

Singing is powerful. Remember last month when we celebrated the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall? What many people do not realize is that for several months before the wall actually came down, the citizens of Leipzig had been gathering at St. Nicholas church, the very same church where Johannes Sebastian Bach had spent most of his career and composed many of his cantatas. Over two months the numbers grew from fewer than a thousand to more than three hundred thousand, meeting every Monday night at 5 pm, and then as November, 1989 approached they met nightly. The pastor of St. Nicholas remembers: "More than 2,000 people leaving the church were welcomed by tens of thousands waiting outside with candles in their hands. Two hands are necessary to carry a candle and to protect it from extinguishing so that you cannot carry stones or clubs at the same time - an unforgettable moment." They moved on to the headquarters of the Stasi, the East German secret police, and there they laid their candles on the steps - and they sang.

Inside, were Stasi police armed with live ammunition and orders to defend a strategic building. Looking back, the curator of the museum, which is what the headquarters is now said, "One stone through the window would have been enough to set off a bloodbath." But the gatherings remained peaceful. And the longings of a people who hungered for freedom were fulfilled. And it was not just in Leipzig. I was in the city of Erfurt in the summer of 1990, and the pastor of the church there described the same kind of scene, a packed church every night with candles and - singing.

Tonight's gospel is meant to be sung. In fact, Luke's Christmas story is filled with singing. Zechariah will praise God's fidelity to Israel through the birth of his son, John the Baptist. The angels will sing of peace and good will at the birth of Jesus, and later Simeon will sing of God's mercy being extended to all the world. Obviously Luke understood that singing is powerful. On this Fourth Sunday in Advent, Mary's canticle echoes Hannah's song (which we read just a month ago), in which Hannah praises God's marvelous deeds in the lives of all who are marginalized or downtrodden. The Magnificat is indeed an elegant expression of joy at God's promises kept: the lowly are lifted up, the proud are brought down, and the hungry are fed.

But what sounds to us like a lovely vision can also be heard as a powerful threat. In the 1980s, the government of Guatemala banned the Magnificat "because, "[u]nlike 'Away in a Manger,' this prayer was apparently considered subversive, politically dangerous. Authorities worried that it might incite the oppressed people to riot." 1

As it turned out in Germany, singing did not lead to violence. But Mary's song reminds us where real power is. While we despair of anything ever changing in the world's centers of power - in congressional bodies or corporate institutions - God points our attention to two pregnant women, one too old, one too young, who faithfully praise the "mighty one who has done great things," and is still doing great things, and often in the most unexpected places. What a powerful song for every hungry heart! Even our own. We bring our hunger into this Christmas celebration - hunger for peace and stability in the world, for the healing of our planet, for food and shelter for all. We also bring that deeper hunger, that aching longing of our secret hearts. Can we believe that God can do great and unexpected things in us? In our lives?

Here we are, on the verge of another Christmas celebration. Mary is pregnant - and so are we, standing, as preacher Fred Craddock says "expectantly at hope's window." As poet David Whyte describes:

*Inside everyone  
is a great shout of joy  
waiting to be born.  
Even with the summer  
so far off  
I feel it grown in me  
now and ready  
to arrive in the world. 2*

Oh really, you say. And will my bundle of joy arrive in time for Christmas? Hope can be a fragile thing. And it's easy to be skeptical when we fix our hopes on a specific time on the calendar. But take a look at the verbs in Mary's canticle. She's mixed up her tenses; she sings as if all these wonderful things have already happened, that God has already accomplished the righting of the world. As Jan Richardson cleverly puts it, Mary is remembering forward. 3

Prophets do this too; they play around with time, "because part of their gift is being able to see the world as God sees it – not divided into things that are already over and things that have not happened yet, but as an eternally unfolding mystery that surprises everyone." 4 It's like one of those sci-fi movies where they're playing around with the space/time continuum. Or *Through the Looking-Glass*.

