

The OTHER Magnificat

Luke 3.1-6 & 1.68-79

December 6, 2015, Advent II

Tim Phillips, Seattle First Baptist Church

The choir's anthem this morning comes from J.S. Bach's *Magnificat*, his musical adaptation of Mary's song of praise after hearing from the angel Gabriel that she is going to have a baby. "How can this be" she asks, "because I am just a young woman?"

"The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you and that which is being born in you is holy," Gabriel says.

So Mary goes off to visit Elizabeth and she sings, "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my savior." That's her *Magnificat*.

But the angel Gabriel has been really busy. He has already appeared to Zechariah and says, "I bring you Good News; your wife Elizabeth is going to have a child and you will have joy and gladness ... because he will be filled with the Holy Spirit and will turn the people's hearts back to God."

"How can this be" Zechariah asks, because I am so old?"

So here's the thing: If a messenger of God shows up with good news, don't bother saying that you are too young or too old. When it comes to this kind of good news – good news about the blessing that is being born in you – God doesn't care how old you are.

And this time, Gabriel says, "...because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will be unable to speak until the day these things occur." So Zechariah spends all of Elizabeth's pregnancy in silence.

And then the day comes, and their son John is born and they take him to the Temple to be dedicated to God, and Zechariah's voice is restored and he speaks for the first time in nine months. And he sings the OTHER Magnificat.

*And you, child, will be called
the prophet of the Most High,
for you will go before God
to prepare God's ways;*

*to give knowledge of salvation
to the people
by the forgiveness of their sins.*

*By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will
break upon us,*

*to give light to those who sit in night
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way
of peace.*

We are singing Zechariah's song this morning, the OTHER *Magnificat*, because sometimes, when the world is dark and the way ahead is scary, the best thing you can do is sing.

I remember being a little kid when I would find myself alone in the dark walking through the woods or a dark building, I would start singing: "Jesus loves me this I know ...". And then, at the top of my lungs, "YES! Jesus love me!" The singing kept my feet moving.

It was out of darkness and fear that hope created those African-American spirituals – the music of resistance – we talked about last week. Protest and promise created the freedom songs of the Civil Rights Movement. The clouds of war created a whole genre of peace songs.

Sometimes when the world is dark and the way ahead is scary, the best thing we can do is sing.

After the shootings in Paris, Peach Jack gave me a poem by Jan Richardson dedicated, she says, "For Beirut, for Kenya, for Paris, for Syria. For every place broken by violence and hatred (this was before San Bernardino). For every person in pain and grief. For you, from me, in sorrow and hope."

This is her *Magnificat* and she calls it “Blessing in a Time of Violence”

*Which is to say
this blessing
is always.*

*Which is to say
there is no place
this blessing
does not long
to cry out
in lament,
to weep its words
in sorrow,
to scream its lines
in sacred rage.*

*Which is to say
there is no day
this blessing ceases
to whisper
into the ear
of the dying,
the despairing,
the terrified.*

*Which is to say
there is no moment
this blessing refuses
to sing itself
into the heart
of the hated
and the hateful,
the victim
and the victimizer,
with every last
ounce of hope
it has.*

*Which is to say
there is none
that can stop it,
none that can
halt its course,
none that will
still its cadence,
none that will
delay its rising,
none that can keep it
from springing forth
from the mouths of us
who hope,
from the hands of us
who act,
from the hearts of us
who love,
from the feet of us
who will not cease
our stubborn, aching
marching ...*

*until this blessing
has spoken
its final word,
until this blessing
has breathed
its benediction
in every place,
in every tongue:
Peace.
Peace.
Peace.*

“There is not a moment this blessing refuses to sing itself into the heart” and “from the feet of us who will not cease our stubborn, aching, marching” for peace.

What is it about feet and peace?

From the prophetic tradition, Isaiah says: “How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who announce peace.” (Isaiah 52.7) That gets picked up again in the New Testament when the Letter to the Ephesians describes the kind of values that will guard us and guide us in the world. “As shoes for your feet, put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the good news of peace,” Ephesians says. (Ephesians 6.15)

Now here in this other Magnificat, the old priest who has seen a lot – wars and oppression and religious hypocrisy and human brokenness and his own disappointments – sings about the “the tender mercy of God” dawning on us and guiding our “feet in the way of peace.”

