

**THE GRANDEUR OF THIS VIEW OF LIFE; LUKE 1:39-45, ADVENT IV, DECEMBER 20, 2015; THOMAS H. YORTY; WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

We did not need a new *Star Wars* movie and all the hype that goes with it to remind us that there are forces at work in the world; forces of light and forces of darkness.

I've been working my way through *Macbeth* and am captivated by the witches and their sinister collaboration to draw Macbeth and Lady Macbeth into their dark machinations. "Come, thick night, and pall thee in the dunkest smoke of hell," Lady Macbeth incants like a witch herself, "that my keen knife see not the wound it makes. Nor heaven peep through the blanket of dark to cry, 'Hold, hold.'" *There is* darkness at work in the world.

We seem now more than in recent memory to be under some dark spell of perpetual posturing for advantage in a game of short-term stakes that thumbs its nose at the next generation; that cripples government, afflicts the 99%, and imperils the earth. In a Presidential election year when candidates seem too hungry for power and legislators too cunning to trust, when terrorism reaches deeper into the collective psyche, I can't help but think there is rejoicing in hell at these developments and what seems a world with problems too vast, too entrenched and too complex for the forces of good to untangle.

Against all of this we have today's Christmas pageant and the lesson from Luke of the meeting of Mary and Elizabeth and, of course, Mary's brave song – the Magnificat.

The world then, in Mary's day, was as anxious, oppressed, uncertain and violent as ours is today. It was a time when political and religious leaders were as addicted to power as they are now; a time when the people, in the grip of Rome, lived in poverty and were soon to revolt.

Yet, what remains, over the centuries, is not a story of bad news but one of pervasive hope and overwhelming joy.

The song Mary sang, about scattering the proud, bringing down the mighty, lifting up the lowly, filling the hungry with good things and sending the rich empty away was the herald of cosmic forces working for good not just in the long unfolding of the universe but in the everyday lives of the people; forces for good that were about to change everything.

Here, at the very beginning of the gospel, before the stage is even set and Gabriel barely departed, Mary's song announces that all of the events to follow – the journey to Bethlehem, the search for shelter, the birth, the visit of the wise men, the flight from Herod and then the life and ministry of this peasant king – would bring about the ultimate defeat and overthrow of evil.

Mary's song is not only the effusive joy of a pregnant mother-to-be but, in fact, a clear and calculated message to the forces of darkness that the game is about to change, that the Holy One of Israel is to take on human form and dwell like one of us subject to the limitations of this broken world to which he would bring healing at last.

Had Mary sung her song in modern day Russia or China she probably would have been detained, interrogated and placed under arrest. The fact that she goes unnoticed is a sign of the obscurity in which she and her husband-to-be reside and in which the Savior of the World chooses to make his entrance.

This makes Mary's pregnancy and the impending role of her son all the more telling and wondrous. While the powers that be in Mary's day are focused on quelling threats to their reign, the game-changing power that will fulfill God's promise to the people enters the world through the back door, if you will, through the life and culture of 'one of us' as it were. We learn much about a person, institution, or culture by the way it chooses to exercise power.

Here's a line from the early English poem *Piers the Plowman*, an allegory popular among Protestant reformers, "Our joy and our healing," the poet sings, "Christ Jesus of Heaven, always pursues us in a poor man's apparel, and looks upon us in a poor man's likeness... searching us, seeking to know us by our kindness of heart; and he sees which way we cast our eyes, and whether we love the lords of this earth before the Lord of Heaven." You can imagine how the Protestant Reformers, oppressed and hunted, had more than a little in common with Mary and, like her, delighted in a God whose power was found in a lowly and humble servant rather than a military monarch or pope.

No wonder Mary sings. And she's not the only one in Luke to do so: Zechariah hears he is going to be a father and he sings; Mary hears that she is going to be a mother and she sings. The angels sing, Elizabeth sings, Simeon sings, everybody is singing.

We know how this goes; when humans hear some unexpected good news their voices break from the monotone of prose and jumpstart into song-like intonations and sung words. Whoopee! The assembly line worker who wins the lottery, the high school student accepted to her first choice college, the grandparents-to-be waiting by the phone for news of the birth, the people who walked in darkness and saw a great light.

Mary's song is the delightful praise of an expectant mother but also, one writer says, a battle chant: "He has shown the strength of his arm and scattered the proud and sent the rich away empty."<sup>i</sup> No sweet lullaby, this is a song of liberation. People don't sing that way but on plantations in the Old South or the ghettos of Bucharest or Buffalo.

It was in South Africa, under apartheid that lighting candles and singing carols at Christmas were banned. One official tried to explain, "You know how emotional black women are. Christmas carols have an emotional effect on them."

Let a poor Jewish woman like Mary sing, or a black mother in Soweto and you don't know what might happen.

Or maybe we do know what happens – if you lived through or remember the 60s it was a time of violence, protest, civil rights, and changing world order. From Bob Dylan to Janis Joplin from New York to Paris to Berlin the decade sang its way to liberation culminating with women and men, arm in arm, singing with Dr. King, "We Shall Overcome."<sup>ii</sup>

Advent is the season for singing; for Mary and her family, for the shepherds and angels, for God's people and for the children. We are blessed to have an army of a choir, led by a general of a maestro. It is not caissons but carols we bring to the fight for justice when all creation bursts forth in song for the coming of the Lord.

We will sing our way through the rest of this service today; we will sing our way through the family service this Thursday; we will hear the magnificent music of the "Fifth Evangelist" J.S. Bach this Thursday night before we and the choir sing the lessons and carols of Christmas.

A colleague tells of a medical student at a university he served as chaplain who was found at the chapel organ one night playing for all he was worth; when the chaplain appeared the med student said, "I want to be a doctor, but when I want to soar, I play the organ." "There will be days," the chaplain responded, "when your only protection from insanity as a physician will be that keyboard."<sup>iii</sup>

Missionaries report that children who starve, who are emaciated, near death no longer cry...tears dry up, the child is silent. The hunger is so deep it has moved beyond pain, beyond feeling, to utter, empty silence.

A society or people, a person or family who hurt often enough, deep enough, become quiet, withdrawn, silent.

These are days when dare not be silent. These are days when some would have us close our doors to the stranger, the Syrian and Muslim – not unlike the closed door that met Mary and Joseph at the inn in Bethlehem. These are days when gun lobbies and their legislators would fuel our fear and have us arm ourselves against each other. These are days when the earth – our home and haven – is terminally ill with the toxins we spew into her thin blue membrane called the atmosphere and some would delude us to think earth's problems result from her own cycles of weather.

If ever there was a time to sing it is now in Advent; not just sweet lullabies but brave Magnificats too. Advent is a time to face the forces that would silence our voice and spirit and stare us down into our graves.

The dark forces of hell rejoice when we distrust and fragment from one another, when we give up on the processes that lead to peace, when we justify the suffering of others, even future generations, by the gain in money and power we can achieve now.

And those same forces of evil that shout destruction are reduced to inaudible whispers when humans work together for the good of the least and the weakest. Hell becomes a silent, empty chamber when we sing the beauty of the earth, the glory of humans fully alive and the love of God.

"For all we know," a great writer recently said, "there is just one minor planet in a limitless field of stars where apple trees blossom and songs are sung."<sup>iv</sup> As entertaining as *Star Wars* is there is a real battle in this world. Let us lift up our voices! +

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<sup>i</sup> William Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, September to December 2015, 80.

<sup>ii</sup> Willimon, 80.

<sup>iii</sup> Willimon, 81.

<sup>iv</sup> Marilynne Robinson, *The Givenness of Things* (Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, New York: 2015) 72.