

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

December 19, 2021 (4th Sunday in Advent, Year C)
Luke 1:39-55

Have you ever noticed the number of songs that are in the first few chapters of the Gospel of Luke? You can't read those chapters without seeing words in VERSE, again and again. In today's reading, Mary sings when she's greeted by her cousin Elizabeth. Zechariah sings when his son John is born and his tongue is finally loosened. The angels sing of peace and goodwill when they share their "good news of great joy" with the shepherds. And Simeon sings his song of farewell once he's seen God's promises to Israel kept in the Christ-child.

WHY, one might wonder, ALL THESE SONGS? Because singing is an act of resistance. That's not all singing is, of course. Sometimes it's an act of joy, and sometimes an act of community, but it's also an act of defiance.

The slaves knew this. When they sang their spirituals they were both praising God and protesting their masters who locked them OUT of worship, but COULDN'T keep them out of the PROMISE of deliverance in the Bible.

And the civil rights leaders knew this, too, singing songs like "We Shall Overcome," when so MANY in society didn't give their cause of justice a CHANCE, let alone TRIUMPH.

The protesters in Leipzig in 1989 knew this too. Perhaps you never heard of the "velvet revolution." For several months before the fall of the Berlin wall, the citizens of Leipzig gathered on Monday evenings by candlelight around St. Nikolai church – the church where Bach composed so many of his cantatas. They gathered to SING, and over two months their numbers grew from a little more than a thousand people to more than THREE HUNDRED THOUSAND, over half the citizens of the city, singing songs of hope and protest and justice, until their song SHOOK the powers of their nation and changed the world. (Later, when someone asked one of the officers of the *Stasi*, the East German secret police, why they didn't just CRUSH this protest like they had so many others, the officer replied, "We had no contingency plan for song.")

Mary and Elizabeth knew this as well. They knew just how RIDICULOUS their situation was – two women, one too OLD to bear a child, one so YOUNG she wasn't even married, yet both called to bear children of PROMISE, through whom God would change the world. And they probably knew how LITTLE attention the world would PAY to them, tucked away in the hill country of Judea, FAR from the courts of power and influence. And they probably knew how HARD life was under Roman oppression. But when faced with the long odds of their situation, they DIDN'T retreat, or apologize, or despair; they SANG. They sang of their CONFIDENCE in the Lord's promise to UPEND the powers that be, they sang of the reversal of the fortunes of an unjust world, they sang of the lifting up all those who had been oppressed. You see, when you're back is against the wall, and all looks grim, one of the most UNEXPECTED and POWERFUL things you can do...is sing.

I was reminded of the POWER of song a few years ago at this time of year, when a few days after the killings at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, we happened to sing O Come, O Come Emmanuel in church on Sunday morning. And one of the verses gave such powerful and poignant voice to both the despair and hope so many of us felt:

*O Come, Thou Day-Spring, come and cheer
Our spirits by Thine advent here
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night
And death's dark shadows put to flight.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.*

As tears flowed and voices were lifted in song that Sunday, I realized that singing of LIGHT in a world of DARKNESS is, indeed, nothing short of an act of RESISTANCE, of DEFIANCE.

As one CONTEMPORARY hymn writer (Gracia Grindal) put it, “We light the Advent candles AGAINST the winter light.” Not “because of,” or “during,” but “AGAINST,” reminding us that the light of Advent, like the light of Christ, is a protest and RESISTANCE AGAINST the darkness that gathers all around us.

Tonight is the longest SUNDAY night of the year, and a night THIS WEEK is the longest night of the ENTIRE year, before the days begin to grow longer. But perhaps the darkness is DEEPER in the HEADLINES we’re subjected to every day. And all those FALSELY CHEERY “Christmas songs” blared across the cultural airwaves don’t help.

But BETWEEN despair and fake optimism, Mary and Elizabeth remind us of ANOTHER way, the way of HOPE. Hope ACKNOWLEDGES that our circumstances are dark, SO difficult they to require us to look BEYOND OURSELVES for rescue and relief, so that we can hear AGAIN and ANEW God’s promise to HOLD ONTO us, through ANY darkness, and bring us THROUGH it to the other side, to victory.

There’s something ABOUT a song. It’s MORE than the words. It’s more than the notes on the page; it’s more than the combination of voices and instruments. It’s MORE than the sum of its parts. It’s GREATER than that; it’s a GIFT from GOD. It captures our imagination. It draws us in. Something deep inside us stirs, and we CATCH the vision. It speaks to us in ways words ALONE could never do. And the song becomes OUR song.

Something even GREATER happens in MARY’S song. Today, in spite of everything I have seen, in spite of the tragedy, in spite of the hardship, in spite of all the cynicism, when I hear and sing Mary’s song, I believe.

I believe in Christmas. I believe in God's good news.

I believe God brings hope in the midst of despair and healing in the midst of hurt.

I believe God brings peace in the midst of strife and comfort in the midst of grief.

I believe God brings companionship to the lonely and family to the forgotten.

I believe God brings power to the weak and justice for the oppressed.

And most of all, I believe God brings new life in the midst of death.

This isn’t just Mary’s song; this is OUR song. This is OUR HOPE. This is the true meaning and purpose of Christmas. It’s why we’re HERE. It’s no wonder Elizabeth’s baby leaped for joy.

It’s a song of hope. And it’s the KIND of song that calls you to JOIN in, and sing along to GOD’S song of DEFIANCE to the darkness. We SING because we have HOPE. Amen.