What’s the connection between peace and feet?

Maybe peace isn’t something we are waiting for.
Maybe it’s something we are going for.

Maybe it’s extending ourselves in forgiveness. That seems to be the context for the text this morning: “And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before God to prepare God’s ways, to give knowledge of salvation to the people by the forgiveness of sins.”

Is there someone you need to forgive this morning? You have been holding on to that wrong, that slight, that hurt for too long and it’s time to stop waiting for them to come around. Go to them – at least in your own heart – and give them and yourself the simple gift of peace this Christmas by forgiving them.

Believe me, I know there is nothing “simple” about forgiveness if by simple we mean easy or uncomplicated. In my experience, forgiveness is very complicated. And that’s all the more reason to go for it because that complicated web of responsibility and blame just gets more tangled and more of a mess the longer we wait for someone else to sort it out for us.

Or maybe you are the one who needs to be forgiven and it’s too vulnerable or too embarrassing to go there. I am beginning to wonder if we could break the world’s addiction to violence and war if we took a page out of 12-step recovery programs and we made it our practice as individuals and nations to go to people to make amends. I’m talking more than just apologizing. I’m talking about going to people and admitting that we have done wrong by them and doing the best we can to make it right.

In fact, peace goes out of its way to connect with people -- especially those who seem strange or different or maybe even threatening. That's the genius of the Peace Corps. It sends people out into the world to learn and grow and connect.

Perhaps what's dawning on us is that peace is something we do with our feet.

Tomorrow is December 7 and there will be all kinds of remembrances of that terrible day in Pearl Harbor and the violence that followed around the world.

Tomorrow also happens to be the 146th anniversary of this congregation and I will especially be remembering our spiritual ancestors in this place who worked for peace – especially our foremother, Alice Franklin Bryant.

Alice was teaching in the Philippines when the war broke out and she and her husband hid in the jungle for six months until they were captured by the Japanese and taken to a concentration camp. 200 people died in that camp and Alice and her husband barely survived.

When the war was over, they returned to Seattle and they tried to help others whose lives had been devastated by the war. When Alice received a check as compensation for her imprisonment, she sent that money back to Japan to help build a community center in Hiroshima. And last year, a delegation from Hiroshima, including one of the few remaining survivors of the nuclear bomb that destroyed his city, came here to honor the memory of Alice and to leave us with Peace Cranes made by school children there ... because, Alice Franklin Bryant and our friends from Hiroshima would tell us, I think, that peace is something we do with our feet.

Maybe it doesn't seem like our lives are as dramatic as all that. But I am reminded of that little book on meditation, *Peace Is Every Step*, by Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Buddhist monk. He encourages us to pay attention to our breathing, to be awake to our lives in this moment, and to be present in the world so that we can see the sacredness of simple things like eating and washing dishes and driving and answering the phone and to notice the way a flower or a smile or holding someone's hand can change our lives. Communion, or "Eucharist" he says, is the way "Jesus tried to wake up his disciples" to see what it means to eat together and to share our lives with one another. "Peace is every step" because peace is something we do with our feet as we move through every day. And maybe the cumulative effect of those simple steps will get us a little closer to the peace we have been waiting for.

That's the message of that other Magnificat:

*By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will
break upon us,*

*to give light to those who sit in night
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way
of peace.*

May it be so. And today, if you hear God's voice, do not harden your hearts.

NOTES

The "Canticle of Zechariah" is found in the *New Century Hymnal*, p.733. The "Blessing in a Time of Violence" is used by permission of the author, copyright Jan Richardson, janrichardson.com. The story of the Alice Franklin Bryant appears in *Our First Baptist Heritage 1869-1984*, pp.81-83. Thich Nhat Hanh, *Peace Is Every Step* (Bantam Books, 1991); Eucharist is on pp.22-23.