Sermon for 4th Sunday of Advent

December 19, 2021

Luke 1:39-55

 I don’t know who the first person that thought to add sea salt to chocolate and caramel was, but that person deserves an award. Or maybe the Nobel Peace Prize. It’s genius. Chocolate and caramel are fine on their own. But the tanginess of the salt creates something that transcends what chocolate and caramel can do on their own.

 The hymns we sing in church are a little bit like chocolate and caramel. The chocolate is the lyrics, the caramel is the music. The salt is us, the people of God gathered together, lifting up our communal voice. The lyrics may be meaningful on their own, the music may be beautiful on its own. But when they are joined together as we sing? We have a fuller, richer experience that transcends what the lyrics or music could do on their own.

 Martin Luther firmly believed that music is a gift from God. Believing music could bring us peace in our hearts as well as teach the faith, Luther advocated communal singing in church and at home.

 He recognized that singing has been an essential part of how the people of God have expressed their faith for millennia, learned the stories of how God provided for the people’s needs. Beginning with Miriam’s song in Exodus 15, celebrating God’s deliverance of the Israelites out of Egypt, the Bible is full of songs that have helped people of faith lift up their voices together in praise of God’s deliverance. In sorrow and anger about the world around them. In joy and wonder over God’s steadfast love and mercy.

 John Calvin, the French theologian, agreed with Luther. He believed that congregational song is a form of prayer, and that God created music to help us praise God and proclaim our faith.

 And Oscar Wilde said that music creates “a past of which [we] have been ignorant,” inviting us into the joys and sorrows, laments and praise others have experienced.

 I wonder if Luke somehow understood all this. Because the first two chapters of Luke’s Gospel are almost like a musical. People have encounters with God, and they respond by breaking out in song.

 We have not just Mary’s song, but Zechariah’s song—rejoicing over the birth of his son John. And the angels sing when they visit the shepherds.

 But the songs in Luke 1 and 2 are not just songs of joy, mothers and fathers thanking God for the births of their sons.

The final song comes Jesus is presented at the temple on the 8th day of his life. Simeon sings “now Lord, you let your servant go in peace…my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people. A light to reveal you to the nations, and the glory of your people, Israel.”

 These are songs of wonder about what God has done, songs of hope and trust in God’s promises. They are songs of faith and obedience, songs that celebrate the ways that God’s purposes for humanity confound our expectations of how the world works.

 We need look no further than Mary’s song for that.

 Because, while her song begins with praise, her *awe* that God had done great things for her…Mary’s song quickly becomes a protest of how society functioned, and her trust in the promises of God to bring about a new reality. A reality where the hungry are fed, where nobody is powerless over their life, and where those who who fear God receive mercy.

 When we praise God, we align ourselves with God’s purposes. We thank God for the promises God makes, and we expand upon our prayer, “your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

 In a sense, Mary’s song is *our* song, too. When we sing her song, we align ourselves with God’s purposes for humanity. We place our own trust in God’s promise of salvation. We enter into her joy, her wonder at being looked upon with favor.

 So as we sing it, perhaps we should ponder what it means for God to notice us. For God to look with favor upon us.

 Pretty much nobody would have looked at Mary and thought she was important. Maybe her family. Or Joseph. But she was a teenage girl in an unimportant part of the Roman Empire.

 Unlike with Zechariah and Elizabeth, we’re not told Mary was righteous or blameless in her life. We’re not told she had any sort of skill or quality or piety about her that would have brought her to God’s attention.

 But the angel visited her anyhow. Told her God looked with favor on her. And asked her to set aside the way she thought her life would unfold, so she could agree to the path God had chosen for her. A path that put her squarely in the midst of God’s redeeming work in the world.

 Mary’s response to hearing all this from the angel Gabriel is, “Here am I, the servant of my God. Let it be with me according to your word.”

 Mary’s song reminds us that we’re not just called to faith, to trust in God’s promises, to obedience to God’s commands. We’re also called to be open to the possibility that God has something different in mind for us than we have planned. And that God has a different understanding of how society should function than humanity as a whole has embraced.

 As Oscar Wilde suggested, when we sing her song, we enter into the joy and wonder that Mary experienced. We celebrate her obedience, and we honor her as an example of faith in action, an example for our own lives.

 When we sing her song, we learn to set aside all of our reasons to feel unimportant, unnoticed by God. We ponder what it means, how it feels, to be favored by God.

 When we sing Mary’s song, we remember what God’s purposes are for humanity. And we dream with her about the day when they will be reality.

 When we lift up our voices together in this space, our skill, our ability to carry a tune, and the pleasantness of the sound of our individual voices are irrelevant.

 What matters is that we gather together to lift up our voices in song, embracing the gift of music that God has given us, and entering into the joys and sorrows, laments and praises of not just each other but *all* of the people of God throughout the ages.

 Our music teaches us not just the doctrinal parts of our faith, not just the good news of God’s mercy and grace and forgiveness. It teaches us that we are part of something bigger than ourselves. It connects us to the church on earth in all times and places, to the ways countless others have experienced God’s mercy and grace. It unites us in God’s purposes for all of creation, and invites us to join God’s redeeming work in the world.

 As people of faith, how *can* we keep from singing about how God is turning the world around?