

Song of Hope
Luke 1:39-55, Micah 5:2-5a
December 20, 2015
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In Advent, not just Christmas, we sing in joy, in protest, and in hope.

My father was not one to be involved in church. I never knew him to be in a Bible Study or to help out at a church sale or to do work around the church when we were growing up. That was just not Dad. But he would go to church every Sunday with my mother, and while we were in Sunday School, they would be in worship, every Sunday together. Every Sunday, that is, except for Easter and Christmas Eve. Those two days he stayed home. He was the baker at our house so he would stay home to bake rolls and pies but he always said that he was staying home those days so that someone who only came on Easter and Christmas could have his seat. Generous guy, my dad.

Because it's true, Christmas Eve service is traditionally the most well attended service of the year. And why do people come on Christmas eve? Do they come for the fellowship, to be with so many people? Do they come for the tradition? Because they've done it every year and Christmas is a time of family traditions? Because the church is decorated so beautifully? To hear the wonderful music? I'm sure all of those come into it, all of those are true, but I think one of the reasons people come to Christmas Eve service is that they want to sing. We want sing O Come All Ye Faithful and Hark the Herald Angels and Joy to the World and Silent Night. It just wouldn't be Christmas if we didn't have the chance to sing. And so few of us sing in our homes with family anymore, it is here that we come to do that. We come to sing. We don't have a regular service on Christmas Eve, we have a service of Lessons and Carols, we have a lot of music so that we can sing. How disappointed would you be if you came to church Christmas Eve and we just sang a couple of carols but didn't do Joy to the World or Silent Night? Because part of the reason you come, maybe a big part, is to sing.

This year we are reading through Luke's Gospel and we read a lot of it at this time of year because Luke has a beautiful story of the birth of Jesus. But if you read it through, notice how many times in

Luke's gospel people sing: when Mary goes to visit Elizabeth, she sings; when Elizabeth and Zechariah's baby is born, Zechariah sings; when Jesus is born in Bethlehem an angel announces the event to the shepherds, but then the angels sing; when Mary and Joseph take Jesus to the temple for his dedication, Simeon, an old man at the end of his life, takes the baby in his arms and he sings—Lord now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace for I have seen thy salvation. They sing.

Why do we sing? Why do people sing? I'm sure there are lots of reasons, sometime the heart seems so full that all we can do is sing—it's an expression of our deepest emotions. And that's why in the Gospel of Luke people sing. When the angels sing to the shepherds it is because the angel has brought an announcement: “behold I bring you good news of great joy.” They sing for joy. Sometimes we are so filled with joy that it just overflows out of us and comes out in song. The angels sing with joy at the birth of Jesus. The words of first hymn we sang today comes from the prophet Isaiah who is joyful about the restoration of the people from their time in captivity in Babylon. We sing for joy. So many of the songs we sing on Christmas Eve are songs of joy, filled with joy that the Savior has come.

Even though he didn't come to church with us on Christmas Eve, my dad was big into singing. It was Dad who sang to us when we were kids. He taught himself to play the banjo and the fiddle and a little mandolin and he would sing to us old folk songs. So the bedtime songs we got were old folk songs about the Cat with 9 lives or Jesse James or cowboy ballads. But he also sang some of the old folk songs by Pete Seeger or the Weavers or Woody Guthrie, because one of the great reasons that people sing is to protest. We sing to say that things should be different than they are, there's something within us that knows that and so we sing. In the old American south the slaves knew this. When they sang their spirituals they were not only praising God but they were protesting the masters who locked them out of worship but couldn't keep them out of the promise of deliverance of the Bible. And the civil rights leaders knew this, too, singing songs like “We Shall Overcome,” when so many in the society didn't give them a chance to advance their cause of justice, let alone triumph.

The protesters in Leipzig in East Germany in 1989 knew this as well. While that element sometimes gets

overlooked in the histories of the “velvet revolution,” the fall of Communism in 1989 and 90, it’s striking to note that for several months preceding 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 – 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 did not crush this protest like they had so many others, the officer replied, “We had no contingency plan for song.”!)”¹

That's really what Mary's song from today is, it is a protest song. Yes her soul praises God, it magnifies the Lord, and she is happy, but she also knows that she is poor and young and lives in a poor land, so it is more than that. It is a song that looks forward to the day when God will have “scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.”

It is also a song of hope, hope for the day when all will be made right, because that is the other big reason that we sing. We sing for joy, for protest or resistance, but we also sing for hope. Hope for love, for justice, for peace, hope for ourselves and for the world. And that's not just what Christmas is all about, it's what Advent is all about—hope. We light these candles each week and remind ourselves of the promises of God, the promises that we haven't received yet but we proclaim by their lighting our hope. And we sing, we sing songs of hope. In Advent we remember that we are still waiting for the coming of Christ, still hoping for the kingdom of God to be made more real in us and in our world, still hoping for that peace that was voiced by the angel when they sang “Glory to God in the highest and on earth, peace.” We sing, not just because we rejoice that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, but we sing in hope, waiting this Advent for him to be born again in our lives.

¹ Quoted in “In the Meantime” David Lose, Mediations for Advent 4C, December 14, 2015

We're going to sing a little more today instead of me talking on and on. We're going to sing with joy for Christ did come to us in Bethlehem. Maybe we'll sing a bit in protest because things aren't yet as they should be or could be, but most of all we're going to sing in hope because we believe that Christ comes not just long ago in Bethlehem, but he will come again this Christmas, he will come again even today, even here, even now and our hearts are full, and so we sing.

Holy God of Advent,

you became weak
so we would find strength in moments of heartbreak;
you left the safety of heaven
to wander the wilderness of the world,
holding our hands when we feel hopeless;
you set aside your glory
to hold our pain so we might be healed,
even when there seems to be no hope;
you became one of us,
so we would never be alone in any moment,
in any circumstance.

So come now,
Child of Bethlehem,
to strengthen us in these days.

May we feel your presence
in a way we have never known,
not just as one born in a stable
long ago and far away
but as the One born in our hearts.

You have promised to go before us:
into our brokenness, into hospital rooms,
into empty houses, into graveyards,
into our future held by God,
and you are here, even now,
waiting for each of us:

to serve us,
to hold us,
to comfort us,
to heal us,
to live in us, now and for ever. Amen