

Swords Into Plowshares: Mary's Song

Luke 1:46-55

Do you remember the movie *The Wizard of Oz*? In the opening scenes, when you first see Dorothy in Kansas, we are introduced to three other characters, regular guys who were sort of everyday fixtures on that farm. Those same three guys show up again at the end of the movie. They're next to Dorothy, at her bedside with Auntie Em, when Dorothy gets back from her fevered adventure in Oz. Suddenly you get it: these are the people who have been with Dorothy all along—in the disguises of a tinman, a scarecrow, a lion. These are the companions who traveled with her all the way through the Land of Oz. They held her up when she fell asleep in the poppies; they were there when the flying monkeys attacked. They stood with her when she said out loud, "I'll never get home." And here they are...before the tornado, after the tornado.

Without those hints at the beginning and the end of the movie, Dorothy's story—her journey from Kansas through the frightening and wonderful land of Oz and back home again—would have been a nice story. But those early characters help us understand in a different way: this is a story about heart and courage and wisdom and amazing loyalty. All these things, everything Dorothy was looking for, had been living on that farm, right next to her, all along.

A good writer will often, very subtly, reveal the theme, the true meaning, of a book or a story right at the beginning, in details you didn't even know at first to notice.

Today we begin the season of Advent, this turning of our heads toward the coming of Christmas. In the liturgical calendar of the Church, today is also the first day of a new year. It's a turning of the page. We begin again; we tell the story of who we are, from the beginning. This year we are looking to Luke, the master storyteller of the New Testament, to set the scene for the story of how God moved toward us. It will happen in a person we call Jesus, a life that will reveal what it looks like for God to be human and for humans to resemble God. Are there details in the very first chapters of Luke's Gospel that we might have overlooked and that might tell us something more than we have seen before? Because this year we need something more.

The Bible, this ancient text that holds our origin story, is a mix of prose and poetry. Many of the words that we read today as poetry—the Psalms, for example—were actually songs. Lyrics and music that would have been playing in people's ears as they went through their days. Luke, the journalist who set out to offer what he called 'an orderly account' of the origins of Christianity, interrupted the first few chapters of his Gospel with *four* of these songs. Four sets of words that sound like music, that carry a different *kind* of meaning than the rest of the text. The kind of meaning that is meant to be absorbed through the heart, not the head.

We are going to immerse ourselves in these four songs for the four Sundays of Advent, because they might show us something we did not see before. They might tell us something we need for the tenuous, off-kilter time we are living in now.

The first song in Luke's Gospel is Mary's. You heard it a moment ago; *the Magnificat*, we often call it. There are so many important things to notice here. That it's sung by a woman. Women

were not the singers of that time or that culture. Mary is not just a woman, but a young, unmarried, *shamed* girl.

She is unexplainably pregnant.
She is voiceless, except when she sings to God.
She is the one in whose body God has chosen to be born.

Mary has just heard an announcement. ‘You are pregnant,’ she heard. Maybe it’s just me, but that strikes me as not obviously good news to a 15-year old girl. Messengers are not immediately identifiable as angels. When that angel departed, I bet Mary felt as out of control of her life as you or I have felt in some moments of ours. She had no idea what was in front of her, or what would come next, or what the end of her story would be.

Mary needed someone to talk to, someone with skin on them, someone who would help her make sense of this strange thing she had just said ‘yes’ to. And so she gathered up a few things and went to find her kinswoman, her *auntie*. Elizabeth, who Mary knows will be there for her. Elizabeth will understand how it feels to be surprisingly pregnant. Elizabeth will take her in without asking too many questions. Probably fix her macaroni and cheese. Tell her stories. Remind Mary of who she is no matter what.

