

First Congregational United Church of Christ
Second Sunday of Advent- December 10, 2023

Scripture lesson: Luke 1:46-55

SINGING AGAINST THE WORLD'S SILENT NIGHT

As Christians, we know the power of music and song. They point us to God.

I remember one of my seminary professors teaching us the history of arguments for the existence of God. He referred to one of them as "the argument from aesthetic experience". He said that over the years this argument has been formulated in various ways, but that his favorite way goes like this: "There is the music of Johann Sebastian Bach. Therefore, God exists." He said, "There's nothing more to say about this argument. You either see and accept its logic or you don't."

As Christians, we know the power of music and song. They draw us more deeply into the presence of God.

We're in the season of Advent. It's the time when we prepare for the coming of God in Christ at Christmas. It's the season when the glorious music and song of Handel's "Messiah" serves to inspire many a Christian's Advent preparation. Next week, that preparation will be wonderfully served here when our choir presents their annual Christmas cantata.

Christmas itself is the season of singing like no other. What will we do when Christmas Eve arrives? We will *fill* our worship with song after song from our tradition of favorite Christmas carols. *Every week* in worship *all through the year* music and song are central to us.

As Christians, we know the power of music and song. They help us to celebrate the deeds of God.

The first two chapters of St. Luke's gospel, part of which Diane read for us a few moments ago, shows us this. In them, as Luke tells the amazing story of what God is doing in the birth of Jesus, he finds that he must speak again and again of people singing and of angels singing. Elizabeth sings, Zechariah sings, Simeon sings. The angel, Gabriel, sings, the multitude of the heavenly host sings. And in our story for today, when Mary learns the good news that she's going to be a mama, what else can she do? Mary sings.

It's what we do when good news comes. We're moving through an ordinary day tending to the details of everyday business. But then our phone buzzes, or we get a text, or there's a knock at the door. Suddenly, good news arrives and we want to sing. Immediately, there's music in our hearts and a song on our lips. Mary gets good news, so Mary sings.

But wait a minute.

If we were Mary, would we sing? After all, Mary's being "great with child" was *not* something that she took to be good news at first. She hadn't chosen it or planned it. It certainly didn't please her fiancé, Joseph.

It's true that the angel, Gabriel, in announcing to Mary her impending pregnancy had told her to "Fear not." But Mary knew her Bible. She knew that when an angel tells you to "fear not" it means that something's about to happen that will likely make you fear-full.

Later Simeon would tell Mary the hard truth of what it would mean for her to be "blessed among women". He told her that "a sword will pierce your side". Being the mother of this child

would not be easy for Mary, but still she sang. She sang, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God, my Savior."

Her song is remarkable. It's no lullaby. It's much more like a battle chant. "The Lord has shown strength with his arm, has scattered the proud in the imaginations of their hearts, has put down the mighty from their thrones, and the rich has sent empty away."

Hers is no sweet, pop tune. It's a song about those who are low being brought up, and about those who are high being brought low. It's the kind of song that can strike fear into the hearts of any of us who are proud, high, and mighty.

At one point when apartheid was still the rule in South Africa, the government in Pretoria banned the lighting of candles and the singing of Christmas carols in Soweto. When asked why, a government spokesman said, "You know how emotional black women are. Christmas carols have a big emotional effect on them." Yes, if you let a poor Jewish woman like Mary sing, a black mother in Soweto or Detroit or Flint sing, you don't know what might happen.

"Music hath power to soothe the savage beast." So wrote William Shakespeare. But music also has the power to release, cut loose, pull down, and raise up. Many of us remember the 1960s. We remember what happened when young people started to sing, "The Times They Are A' changin'". We remember what happened when Christians joined hands across the color line and started singing, "We Shall Overcome". Things were released, cut loose, pulled down, and raised up.

It was a time of change. It was often a frightening time. Maybe that's why now when money gets tight, we're sorely tempted to call music a "frill" and start cutting it from school budgets. It's a risky business when people sing. Better think twice about encouraging it when the times are ripe for change.

Yet what does it mean when people can no longer sing? What does it mean when people have been rendered speechless and without voice? I recently read a missionary's account of what happens when a child is starving. As severe emaciation sets in and death draws near, the child can no longer cry. Tears dry up and the child is silent. The hunger goes so deep that it moves beyond pain and into an utter and empty silence. If you're pushed down and mistreated long enough, if you're abused and hurt deeply enough, you lose your voice. Unable to sing or even speak, you can only withdraw into a broken, empty silence.

Yes, the world has its own version of Silent Night, but there's nothing holy or bright about it. There are always enough starving children and grieving mothers to mock our music and silence our song.

Dr. Janelle Goetcheus is the medical director of Christ House. If you're sick and homeless in Washington, D.C., Christ House is the place you can go and stay until you get better. Dr. Goetcheus tells the story of going out one cold night to the area near the Washington Monument. It was around Christmas time and she was with an outreach team from Christ House. She and her friends soon discovered five men huddled around a steam grate, trying to keep warm.

One man had pneumonia. Another had severe steam grate burns that had become infected. Dr. Goetcheus suspected that a third might have laryngeal cancer, a suspicion that later proved true. Off in the distance she could see the lights of the national Christmas tree and hear the sounds of Christmas music. But nearby people hurried by in silence.

What else can you do when you find yourself in the presence of death? You go numb. You lose your voice. You go silent.

The loved one of a close friend dies. You find yourself thinking, "I don't know what to say." What is there to say in the face of such death's awful presence? "He's better off now. We're thinking about you. In time you'll get over this." The words seem so trite, so woefully inadequate. You wonder if it's not better to just keep quiet.

But then the family gathers at church to confront their loss, and what does the church lead them to do? The church leads them to sing. See them singing through their tears, "A mighty fortress is our God". See them singing through their pain, "For all the saints who from their labors rest . . . thy name, O Jesus, be forever blest, alleluia".

The church calls on them to sing even when they don't feel like it, and it's among the best things that we do. For in the midst of the world's silent night, such singing is pure defiance. It is an act of stunning faith. It's a relentless revolt against the presence of death.

Tyrants hate music and so does death. That's why Janell Goetcheus and her friends do not walk silently by. They pick up the men at the steam grate and take them back to Christ House with a song in their hearts.

The scene is first century Galilee and December darkness has fallen. There are no stars in the sky. People are shut up in darkened houses for fear of Roman soldiers. Outside in Nazareth, the streets are empty and fearfully silent. But in the midst of the silent darkness a pure, clear voice rings out.

"My soul magnifies the Lord . . . who has put down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of low degree."

To be sure, there will be many dark days ahead for Mary. As the mother of Jesus, she will know great joy AND great pain, as does any mother. Down the road in Ramah, mother Rachel will soon be weeping for her slaughtered children. In time, other mothers will weep for Mary's son. But for now, Mary's faith leads her to sing.

Of course, in our lives, it's not only joy that we know. Cold, dark January days lie just beyond the season of gladness for which we now prepare. The days are short and the nights are long.

But for now, our faith leads us to sing. We sing because we believe, and we believe because we sing.

With mother Mary, we join in her mighty song, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." Amen.