Remember when the White Queen says to Alice,

"The rule is, jam tomorrow and jam yesterday—but never jam today."

"It **must** come sometimes to 'jam today,'" Alice objected.

"No, it can't," said the Queen. "It's jam every other day: today isn't any other day, you know."

"I don't understand," said Alice. "It's dreadfully confusing!"

"That's the effect of living backwards," the Queen said kindly: "it always makes one a little giddy at first—"

"Living backwards!" Alice repeated in great astonishment. "I never heard of such a thing!"

"—but there's one great advantage in it, that one's memory works both ways."

"I'm sure **mine** only works one way," Alice remarked. "I can't remember things before they happen."

"It's a poor sort of memory that only works backwards," the Queen remarked.

Evidently, the Queen was right. Sometimes remembering forward is just what is called for. I've often complained, in times when I have been waiting for something to come to fruition, that God doesn't have a good sense of time – meaning things don't happen when I want them to. But what if we took a cue from the White Queen and from Mary and all the prophets – and mixed up our tenses?

Try this as an exercise. As you think about your hunger for the righting of the world, and about your own hunger for God, your deepest longings, ask yourself: what has God brought to birth in me this Christmas? What did God create in my life this coming year? How have I followed God's leading in the living out of my deepest hopes? How did I work with God in the transformation of the world? It may seem like a strange way to think, but really what it is is living in hope, mixing up our tenses and "standing expectantly at hope's window."

And as you do that, there is another aspect of this gospel story that we need to pay attention to. And that is that when Mary needed support and spiritual nurturing, she went to Elizabeth. And Elizabeth herself gained insight from her younger cousin Mary. These two women illustrate the fact that we hope in community. We do not wait alone for God's promises to be born in our lives. Together, we hold each other up when one of us needs encouragement or support. We help one another search for meaning, rejoice with one another, walk alongside each other. Just as Elizabeth must have listened to Mary, and helped her prepare for what was to come, we help one another work things out. Sometimes, we just sit in the dark quiet and wait, together, trusting in the promises of God, listening for a word from God. That might seem so obvious. But so often we do try to go it alone, especially in spiritual matters. Maybe we think everybody else has it altogether, and we don't want anyone to know how faithless we are – or at least feel.

There was a novel in the 80s called *Glittering Images* about an Episcopal priest who falls from grace and finds help from a wise spiritual director. The author, in a very astute sequel, *Glamorous Powers*, portrays the spiritual director going through his crisis and his journey to wholeness. We don't all have it together, but we are all in it together.

There is a generational theme in this story, too. The older Elizabeth is there for her younger cousin. Mary brings good news to her older kinswoman. Old and young – and everybody in between have wisdom to share. I had the experience this week of being asked for advice by a younger colleague. As I thought about it later, I wondered when I had become the older, wiser pastor, when it seems just yesterday I was the new kid on the block. But it was good to be an Elizabeth, to be able to share experience and wisdom, knowing also that I need to go to my own Elizabeth. And I find that I learn from our young teaching parish students, hopefully as much as they learn from me. All this is to say that we wait at hope's window together.

And as we wait, what better thing to do than to sing. When we give voice to our confident and courageous hope, we actually become more confident and courageous. Our few voices here tonight may seem a small thing in the face of all the worries of the world. But our voices are surely no smaller than those in Leipzig twenty years ago or those two voices joined in the Judean hill country twenty centuries ago. Mary's God, our God, we should remember, delights in taking what is small and insignificant in the eyes of the world to do extraordinary and unexpected things. Why should we expect anything different?

Amen

- 1 John Ortberg, *The Christian Century*, December, 2009
- 2 David Whyte, "A Great Shout of Joy," excerpted from *Winter of Listening*
- 3 Jan Richardson, *Door 14: Remembering Forward*, [www.theadventdoor.com](http://www.theadventdoor.com)
- 4 Barbara Brown Taylor, "Singing Ahead of Time," *Home by Another Way*