

“Our Magnificat”
Luke 1:46-55
The Fourth Sunday of Advent
December 24, 2023
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“Hope is a song in a weary throat.
Give me a song of hope
And a world where I can sing it.
Give me a song of faith
And a people to believe in it.
Give me a song of kindness
And a country where I can live it.
Give me a song of hope and love
And a brown girl’s heart to hear it.”

The Episcopal Reverend Pauli Murray penned this poem as part of their book *Dark Testament* in 1970. Pastor Leigh brought this poem to my attention during planning for our Advent Evening of Prayer, which we hosted on December 5 with the Ignatian Spirituality Center. Rev. Pauli Murray’s words resonate so well with our advent theme of “how does a weary world rejoice?”, a theme which I have found more and more relevant as we have traversed this advent season.

“Hope is a song in a weary throat.”

I think the Mother Mary knew that well. How could her throat NOT be weary, being an unwed pregnant teenage Jewish girl living in Roman-occupied Palestine? She surely knew the poetry and song of her Hebrew ancestors who prophesied and lamented and called for justice to flow down like waters. Mary surely knew the miraculous mothering stories of Hagar, Sarah, and Rachel; she surely knew the song of Hannah, found in 1 Samuel, rejoicing in God’s providence and declaring the goodness of the Holy One not just for her, but for all those crushed under forces of oppression. Mary’s throat must have been weary from generations of singing that lived in her very cells—singing the song that we now know as the Magnificat.

Hear these prophetic words from the Mother Mary, from Luke 1:46-55, translated by Dr. Wil Gafney:

“My soul magnifies the Holy One,
And my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
For God has looked with favor on the lowliness of God’s own womb-slave.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
For the Mighty One has done great things for me,
And holy is God’s name.
God’s loving-kindness is for those who fear God
From generation to generation.

God has shown the strength of God's own arm;
God has scattered the arrogant in the intent of their hearts.
God has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
And lifted up the lowly;
God has filled the hungry with good things,
And sent the rich away empty.
God has helped God's own child, Israel,
A memorial to God's mercy,
Just as God said to our mothers and fathers,
To [Hagar and] Sarah and Abraham, to their descendants forever."

That, dear church, is a song of hope in a weary throat. And like Rev. Pauli Murray's Dark Testament, on this fourth Sunday in advent we join in the chorus, calling for a world where we can sing songs of hope, a people who believe songs of faith, a country where songs of kindness can be real.

Y'all, the world is so weary. This year we have watched as yet more lives have been claimed by gun violence, as more laws have been passed limiting reproductive rights and the rights of LGBTQIA+ people, as natural disasters destroy lives and livelihoods, as rumors of wars have turned into genocide. The world is weary.

Y'all, *I* feel weary. I feel afraid. I feel discouraged. I feel worn down. And I know many of you feel this way, too.

Mary's Magnificat is not just ink on paper in a dusty book, it is a living, breathing song that *we can* sing today. Like Mary, each of us are called by God to join the kin-dom chorus, each with our own voice parts and languages and phrasings. Like Mary, we have the opportunity to answer the call of the Sacred, and respond.

If the Annunciation is the story of Mary's call to ministry, then the Magnificat is Mary's first sermon. If Mary's ministry is bearing the Word of God, then we must recognize Jesus' whole life as a prophetic sermon, calling us to "Stop. Watch. Pay attention. Look at what God is doing among us."

We, too, can answer the call, can preach the Word, can minister, can sing along.

There may be those who say, "But it's...too scary, too hard, too daunting, too dangerous, too cold, too vulnerable, too risky..." Maybe those who say these things are us. And all those things are true. The world is scary and hard and daunting and dangerous and cold and vulnerable and risky...so why in the world would we say "yes" to God? Why in the world would we go into ministry with God's people? Why in the world would we lift our voices and join the song?

Because it is hard to be afraid while singing.

