

I.

After we got our driver's licenses, my best friend and I loved nothing more than getting in the car and just driving, windows down, radio up. We would sing whatever songs came on the radio at the top of our lungs: oldies, power ballads, pop hits. Even if we didn't know all the words, we would sing. And...sometimes we would have to stop singing because we were laughing so hard at the words we had made up to the familiar tunes. Words that made absolutely no sense.

But when a song came on that we both knew well, well, nothing could hold us back. Heads thrown back, voices loud, we would turn the radio up and sing with all our might. We didn't care who heard us when we slowed to a stop at a red light. We just sang. Because we knew those songs by heart.

II.

From the time she was a little girl, Mary had been taught the songs of her faith. She had learned that when women had something to say in the Scriptures, they often said it with a song. Miriam sang. Hannah sang. Deborah sang. And as she grew up, Mary learned all the greatest hits. She would hum the tunes as she was helping her mother with chores. She would sing the words on the way to the Temple. They became her companions as she moved through the years.

But even though she loved the songs, she knew they had been written by and for people who lived a long time ago. They seemed to describe a God that she hadn't met yet. They seemed to know things about faith that she hadn't yet learned. And so, even though she sang along, they were someone else's songs.

None of those oldies had prepared her for the moment when an angel showed up at her side and began saying incredible things. Things about God and about her and about a baby that would save the world. Mary's head was spinning and she didn't know what to think or what to do. The angel asked if she would be a part of God's incredible plan and before she had time to weigh the pro's and con's she realized she had said yes.

III.

It wasn't until after the angel had left that the reality of what had just occurred began to sink in. This wasn't something that she would be able to keep to herself. Soon her parents would know. The man they had betrothed her to, Joseph, would probably refuse to marry her. What would her future look like, now that she had said yes to this? Had God showed up and ruined her life?

Unsure of where to go or who to turn to, Mary decided to listen to the angel. He had told her that her cousin was also inexplicably pregnant, even though she was far past childbearing years. And so, Mary set off into the Judean hillside to find her cousin Elizabeth and see if, together, they could figure out what this all might mean.

As Mary crossed the threshold into Elizabeth's house, Elizabeth's child shifted in her womb and Elizabeth heard the whisper of God. So before Mary could finish saying hello, before she could begin to explain about the angel and the baby, before she could try to put words to anything that had happened, Elizabeth's words bubbled forth: "Blessed are you, Mary! Blessed is this child you carry!"

Instead of a lecture, Elizabeth gives Mary the most powerful gift she could receive in that moment. She gives her a blessing. Mary had expected anger, ridicule, and even threats from

everyone she loved when she told them her news. But instead, Elizabeth simply tells Mary the truth: Yes, Mary, your life is about to change forever. But God's faithfulness endures forever. Yes, Mary, the road ahead of you will be long and hard. But still you are blessed.

Mary needed to hear that good news. Mary needed to receive that blessing. Mary needed this pure, unadulterated grace from her cousin. And when it came to her, it felt like God was speaking to her again.

IV.

All of a sudden, all of Mary's favorite songs came flooding back into her heart and she found her voice. Receiving Elizabeth's song of blessing, Mary in turn began to sing. She sang a song passed down across the ages. Miriam had sung a song like this when the Israelites escaped from Pharaoh, crossing a sea on dry ground. Hannah had sung it too when she learned that she would have a child.

But as Mary sang, it wasn't just a song from the past anymore, it was her song too, with words that she wrote as the melody filled her lungs: "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior," she began. My soul **MAGNIFIES** the Lord. I am not just a window through which people can see God. I am not just one who points beyond myself. But I am magnifying what God is doing. I am taking this gift and proclaiming it loudly. I am no longer afraid.

