

“The Voice of Praise”

“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior . . .” Those of us who grew up on The Lutheran Hymnal became pretty much convinced that this was the very tune Mary sang. Not likely, but maybe something like it . . . Hers was a voice of praise — as ours should be.

That’s a problem for a lot of Christians. Their voices are mute when they should be most vocal; the tongues cannot seem to form the words that beg to be uttered — or better, sung. Some have a built-in excuse: *“I can’t sing.”* My grandfather used to say, *“If you can’t sing good, sing loud!”* A person who took that counsel very much to heart was the president of the first congregation I served in upstate New York. Dick Scott was a total monotone. I used to think that everybody could be taught to sing, until I met Dick. But his monotony did not prevent him from singing out. When he would serve as the Assisting Minister for Communion, I had to stand with a finger in the ear closest to him because he would otherwise throw me off. Dick loved to sing . . . he especially loved to sing in worship. He had absolutely no talent to do so — he didn’t care. His was a voice of praise.

When I came home one day (this was a long time ago), the sounds of singing were filling the first floor of our home, coming from the television. I knew it was from some Broadway show; it had that necessary “plucky” sense to it. Sure enough, it turned out to be “Oliver,” as plucky a score as you will find in the Broadway literature. These were wonderful children and adult voices, and they conveyed the mood that the librettist and composer intended: schmaltzy where schmaltzy was required; determined when called for; bright and cheery as a meadowlark when bright and cheery was the mood to communicate. But not a one of them was the voice of praise.

Mary’s is the voice of praise. Pay attention to what she finds praiseworthy. To be sure, the very first thing she praises is the good news

that has been given to her. At first, it did not sound at all like good news: “*Mary, you’re pregnant,*” to an unmarried young lady is seldom good news. But when the angel explained it, it was cause to give praise: “*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.*”

Notice, even in the afterglow of the message of her impending birth and its miraculous causation, Mary’s focus is on the God who is at work. Yes, all generations will call me blessed . . . but it’s because of the Mighty One doing great things. Hers is a litany of the great things God does — except we don’t always perceive them as great: “*His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.*” The Greeks and Romans had stories galore about gods who would visit earth, usually to cause some mischief; Mary knows the God who has been in touch for generations: “*He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.*”

Think back to the Exodus where, we are reminded by Psalmists and prophets that followed, God acted “*with a mighty arm and an outstretched hand.*” This is the God who enters human history, who refuses to remain aloof and distant, who interacts with those He loves. But He is no wimp; those who become proud (that usually implies people who think they have a ‘lock’ on God), He scatters to the winds. “*He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly . . .*” How many empires held sway over God’s people, only to fall by history’s wayside? The mightiest of them all, the Romans, held sway as Mary sings, only to disappear in ruins. Is there a message in there for The United States of America?

“*. . . he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.*” God is on the side of the poor. Mary’s contemporaries had it all wrong — wealth was never a sign of God’s favor. In Fiddler on the Roof, Tevye prays about his lot in life: “*God, it’s no great shame to be poor;*

but it's no great honor either.” But in an odd sense, it is a great honor. God honors the poor; He comes to them in their hunger and deprivation. *“Blessed are you poor,”* Jesus says in Luke’s version of the Beatitudes. Mary adds: *“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.”* And with that we are at the core of what warrants the voice of praise.

The promise to Abraham was three-fold: A great nation; many descendants; A land, a place still under contest, 4,000 years later; And this: *“By you shall all the nations of the earth be blessed.”* Mary focuses on something her contemporaries liked to ignore or forget: God did not choose Israel because they were special; God chose Israel and that made them special. What made them special was that God intended to work through them to bring about His plan to restore His broken creation.

The voice of praise has nothing to do with skill, talent, range, or timbre. Pavarotti can belt the high notes with power and ease, and when he sings the aria "Nessun dorma" from Turandot, it will bring me close to tears; that doesn't make his voice a voice of praise. Sunday School children sing carols and hymns somewhat off key and the voice of praise fills the room.

We have shared in some singing already this morning, and ours has been a voice of praise. On Friday, we will sing hymns and carols and anthems, and some will complain that there were too many (and others will complain that their favorite wasn't one of them), and I pray we will fill this sanctuary with the voice of praise. What makes a voice of praise a voice of praise is the God who is the focus of the exultation.

This is the God who comes, who acts, who intervenes, who draws near, the God who becomes incarnate. This morning we are still in the preparatory season of Advent. Today we are still preparing. So let's prepare our voices, get them well stretched out, lubricated, and used to singing. And if you can't sing good, then you be the loudest one in the room. Amen.