“Just start singing. Once you do, the fear goes away.” This is the advice given to the elephant Meena in the animated movie *Sing*, to help her overcome her fear of singing in public. But even outside of an animated film, singing can be an important coping mechanism. Think of the courageous songs of enslaved persons that served as encouragement, community centering, even mapping paths to freedom. Think of social movements throughout time, people singing as they march in the streets or kneel on a football field or sit at lunch counters or offer “Ceasefire Carols” at Pike Place Market. Singing is powerful, as I am sure the choir can attest. Doctors and researchers agree that singing can help with anxiety, as singing requires attention be paid to the frequency and depth of breathing. And it is also well-documented that people singing together find their heartbeats syncing and feel a part of a community.

“Just start singing. Once you do, the fear goes away.”

Mary must have been anxious, lonely, weary, terrified, as she embarked upon the journey of responding to God’s call to the ministry of bearing the Word. After all, the angel Gabriel had told her “Do not be afraid!” But I think Mary also knew there was an option for her apart from fear, because she was not alone, and she knew she was part of a community. Her ancestors were with her as she sang. She sang of how they were real people who lived and loved and sang and died, how they had hopes and dreams that were left unaccomplished and yet they trusted in God to be with them, to deliver them from oppression. Mary stands in a long line of Palestinian Jewish women calling for empire to be brought down, for those looked upon as weak to rise up, for reproductive justice that would ensure the lives of their children could be safe, healthy and full. In her Magnificat song and her Magnificat life, Mary joins in the chorus of people imagining a world currently unseen, hoping against hope and dreaming against dream that it will come to be.

I like to think that as she sang the words of the Magnificat, her fear went away.

Beloveds, we are invited and called to sing, too.

Really, even before our vocal cords vibrate or before we take in a breath to our diaphragm, we have *already* been singing.

At the end of June this year, Dr. Adam Frank, a professor of astrophysics at the University of Rochester, published an article in *The Atlantic* entitled: “Scientists Found Ripples in Space and Time. And You Have to Buy Groceries.”¹ The beginning of that article reads, “The whole universe is humming. Actually, the whole universe is Mongolian throat singing. Every star, every planet, every continent, every building, every person is vibrating along to the slow cosmic beat.” Dr. Frank goes on to describe how a team of astronomers from around the world have been working together as the North American Nanohertz Observatory for Gravitational Waves (also known as NANOGrav). And this group of the brightest and best just this year were finally able to prove, after over a hundred years of waiting and philosophizing over Einstein’s theory of

¹ <https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2023/06/universe-gravitational-waves-nanograv-discovery/674570/>

relativity, that there is a grand gravitational wave through everything that is, resulting in something like a cosmic soundscape.

Dr. Frank writes,

“Over the course of a decade and a half, the NANOGrav team pored over their machines, their numbers, and their mathematical theory to bring us proof that something miraculous—something wonderful—is happening right under our noses. Actually, it’s happening to our noses, and the rest of our bodies as well. Every gravitational wave in that background the NANOGrav team found is humming through the very constitution of the space you inhabit right now. Every proton and neutron in every atom from the tip of your toes to the top of your head is shifting, shuttling, and vibrating in a collective purr within which the entire history of the universe is implicated. And if you put your hand down on a chair or table or anything else nearby, that object, too, is dancing that slow waltz.

The gravitational-wave background is huge news for the cosmos, yes, but it’s also huge news for you. The nature of reality has not changed—you will not suddenly be able to detect vibrations in your morning coffee that you couldn’t see before. And yet, moments like these can and should change how each of us sees our world. All of a sudden, we know that we are humming in tune with the entire universe, that each of us contains the signature of everything that has ever been. It’s all within us, around us, pushing us to and fro as we hurtle through the cosmos.”

Though we may not be singing yet, at this very moment, in a way we have already been singing, since the beginning of all that is. So today, on the cusp of welcoming the child in the manger to this earthly plane once more, in this already/not yet space, let us join “the heavenly chorus, which the morning stars began.”

The only question is: what song shall we sing?

Dear church, what is Our Magnificat?