The song she sang was also a song of revolution and redemption. While others believed that wealth and power were signs of God's favor, Mary knew the truth. God is with those on the margins, the ones who have been pushed aside, made to feel ashamed. Singing a song she could feel in her bones, she joyfully testified to a God who looks with favor on the lowly, lifting them

up, redeeming their suffering and blessing them. This God has decided to enter the world through the poor and the powerless. It will be through the likes of Mary and her kin that the universe will be redeemed.

She sang the song for Elizabeth and her astounded, silent husband Zechariah. But she didn't sing just for them. She sang this song for herself. She sang it for the Mighty One who would do great things for her. She sang it for the angel who gave her the good news. She sang it for the world that would once again be reminded that God has not forgotten them. And maybe most of all, she sang her song for the child. Her child. Her son.

V.

These days the studies are clear. Babies in the womb can hear and even identify the sound of their parents' voices. They can respond to music. And, in fact, playing music can help in their early brain development, all before they are ever born. The soundtrack of Mary's faith was knit into Jesus's bones as they formed in her womb, the songs of revolution and redemption were as close to him as his mother's heartbeat.

And I would imagine that Mary's song of revolutionary, odds-defying love continued to shape her life, and the life of her child, long after she stopped singing that day at Elizabeth's house. As Mary gave birth to Jesus and then raised him, I believe that song continued to weave its way through her days. As Jesus's first theology teacher, Mary must have continued to sing to him the songs of her faith until he too could sing them by heart.

And as he grew up, Mary's song became Jesus's song as well. This song of a God who comes and dwells with those who have been forgotten must have been humming in the background as he moved away from home and began to teach and preach. This song about a

God who lifts up the downtrodden must have helped him muster his strength as he proclaimed good news to the poor, freedom for the prisoners, sight to the blind. As Jesus welcomed outcasts and fed hungry people on a hillside, he must have remembered the song about a God who fills the hungry with good things. As he healed those who had been neglected or in pain, and pointed toward God's coming reign, the words of his mother's song must have been ringing in his ears.

And when Jesus faced the hardest moments in his life, the song continued to echo through his life, as Mary once again picked up the refrain. She was there when he was led to trial. She was in the crowd the next morning, when it seemed as if the song would be lost forever. She refused to leave him when it seemed that the whole world would abandon the tune. And perhaps, even then, Mary was able to find the strength and the courage to continue mouthing the words of her song. The song of a God who will raise up those who have been cast low. This God who would remake the world.

VII.

Mary's song isn't one of our typical Christmas carols. It doesn't talk about the holly or the ivy, it doesn't speak about winter or bells ringing. It doesn't even mention Jesus by name. And it isn't a dreamy-eyed love song, filled with rainbows or butterflies. It doesn't rhyme and we don't have any sheet music so that we can learn the tune.

Down through the centuries the song has even been banned. When Martin Luther and others translated the Bible into German, they left the Magnificat in Latin, directed to do so by the German princes who were funding their project. The people in charge didn't want anyone to get any crazy ideas. When India was held under British rule, they were not allowed to sing the Magnificat in worship. And after the mothers of disappeared children in Argentina plastered the

words across the capital plaza, the military junta banned all public displays of the song. Even in our spaces of worship, this song has so often been overlooked or ignored altogether. For a song of a God who pulls the powerful from the thrones and lifts up the lowly is sometimes a dangerous one to sing aloud. And yet, as those who seek to follow Jesus and do God's will, this mighty song of revolution and redemption may be the most important song we will ever hear. And ultimately, it is a song we must learn how to sing ourselves as we move into the world.

For here, in Mary's song, we learn the true purpose of Christmas. And it isn't the gifts or the trees or the lights. It isn't the wreaths or the cookies or even the carols. No, it is the promise. The promise of a God who is coming to dwell with us. The hope of a God who will set things right. The joy of a God who has not forgotten us. The love of a God that is more powerful than any force here on earth, even more powerful than sin or death.

The promise of a God who is already, in this very moment, working to turn our world and our lives upside down. The words are already there for us. All we need to do is begin singing along.

Amen.

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