



## *Singing Imagination*

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Claire Nevin-Field  
The Third Sunday of Advent ~ December 13, 2020*

### **Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11**

“The Spirit of Exalted YHWH is upon me,  
for YHWH has anointed me:  
God has sent me to bring good news to those who are poor;  
to heal broken hearts;  
to proclaim release to those held captive  
and liberation to those in prison;  
to announce a year of favor from YHWH,  
and the day of God’s vindication;  
to comfort all who mourn,  
to provide for those who grieve in Zion—  
to give them a wreath of flowers instead of ashes,  
the oil of gladness instead of tears,  
a cloak of praise instead of despair.  
They will be known as trees of integrity,  
planted by YHWH to display God’s glory.  
They will restore the ancient ruins,  
and rebuild sites long devastated;  
they will repair the ruined cities,  
neglected for generations.  
For I, YHWH, love justice;  
I hate robbery and sin.  
So I will faithfully compensate you,  
and I will make an everlasting covenant with you.  
Your descendants will be renowned among the nations;  
and your offspring among the people;  
all who see you will acknowledge  
that you are a people blessed by YHWH.  
I will joyfully exult in YHWH,  
who is the joy of my soul!  
My God clothed me with a robe of deliverance  
and wrapped me in a mantle of justice,  
the way a bridegroom puts on a turban  
and a bride bedecks herself with jewels.  
For as the earth brings forth its shoots,  
and a garden brings its seeds to blossom,  
so Exalted YHWH makes justice sprout,  
and praise spring up before all nations.

### **Canticle**                      The Song of Mary

“My soul proclaims your greatness, O God,  
and my spirit rejoices in you, my Savior.  
For you have looked with favor upon your lowly servant,  
and from this day forward  
all generations will call me blessed.  
For you, the Almighty, have done great things for me,  
and holy is your Name.  
Your mercy reaches from age to age  
for those who fear you.  
You have shown strength with your arm;

### *Magnificat* - Luke 1:47-55

you have scattered the proud in their conceit;  
you have deposed the mighty from their thrones  
and raised the lowly to high places.  
You have filled the hungry with good things,  
while you have sent the rich away empty.  
You have come to the aid of Israel your servant,  
mindful of your mercy—  
the promise you made to our ancestors—  
to Sarah and Abraham and their descendants forever.”

### **1 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24**

Rejoice always, pray constantly, and give thanks for everything—for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. Don't stifle the Spirit; don't despise the prophetic gift. But test everything and accept only what is good. Avoid any semblance of evil.

May the God of peace make you perfect in holiness. May you be preserved whole and complete—spirit, soul, and body—irreproachable at the coming of our Savior Jesus Christ. The One who calls us is trustworthy: God will make sure it comes to pass.

### **John 1:6-8,19-28**

Then came one named John, sent as an envoy from God, who came as a witness to testify about the Light, so that through his testimony everyone might believe. He himself wasn't the Light; he only came to testify about the Light—the true Light that illumines all humankind.

Now the Temple authorities sent emissaries from Jerusalem—priests and Levites—to talk to John. "Who are you?" they asked. This is John's testimony: he didn't refuse to answer, but freely admitted, "I am not the Messiah." "Who are you, then?" they asked. "Elijah?" "No, I am not," he answered. "Are you the Prophet?" "No," he replied. Finally they said to him, "Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you have to say for yourself?" John said, "I am, as Isaiah prophesied, the voice of someone crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight our God's road!'" The emissaries were members of the Pharisee sect. They questioned him further: "If you're not the Messiah or Elijah or the Prophet, then why are you baptizing people?" John said, "I baptize with water because among you stands someone whom you don't recognize—the One who is to come after me—the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy even to untie." This occurred in Bethany, across the Jordan River, where John was baptizing.

Right now, it is hard to escape the fear, anxiety and depression many people are experiencing- the world feels fragile and unsafe. And many of our readings in church in the past few weeks have echoed this sense of gloom, even despair. But finally, this morning we have something different. We have a song sung by a poor teenage girl who happens to be a prophet and who will become the Mother of God.

The back-story to Mary's song is similar to a long line of unexpected, improbable, even scandalous biblical births-stories of despair turned into hope. We can hear the echo of Sarah and Hannah's cries of disbelief and delight as they learn they are pregnant after having given up all hope of ever bearing a child, as they learn that they will no longer be viewed as worthless in a society that values women only for their ability to produce children, as they revel in the marvelous acts of God. And in the few verses immediately before the Magnificat that we just read and sang, two more women greeted each other with cries of great joy- laughing at their unlikely scandalous situation. Elizabeth, Mary's cousin- old Elizabeth- pregnant Elizabeth, greets young, unmarried Mary. Now they both would have had cause for doom and gloom. Elizabeth thinking of the ridicule that might be heaped upon her by the village at bearing a child well past her expiration date could be excused for being a little less than enthusiastic. And poor Zechariah, her husband, had been struck mute by the angel that announced this particular impending birth- mute because he had the nerve to question how God was going to pull this one off- well, that can't have been easy to explain to the village. And unmarried Mary could have been excused for questioning, doubting, fearing. She could be ostracized, stoned even for this scandalous pregnancy. But rather than fearing, and gifted with song rather than being struck mute after questioning the angel, Mary sings away. Somehow, both women, despite the circumstances, rejoice- they see what has happened to them as pure unmitigated gift from God. Mary literally sings her delight.