What descriptions of God’s goodness would we mention? What aspirations would we call forth? What would we prophesy on behalf of our labored-breathing, back-aching, bone-weary world? How would we Magnify the Holy, singing so that our fear goes away?

Perhaps this modern Magnificat will give us some ideas. This is by Rev. M. Barclay, founder of *enfleshed*, an organization that crafts Christian liturgy that is queer-affirming and body positive.

My soul is alive with thoughts of God.
What a wonder, Their liberating works.
Though the world has been harsh to me,
God has shown me kindness,
seen my worth,
and called me to courage.

Surely, those who come after me will call me blessed.
Even when my heart weighs heavy with grief,
still, so does hope abide with me.
Holy is the One who makes it so.
From generation to generation,
Love's Mercy is freely handed out;
none are beyond the borders of
God's transforming compassion.
The power of God is revealed
among those who labor for justice.
They humble the arrogant.
They turn unjust thrones into dust.
Their Wisdom is revealed in
the lives and truths of those on the margins.
God is a feast for the hungry.
God is the great redistributor of wealth and resources.
God is the ceasing of excessive and destructive production
that all the earth might rest.
Through exiles and enslavement,
famines and wars,
hurricanes and gun violence,
God is a companion in loss,
a deliverer from evil,
a lover whose touch restores.
This is the promise They made
to my ancestors,
to me,
to all the creatures and creations,
now and yet coming,
and in this promise,
I find my strength.
Come, Great Healer,
and be with us.

Dear ones, what truth is within you that you are too afraid to say and so you need to sing? What hope is pounding with the beat of the blood through your heart, asking to be given voice? What story do you have to tell the world so that all who have the ears to hear and hearts to listen can know what the Holy has done for you? What dream do you hold close that is calling to be shared? And what truths and hopes and stories and dreams do we collectively hold?

Perhaps Our Magnificat would go something like this:

Our hearts, our souls, our whole beings magnify the Holy in and around and with us.
The divine Source of Love and Life has been good to us,

Showing us the Way to live peaceably alongside all Creation.
 God doesn't shy away from our messy humanity, from the times we speak without
 thought or give into our insecurity or disappoint each other or shame others for just trying
 to survive.
 May those alive now and those yet to come
 believe in the depths of their hearts that what we know about God
 is not the full picture and yet can be trusted,
 Let all bless God's Sacred name.
 The One Whose Name is Love
 is known by those who respect Them,
 Passed down through the generations so that everyone
 from our young to our elders may join the great chorus
 calling each of us to live as our whole, beloved selves.
 The strength of God's heart has been shown over and over,
 in the steadfast unconditional love for the Creation,
 In the way the ground repairs itself over decades after wars cease.
 Let a path for healing be found now.
 Those who think they speak for the Holy
 and for God's family shall be humbled and turn from their current path,
 repenting and so changing their hearts and minds.
 Those who rule with power built and sustained on the backs
 of those less fortunate and less powerful,
 those oppressed by capitalism and patriarchal control,
 they shall recover their hearts and be saved
 by those of whom they think less.
 The systems and institutions built to protect the powerful
 will one day crumble,
 Even now we are seeing the dust begin to gather
 and the ground begin to shake,
 And in their ruins shall grow trees and flowering plants
 reaching sunlight through cracks.
 Sacred Love keeps Their promises to us,
 and mercy flows and mingles with forgiveness each day.
 Just as God promised to be always with our ancestors,
 She promises to be always with us, from now until the end of the ages.

So let us sing.

Dr. Frank ended his article on gravitational waves this way:

"The universe is an impossibly vast symphony of cause and effect. The endless comings
 and goings of galaxies, stars, and planets create a melding of songs that you are part of
 too. [This] discovery exposes the intricacy and gracefulness of that melding. It's a

reminder that the world always has been, and always will be, worthy of wonder. But of course, you already knew that. You always have.”

Oh, Seattle First Baptist Church

Oh, beloved church family

Oh, you beautiful, passionate co-conspirators

Won't you sing?

With me?

With Mary?

Won't you sing

Our Magnificat?