if step back, we can see the Annunciation and the Magnificat as writer Madeleine L'Engle wrote:

This is the irrational season
when love blooms bright and wild.
Had Mary been filled with reason
there'd have been no room for the child.***

In just four short lines, Madeleine L'Engle's elegant little poem "After Annunciation" truly captures the heart of what is at stake during these closing days of Advent. "Irrational" is not usually a word with positive connotations as it implies poor judgment, being unreasonable, and not thinking clearly. We favor what is logical, rational and well thought out.

Yet Mary would have us embrace the irrational, mysterious. This is how Advent reminds us that another world is indeed possible.

Advent *is* the irrational season, a time to embrace opposites and reversals, a time for the status quo to be redeemed, to be reimagined, to be recreated. Advent is when deserts are ready to bloom and rejoice, when the weak and feeble will soon be made strong and whole, when fearful hearts will soon feel the tender mercy of God. Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, the thirsty ground springs of water and the least likely people shall be empowered.

If Mary had been logical and reasonable, if she had chosen expectations over mystery, there would have been no Christ child, no Christmas, no Silent Night, no Son of God love's pure light with radiant beams from his holy face and with the dawn of redeeming grace.

Like Mary, do we have the faith to listen? Amen.

*From *Twang! The Ultimate Book of Country Music Quotations*, compiled by Raymond Obstfeld and Sheila Burgener; cited at PreachingToday.com)

**Rev. Lloyd Stillely, <https://www.lifeway.com/en/articles/sermon-christmas-mary-song-magnificat-luke-1>

***Madeleine L'Engle From *A Cry Like a Bell: Poems* (p. 58)