And what a song it is- a song that revels in the many gifts of the Mighty One, gifts that may not appear to be such. It is a song that gives the proud the gift of decreased swelling in their heads, gives the full the gift of an empty stomach so they can get in touch with their humanity and gives the rich the gift of an emptiness they can fill only with something other than stuff. And strangely it is a song sung in the past tense- almost as if Mary believes that her song is the way things are, not the way she hopes they will be. Which is one of the funny things about those who trust completely in God, who have faith- they have the ability, even in less than optimal circumstances, to see the possibility, the opportunity, the God presence. They have the gift of imagination- of seeing things as they can be rather than as they are. They know that God has not forgotten us and is never finished with us- that things as they are now are not things as they will always be. They are not wild eyed and delusional, they are aware of the present, fraught with all its difficulties- with its job losses, pandemics, toxic relationships and the like, but they are also aware of the astounding ability of God to break into human existence and turn it upside down. Mary, of all people, knew that one intimately- as nearly and completely as the child that grew within her- likely giving her morning sickness, varicose veins, and heartburn as well as the indescribable joy of feeling life kicking inside her and knowing that all of this was from God- this gift of a life turned upside down.

Mary was keenly aware that God invites each of us to participate in the great and eternal mystery of life- in God's project. The offer to participate is sometimes extended by an angel, but often not. Often it is extended by a very ordinary, very human being. Often it comes in silence rather than in a noisy announcement. Often it is extended when we are not looking for it- and often when we most desperately need it. God has a funny habit of doing the unexpected, of snatching victory out of the jaws of almost certain defeat. Mary knew this in her story- and we know it in Mary's story and most obviously in Jesus' story; the story of rejection, despair, agony, abandonment and death being turned into new life. And we also may know it in our own stories. There are many uncertainties in life, but one constant is God's invitation to us to participate, to join the song improbable and upside down as it - to become part of the ever unfolding mystery of life, a mystery whose ending no one knows, maybe even God.

But how do we do this- plunge into the mystery, letting go of our doubt, fear and skepticism? I don't think there is a "one size fits all answer", but I think part of it has to do with one of Mary's gifts- imagination- a gift with which we, modern sophisticated people of science and fact may have lost touch. Hemmed in by fear and enamored by facts, we are a people vulnerable, especially when times are difficult, to being locked into the unpleasant present. People vulnerable to seeing things only as they are and who scoff at such imaginary nonsense as angels talking to young women or striking disbelieving husbands mute, and who have forgotten that God sees things differently and that God never gives up, never forgets. We live in a world of the concrete- only believing what we can see, touch, hear, taste or feel to be true. A world in which seeing precedes believing. A world sometimes lacking in imagination and therefore sometimes in faith. It is imagination that leads to faith- faith as defined by theologian James Whitehead, "is the enduring ability to imagine life in a certain way". We hear, the world tells us, it's only your imagination and it's all in your imagination. As if what is in front of us, what we can substantiate or explain is all there is. As if words on a page don't move us, don't create images in our heads and imagining something never leads to it becoming reality.

We live in a world in which poor unmarried women and their babies face immense difficulties- a bleak future. In which the December skies don't typically open up- riven with angels singing. But here, as we gather and remember the story, as we meet God, very much present and alive in our midst, we feel the faint stirrings of imagination. Here we remember that Mary gently, but insistently calls us, sings us to imagination. We look at the faces of the children at the Christmas pageant- children who have not yet learned that such stories are not "real" and we begin to remember when we had imagination. When a cardboard box was a pirate ship, an old blanket a superhero's cape and angels bursting onto the scene with divine announcements taken completely and gracefully in stride as a matter of fact. We remember that imagination is the prerequisite for faith, and more importantly, for faithful action.

I know that there are many of us here this morning who are worried and wondering-who have important questions; will my chemotherapy work? Can I really not take another drink of alcohol again? Will I be laid off, or will I find a job again? Perhaps you need to make a difficult decision and you are paralyzed by fear, locked into the present. People tell you to "deal with reality and face facts" or they may tell you there is only one possible solution to your problem. And I am not trying to downplay or trivialize the enormity of such situations, such decisions. But somewhere, in the midst of confusion and paralysis, of fact and reality, if we listen the faint echo of a song fills the air. A baby is born in a dark stable. Shepherds start scurrying. A King becomes extremely nervous.

Imagine that. Imagine a world- a new world -a world where God showing up and acting is not a fairy tale but an ever present reality. Imagine inviting that God, patiently waiting for such an invitation- imagine inviting that God into your very being. Imagine feeling new life within you. Imagine throwing your head back and joining Mary's song- adding your own verses. Imagine not holding back and waiting until you are sure of the ending of the story before you plunge in- certain that, whatever the ending is, it will be in God. Imagine that.

May our souls magnify the Lord. May our spirits rejoice in God our Savior. For God has looked with favor on us, and all generations will call us blessed. For the Mighty One has done, is doing and will do, great things for us, and holy is God's name.