
My Soul Magnifies the Lord

A sermon by Canon George Maxwell
Advent 4 – Year C

*“My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.”*
—Luke 1:46b

I was always taught that you should sing in church. If you have a good voice, you should raise it in song to magnify the Lord. And, if you don't, you should sing out anyway just to pay God back!

Advent is a season of song. We set the tone with Advent Lessons & Carols on the first Sunday, and have been singing songs about longing and expectation ever since. By now, you know all of the words and the music beneath them: “Lo! he comes, with clouds descending”; “Come, thou long expected Jesus”; “Comfort, comfort ye my people”.

We don't sing just because it's fun to do—though, of course, it is.

We sing because it's one of the ways that we search for God. These hymns take us to the places that are just beyond our reach. They put us in touch with a mystery that we can imagine, but can't quite put into words.

Perhaps it shouldn't surprise us, then, that Luke records so much singing in response to the coming of Jesus.

Mary sings the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55) after Elizabeth greets her.

Zechariah sings the Benedictus (Luke 1:68-79) after he names his son and regains his speech.

The angels sing of peace and goodwill (Luke 2:10-14) after they share their “good news of great joy” with the shepherds.

And, Simeon sings the Nunc Dimittis (Luke 2:29-32) after he recognizes Jesus as the promised Messiah of the Lord.

These songs are all early Christian hymns. They draw on the structure and language of familiar Hebrew scripture. Interestingly, they offer no commentary, as if the events they describe are just what everyone had been hoping for and need no further explanation.

Yet, these songs are not just pious prayers. They have an edgy tone of resistance. Listen to them closely, and you will hear a longing for the justice and freedom that only true love can bring.

I recently listened to an interview of the Indigo Girls, Amy Ray and Emily Saliers. The interview carried the provocative title, “Music and Finding God in Church and Smokey Bars.” Music and spirituality, they said, are intertwined in a way that can't be pinned down. They had no trouble finding God in music when people are gathered together singing a song, or in the loss of separation between the performer and the audience that we sometimes experience at a concert.

I was particularly struck, though, by their longing for new protest songs. Civil rights activists have long had an idea that they were singing their way to freedom. “If I Had a Hammer” and “We Shall Overcome” gave life to the movement. It's as

if the community that these songs created gave people the power to grasp what had always seemed just beyond their reach.

As the interviewer noted, Saliers' song, "Closer to Fine," provides a contemporary example.

*We go to the Bible, we go through the workout
We read up on revival and we stand up for the lookout
There's more than one answer to these questions
Pointing me in a crooked line
The less I seek my source for some definitive
The closer I am to fine*

When the Indigo Girls sing this song in concert, their audiences sing with them, and if they stop singing at any moment, their audiences keep right on going as if that's the way it's supposed to be. You can sense the loss of separation between the performer and the audience. And, you can hear the distinct tones of resistance, the longing for the justice and freedom that only true love can bring.

The Rev. Dr. David Lose, President of Lutheran Theological Seminary, hears these tones of resistance in other protest movements as well. He tells a story about a particular protest that proceeded the fall of the Berlin Wall. Apparently, protesters gathered for several months on Monday evenings at a church in Leipzig to sing songs of hope and protest. The crowd grew each week and eventually included over half of the citizens of the city. The size of the protests put pressure on Gorbachev to take down that wall.

Later, someone asked an officer of the *Stasi*, the East German secret police, why they did not stop the protest as they had others. The officer replied, "We had no contingency plan for song!"

Perhaps it shouldn't surprise us, then, that we hear Mary singing.

She was a woman in a man's world, too young to even be married and too poor to have any real say in things. She was vulnerable to the religious establishment, and she was powerless before the ruling political authorities.

So, she goes back to remember the promises of God, and then she goes forward to describe what they will look like when they come true.

*He has shown the strength of his arm,
he has scattered the proud in their conceit.
He has cast down the mighty from their thrones,
and has lifted up the lowly.
He has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent away empty.
He has come to the help of his servant Israel,
For he has remembered his promise of mercy.
The promise he made to our fathers,
To Abraham and his children forever.*

That's what you do when the task at hand seems so large, and you feel so small. You sing. You go back to the beginning, and you look forward to the end, all in music that can give it life.

Dr. Lose also describes the resistance of song in the context of a more personal experience after the killings at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. He was visiting a church on Sunday morning near the end of the Advent season. When the congregation began to sing "O come, O come Emmanuel!" he felt his feelings rise up into his throat.

*O come, thou Day-spring from on high,
and cheer us by thy drawing nigh;
disperse the gloomy clouds of night
and death's dark shadows put to flight.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
shall come to thee, O Israel!*

As the voices began to rise, the tears began to flow. Lose said that he realized that singing of light in a world of darkness is, indeed, nothing short of an act of resistance.

And that is where many of us are this week.

After the events in Paris and San Bernardino, the world does feel a little darker. We are afraid of terrorists in ways that we weren't before, or angry at people who are playing with our fear—or both!

Hearing that Santa Claus is coming to town, or that Rudolf still has a very shiny nose, makes us feel a little better, but it's not really the good news that we need.

Mary reminds us, though, to sing.

“O come, all ye faithful,” “Hark! The herald angels sing,” “Angels we have heard on high.”

These hymns not only make us feel better, they also proclaim the good news that we need to hear. They remind us of the promises of God, and make us feel the possibility of the justice and freedom that only true love can bring. They help us to imagine the mystery that we still can't quite put into words.

Who knew that we would find ourselves singing protest songs to herald the arrival of Christmas?

That's the way God works, though.

Mary reminds us what Episcopalians have always known.

It's the music that makes the moment.

And now, it's time to sing.

Merry Christmas!

Amen.

Note: After the service, a parishioner told me that I should have referenced “God rest you merry, gentlemen” because it captures most clearly what I was saying in the sermon. I give it to you now!