

12-11-16 "Why Not Sing?" A Reflection on Luke 1:46-55 by Mark Arbisi, Christ Church, KBK

It might be just me. I don't honestly know. I'm wondering if it is much more than just me. So I pose the question. I have this sense something special is missing. Meaning, for starters, I haven't heard any Christmas music yet. Not a single "fa la la", or a "Deck the Halls", not even a note from the wildly popular "I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas," to say nothing of "Frosty the Snowman." Maybe I'm always in the wrong place at the wrong time. Maybe I'm not listening to the necessary radio stations. IDK. I darn well know I haven't been to the Portland Mall.

But then I had the wild thought that, maybe the Christ we Church folk have long thought proper to keep in Christmas is a battle we have finally won. Think about it. Meaning, maybe the world has gotten to the point where it cares as much about where Christ is as it cares about where Waldo is; and if so then it only follows that the world would care even less about what we Church folk keep in or out of our Christmas. But if that is the case, why does our victory feel to me so much like a defeat?

Maybe I'm making too much of this, over-analyzing that is; maybe something else is going on. Maybe something rather huge and influential is in the air this year. Maybe the sense of Christmas' advent which strikes me as gone missing is has not so much gone missing as it is being drowned out by the weightiness of so many, many things. 2016 has been an unprecedented year, with 2017--indeed the next four--promising more of the same. One doesn't have to be an immigrant or an asylum seeker to be frantically anxious and overwrought with fear this Christmastime.

It is human nature to prefer predictability, yet tens, hundreds of millions of American citizens are now unsure as to the future of things central to their very existence. Programs that generations have depend up, such as Medicare and Medicaid are suddenly weighed down with newfound uncertainties and fears; Bills are now being written and proposed to slice and dice Social Security benefits in the most draconian of ways. And for the thirty Million Americans—like Renee and myself—who are insured under the Affordable Care Act, 20 Million of which who have never benefited from Health Insurance before, human lives are being treated as mere pawns on a gigantic chess board. I can't remember a time in my life when anxiety and fear of tomorrow has been greater. Indeed, for countless numbers of Americans "Merry" would seem a near-impossible word to embrace these days; indeed, none should be too surprised should Christmas "cheer" prove a rare commodity this Christmas.

And then there is Mary. From a world which has long shut down and shut out female voices, and from Holy Scripture, in defiance of Patriarchy, we surprisingly do hear female voices. Today's Gospel lesson is rare indeed. In it the only voice we hear is female, which is part of an extended dialogue between two women, only women. Both, as we know are expecting; both expecting due to the most extra-ordinary of circumstances—Providence's dramatic intervention in the life of a women much, much too old, and another, a girl really, much, much too young. In response to her little discovery, the younger, Mary, runs across a great desert wilderness expanse, to seek and to give, solace and support to her much older cousin, Elizabeth.

Upon reaching Elizabeth's doorstep Mary breaks into song. Into song. Mary, a child really. Lowly, powerless, a peasant from podunkville, struggling under Roman's harsh realities and burdensome taxes which drain the poor to build Herod's palaces and which is structured to sustain a system where all wreath is at the top so that the extravagant lifestyles of the rich and famous are maintained. Mary, unmarried, with child, subject to scorn, ridicule, shame, even legal retribution due to her condition, sings. She sings! And does she ever. Image, just image the steely will, the iron resolve, the hope against hope required to sing under such repressive circumstances--to keep hope alive. A commentator observes, "Perhaps Mary gets a bit carried away: this teenager is no politician, no revolutionary...but all of a sudden she has become an articulate radical, an astonished prophet singing about a world in which the least have become first and the first, last" (B.B. Taylor).

In any day and age, in any circumstance, such a song as Mary's song is pretty much guaranteed to blow the roof off of any chapel, to say nothing of Senate or Congressional hall. Giving voice to the lowly, animated by the Holy Spirit, Mary praises God for favoring the marginalized and the downtrodden. Who does that? Yes, she sings of her own experience, her own hope, but also out of the experience and hope of everyone past and present who like her, has been pushed to the margins, swept under some repressive rug.

In opposition to a world structured otherwise Mary is heard proclaiming God's favor upon the lowly; she sings of God's will for the radical redistribution of wealth, of "scattering the proud" of "bringing down the powerful" and of a new world order where billionaires, climate change deniers and retired Generals relinquish Cabinet appointments and are instead engaged in humanitarian efforts to relieve suffering, to transform an economy marked by scarcity and competition into an economy of generosity in which all have enough. Mary sings because burning insider her is the desire for the "hungry [to be] filled with good things, and the rich to be sent away empty". The rich are empty, blessedly, because it has become the pleasure of the rich to share their good things with those who have no means to ever acquire them themselves. All of which Mary reminds us, has

always been God's preference for us and for communities we inhabit, and always will be, from "Abraham and to his descendants forever."

How to explain all this? Mary's bursting so extemporaneously, poetically, poignantly, so boldly...waxing and waning as she does in such an attack on the establishment? Well I sure as heck don't know, but I know this: it has got to be the classic case of the old saying, "when life gives you lemons, make lemon-aid" ...when life is repressive and scary, uncertain and heavy laden, then sing, sing of God and God's goodness. It's as if a little sugar in the midst of life's sourness does wonders for one's spirit; and if that isn't reason enough, to be sure, singing also glorifies God which in turn can easily spill over into another person's life, thereby sweetening them too, and with one neighbor at a time, the world.

Again we ask, how to explain Mary? Because singing of light in a world of darkness can be an act of resistance to powers that repress. Because when at Christmas we sing of a baby born to "rule the world with truth and grace, and make the nations prove the glories of God's righteousness and wonders of God's love" that is precisely what happens—the status quo, far short of God's will, is directly confronted. The American slaves knew all this—their spirituals both praised God and shined a harsh light on their masters; the civil rights leaders experienced the power of song each time they sang "We Shall Overcome." Immediately prior to the fall of the Berlin Wall the people of Leipzig, Germany would gather by candlelight every Monday evening outside of St. Nikolai Church, to sing of freedom. Over the course of two months the crowd grew from a few hundred, to a few thousand, to over half the citizens of the city. It can be said that song helped fall the wall. Later when the East German secret police were asked why they did not crush the protesters they replied, "We had no contingency plan for song."

"Hail Mary full of grace, blessed art thou among women..." for she knew how to sing, she knew of the power of God that song let's lose to trample the powerful and lift high the lowly; she knew that song was the best way to face the long odds of her situation, without retreat, without apology, and how song in such situations acts as a healing balm upon human despair and suffering. She knew, that when your back is against the wall the most powerful thing you can do is sing.

With Mary's voice, with your voice with my voice, to say nothing of the voice of the slaves, minorities, those who have and lived under repressive regimes...guess what? We have a choir! Our voices form a choir! So why not sing? Why not sing?

Praise be to God & Amen.