

Gentle Revolutionary

Text: Luke 1: 47-55

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I have a confession to make this morning. I don't think it's an overly egregious kind of thing to disclose. Still, you never know and I have to come clean. I certainly hope that it doesn't diminish your opinion about my pastoral judgment. After all, we've known one another for a long time, and I trust that you will be able to hear this with measured and mature perspective.

So here is my bit of self-tell. I absolutely love to sing Christmas carols and I am one who believes that it's never too early to sing them. I know, I *know*: some purists among us are likely to be uncomfortable with such a radical stance. They are likely to say that singing carols while still in Advent - and before Christmas Eve - is out of theological sequence. Some of my seminary professors, even among the best, taught me this!

But I say phooey to that! I have come to believe that we can never sing of praise or wonder or Christmas blessing too early or often enough. Given all that God has done, still does, ought to have us singing of mystery and light and peace; of birth and tenderness and joy every single chance we get. In fact, there is such a thing as holding back too much in life, and of waiting too long.

So we're going to simply reflect some on carols today. They are so powerfully evocative. And so personal, too. They have the capacity to carry us to the deep soul of life, even to the longing for the birth of Jesus more than any other form of human expression.

In particular, I want us to hear of one that predates the very first Christmas. The best of scholarly agreement places this carol six months before the Bethlehem birth. It has been variously named over time: the *Song of Mary*, the *Canticle of Mary*, the *Carol of Mary*, and in the Byzantine tradition the *Ode of the Theotokos*. Most of us recognize it by a more classical name, the *Magnificat*.¹

It's one of the eight most ancient Christian hymns that we can identify. As such, it has earned Mary the credit for being the first Christian disciple; for even after only three months of carrying her child, she was becoming the spokesperson of the ideals and values that his all-too-brief life would give to the world.²

She begins and sustains in rejoicing. Eugene Peterson translates her first words, "I am bursting with Good News; I am dancing the song of my God!" Or, more traditionally: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my Spirit rejoices in God my Savior!"

I love one of the words tucked in there: magnifies. It begs our pause! It's not a benign statement! It's expansive! There was a largeness growing in her not only because she was with child. At the self-same time God was doing something to make her soul larger to bear all that was to come – most of which she had no way of knowing yet. And the

practice of rejoicing, of breathing gladness, is one of the best ways to stretch the human soul.

Martin Copenhaver, President of Andover Newton Theological School, my alma mater, soon to be called Andover Newton at Yale, notes that the practice of rejoicing is key to celebrating the birth of Christ. He says that we need practice it because it's not always or even often a natural thing to do. In fact, for some of us it is not at all easy. His words: "We need to practice rejoicing not because this is a particularly bright time, but precisely so because it is dark; and yet, even here, in the darkness, the light of the world is coming."³

So Mary names it, claims it, sings it: "My soul rejoices! I am bursting with Good News!"

And then her expanding soul leads us deeper. She sings about the value of life. And that's because she realizes, and deeply, that the birth of Jesus is really so much more than a single child. It is the inexplicable recognition of Emmanuel, God with us, in us, for us, through us.

She forms her words with such poetic care. "God has looked with favor on the least and the lowly." In true humility she described herself that way. But then she sings of the experience of being lifted up, identified, named, and known as more than she had learned to see in herself before.

You see the progression? Rejoicing enlarges the soul and leads to a revaluing in life – something that begins with a deep awareness of being loved by God, and then that extends to all people. And to the world.

I did a good bit of my Christmas shopping on-line and in the process came across three unexpected cyber security screens. One asked me outright to "Click on this box if you are not a robot." Another asked me to verify myself as human. It said, "Click here if you are a human" . . . and then asked me to digitally drag one of three icons - a hammer, a tire, or a gallon of milk to the proper repository. "If you are human place the food icon in the refrigerator."

My goodness! A robot? A human? "There is a pearl of great price in you," the Gospel would later tell. A pearl of great price in the vessel of every single human heart.

So rejoicing with a larger soul, revaluing the gift of life. And then this: revolution! Please hear me on this because Christmas has no lasting power if we stop short. And, for goodness sake, please don't hear what I'm not saying!

We may remember Mary as gentle and tender, but she was also revolutionary. The vision of a better world overcame her. Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it like this, "her song does not have sweet nostalgic or even playful tones. It is, instead, a hard, strong, inexorable claim about collapsing the thrones and lords of this world; it's about the power of God and the powerlessness of humankind."⁴

Quinn Caldwell is a colleague of mine, a Senior Pastor of a UCC church in Syracuse. He is a bit of a quirky guy and has a curious way of greeting people on Christmas Eve.⁵ He says, "Merry Christmas and welcome. If you came tonight expecting a tame story, you came to the wrong place. If you came for a story that does not threaten you in some way, you came for a different story than the one we tell. But if you came for a story of reversals; if you came to be reminded that God loves you too much to leave you unchanged; if you came to follow the light, even if it blinds you; if you came for salvation and not safety, then, ah, my friends, you are in precisely the right place."

And then he asks with a pause that surveys the room: "So, what are you here for?"

So let's pull it all together. What an amazing Christmas carol Mary sang! Rejoicing her way to a larger soul; revaluing life as God intends for every breathing living being; and inciting a spirit of revolution until the world as we know it is whole and wholesome and loving and fair.

I don't know the melody, but I do so love her words. I hope that you will hold them deeply in heart with me, as this week carries us to Christmas. And I hope you'll start that by letting me sneak in another Christmas Carol – even a week before it's time!

Merry Christmas! And Amen!

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¹ Wikipedia search: "Magnificat."

² Raymond E. Brown. *Coming Christ in Advent*. The Liturgical Press, 1988, pp. 60-71.

³ Martin Copenhaver, "Rejoice!" in *Hark! Advent Devotionals*, UCC Still Speaking Authors, 2012, p. 16.

⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer. *The Mystery of Holy Night*. Crossroad, 1996, p. 6.

⁵ Quinn Caldwell. *All I Really Want*. Abingdon Press, 2014, pp. 110-112.