“Mary Sings”

Preached at the Wollaston Congregational Church

On December 11th, 2016

Scripture: Luke 1:39-45, 46b-55

Today’s gospel reading begins in this way: Elizabeth rushes to the door to greet young cousin Mary and at that moment, baby John leaps in her womb. It is the first kick!

Elizabeth interprets this kick as John’s greeting for his Lord, even though Mary is barely showing. The seed of hope for the world is still buried deep inside, just beginning to grow.

Elizabeth pours out her blessing on Mary:

"Blessed are you among women,

and blessed is the fruit of your womb.

And why has this happened to me,

that the mother of my Lord comes to me?

For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." In response to this blessing, Mary spontaneously bursts into song, praising God. The song looks forward, anticipating the meaning of the coming of Jesus for the world.

Mary’s song isn’t only a song of praise, though. It is a song of reversal, in which the poor and lowly will be lifted up. It is a song of hope for the poor, and reconciliation for the lost. It is joy for those who have been put down.

Beginning with the words “my soul magnifies the Lord”, this song is known by the Latin word “Magnificat”. It has been set to music many times, and it is sung by choirs and congregations around the world, especially at Christmas time. This song is, in essence, *the gospel*, encapsulated in a few verses. It has been called this Luke’s overture, by scholars, it is the work that summarizes the whole story of Jesus.

I chose the passage we read today: the greeting of Mary and Elizabeth

and the Magnificat, as the gospel passage for my ordination service a couple of months ago. One of the reasons I chose the passage was to express my deep feelings for what theologians call the “incarnation.” That is, the coming of God in the flesh, in the human person of Jesus.

In the scriptures and hymns of Advent, Jesus is often referred to as Emmanuel, which means “God with us.” The gospel is a story of the maker of heaven and earth, so in love with the creation … so longing to be among us, that God was willing to enter the world by human means. God came to us, by being implanted, living and growing in the womb of a young girl. God came to us birthed in a stable, subject to all the vulnerability and dangers of early childhood in the ancient Middle East.

A second reason I chose this passage has to do with my relationship with the Magnificat. I first began singing this song, in the simple form of a chant, while I was in college. The student group I belonged to was attached to a local Methodist/Reformed Church in a west London suburb. During my second year of college, the church and many others throughout London, planned to host a meeting of the Taizé community.

Between Christmas and New Years, students and other young adults from around Europe would be gathering in London, sharing Taizé’s values of peace and reconciliation. I leapt at the chance to assist with the hosting and to participate in the gathering.

To give you some background: the Taizé community was founded by Roger Schultz in a tiny village in France. Frère Roger, as he became known, was born in Switzerland in 1915. His upbringing was in the Swiss Reform church. As a young man Roger developed a deep spiritual practice, while healing from tuberculosis. He studied theology in college, but resolved to find a house to make a religious community of silence and work. His life-long desire was to live the Good News … to incarnate, to make flesh, the gospel of Jesus Christ.

During World War II much of France was occupied by the Nazis. But Roger found a place in the poor village of Taizé. Taizé is in the area of France that was not occupied, just a few miles from the demarcation line. He began to take in refugees escaping from the Nazi occupied area, many of whom were Jewish. He took in all who came. When the war ended, the community began to take in children orphaned during the war. Roger’s sister Genevieve came to help care for the children.

In the decades following World War II, many young people in Europe

lost interest in religion. It had let down their parents and they weren’t going to let that happen to them. They would depend upon themselves, and their own efforts to improve things. But Frère Roger and the brothers of the Taizé community had a ministry for the young people of Europe. The men of this holy order dreamed of giving the younger generation an alternative from cynicism and self-reliance.

Back in the early 1980’s the community hosted young spiritual “seekers” from around Europe. Roger described them in this way:

“They cross various human and geographical boundaries. They come to fix their gaze not on what divides them but on what unites them, *not* to reinforce their pessimism but to perceive signs of hope"

The Taizé community was committed to the reconciliation of all people, particularly Protestants and Catholic, at the time. Once in a while, there was a special meeting in a European city, where young Taizé pilgrims flocked to meet one another and talk about the things that concerned them. The meeting in London in December 1981 was this kind of event.

Taizé is famous for the simple chants used in worship, in various languages, including Latin, Spanish, English, French, German, and Italian. During the London gathering, these songs became the “herald”

of groups of students traveling around the city.

Each evening, when a worship service was about to begin in St Paul’s Cathedral or Westminster Abbey, thousands of students would flood the London underground coming from their host communities. I don’t know if you’ve ever used it, but the Tube’s escalators are much longer than the ones on the “T”. They are white tiled “tubes” in themselves and seem to descend way below ground, making for great acoustics for the musicians who perform down there.

As this great horde of students moved around London, ascending and descending those lengthy escalators, they would sing the chants of Taizé. Wonderful, echoing song rose: “Magnificat, magnificat, magnificat anima mea dominum” my soul magnifies the Lord!

As I sang along with the pilgrims, the Magnificat chant became imprinted in my heart. Even now, my daily spiritual practice

requently includes listening to, and singing Taizé’s Magnificat chant.

Today Taizé attracts tens of thousands of young people each year from around the world. They join in the community's worship three times a day. They listen to Bible introductions on the sources of the faith. They spend time reflecting in silence, and they meet in small sharing-groups. The brothers say, humbly, that they do not know why the young people come and what they find attractive.

I have a sense that it is the brothers’ culture of deep listening, authentic service and non-judgmental acceptance, that draws in the young. Many of the young adults meet with the brothers one on one to discern God’s call for them in their lives.

We, this Advent time, might also consider what is God’s call for our lives. How might we, like Mary or the brothers of Taizé, birth the Good News in our lives and in our community. And how might Mary’s song, the Magnificat, help us in that discernment?

Mary did not “think up” the coming of Jesus to her womb. She simply responded with consent and obedience to God’s plan and purpose for the reconciliation of the world. She offered up her own body to be the one who would conceive, gestate, birth, nurse and nurture, this “great idea” of God’s. It was her calling and her joy. Such a joy, that her song just poured from her heart.

And so, I wonder, what is God asking to be birthed in your life and in my life? Is there a venture, a project or a plan, that fills you with joy and anticipation? Perhaps a call to make new connections or deepen relationships. Right now, perhaps, it is just a tiny seed in your imagination. Is there something creative, something liberating, or true or beautiful, you long to do? What song are you being called to sing? What song of reversal, reconciliation, peace, joy or hope?

And in the life of our church …

Are we being called to nurture the seeds of hope and peace that God is planting in the midst of this gathered body? Are we being called to open our eyes, our ears, our hearts to the community around us?

This church has participated in ministry to the young in the past. Are there new things we can do with the young of our communities? What are they crying out for?

Friends, we are called to nurture and gestate, to sing and to dance. Over the coming months, I hope to meet with each one of you and discover the song that you sing, the creativity you long to birth.

As we meet as a congregation, God will plant in us what God has in store. If we are obedient, if we offer ourselves for this great incarnation, we will receive the blessing of gestating, birthing and nurturing the good news in our midst.

My soul magnifies the Lord, may it be so!

Amen

Resources

Santos, Jason Brian, *A Community Called Taize: A Story of Prayer, Worship and Reconciliation*, (Illinois, IVP Books, 2008)