Luke describes the moment Mary arrives at Elizabeth’s home as an explosion of wonder. Things begin to happen as soon as the doorbell rings. The baby inside Elizabeth leaps to attention. She feels the Holy Spirit—some sureness of God’s presence—in a way she never has before. She’s so excited, she squeals with delight. As if she’s clairvoyant, Elizabeth sees in Mary—for Mary—that something immense and wonderful has happened. Somehow Elizabeth knows this secret that Mary hasn’t even said out loud yet. Elizabeth welcomes Mary as if she is warmed and honored by her visit. As if she has been waiting for her all along.

I wonder if Elizabeth’s greeting might be the first time it occurs to Mary that *joy* might be the appropriate reaction here. *Now* Mary begins to sing:

*My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for God 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.*

I’m struck by that phrase ‘*My soul magnifies the Lord.*’ What do I magnify when life curves in a way I did not expect or plan for? I think our tendency is to anticipate disastrous possibilities. ‘Catastrophize’ is the verb you might use for this. We like things the way we know them. When un-chosen change comes, first we layer it with our fears. Then, as we collect ourselves a little, we gather our resources, enlarge—magnify—our defenses. We try to make *ourselves* bigger than whatever has happened. We gather up our strength and resolve. Our knowing what we want and how to get it. Our determination to beat whatever stands between us and the destiny we’ve planned for ourselves.

But watch Mary. Richard Rohr calls Mary the perfect receptacle for God’s action in the world. Her focus lifts; instead of resisting this un-asked-for change; she blesses it. The words of her song are not ‘I can beat this thing.’ They are, ‘Here I am, God. I trust you. I will be whatever *you* say I am. I will live a life that *you* are in charge of, not me.’

But Mary's *Magnificat* is not just about her. She sings about a God who knocks the proud off their high horses so he can pull victims out of the mud. A God who sends the rich and powerful away from the table so that the hungry can eat until they are full. In a world that said then, just like it does now, 'Blessed are the beautiful, blessed are the successful, blessed are the healthy,' this is a God who says "Blessed are the poor and the hungry and the meek." The whole plan God is putting in place by coming among us, Mary says in her song, is about turning things upside down, reversing our expectations, the way we know things *always* turn out. Scrambling what we know about which pieces of news contain God's favor and which ones definitely do not.

I notice that the verbs in that song Mary sang are all past tense.

God *has shown* strength.

He *has scattered* the proud.

He *has lifted up* the lowly, *filled* the hungry, *sent* the rich away empty-handed.

These were not predictions about the future. Mary was not being asked to make these things happen. The success of God's plan didn't depend on her endorsement, just as it doesn't depend on ours. She was being invited into a movement that had already begun. Mary's 'yes' was not in answer to the question 'Shall this happen?' The question was, 'Will you join this story?'

The coming of God into the world did not happen just once. It happens, again and again. Now too. You are invited, just like Mary was. In the story, already underway then, still stirring now, God is already at work to turn the world. All those injustices that have been put in place through generations of separation and scapegoating and selfishness—injustices you and I have inherited our way into—they're already being turned out. Progress may be slow, even undetectable, but here and there swords are already being reshaped into plowshares, weapons into the instruments for planting peace, justice, flourishing.

To hear the sound of it, you have to listen beyond the first rush of noise—the news of retail theft rings, the tragedy of migrating people who die on as they are crossing the sea, the fear about a new strain of coronavirus. But listen. The stirring of God's presence in the world is also audible. A chorus has already begun, a song of connection and courage and kindness. Our work is to do what Mary did: to say 'yes' faster than might seem prudent. To magnify, enlarge, the hope until it dwarfs our fear.

Meister Eckhard, the 14th century Christian mystic, said "We are all meant to be mothers of God." Maybe God's next act of birth into the world is inviting your 'yes'. Your willingness to magnify—to make bigger—the God who comes, every time, in *every* change, to turn shame into gratitude, poverty into richness, power into peace, sorrow into joy.

So sing to us again, Mary. Sing to us until your song becomes ours, until the God you magnify becomes visible, even to us.