

Remembering the Future

sermon digest

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Luke 1:57-66

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Music is powerful. Christmas, for example, is unimaginable apart from music. Think of doing your Christmas shopping apart from the accompaniment of “Jingle Bells” and “Rudolph” or Advent worship and Christmas Eve devoid of carols. Think of the great interest raised this year as Bob Dylan, balladeer of the protest movement of the 1960's and 70's, released a Christmas album—an album, by the way, whose profits are dedicated to hunger relief.

Think back, too, to the surprising discoveries we made a few decades ago when we took a second look at the spirituals that had sustained African Americans through centuries of slavery and discrimination. Far from the safe, comforting, other-worldly messages we had previously assigned to them, we began to recognize in them revolutionary elements of protest and change. We began to understand that “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” may have been more about the underground railroad than heaven; and “Wade in the Water” may have been designed to impart instructions to fugitive slaves on avoiding capture. The familiar refrain “when I get to heaven, I'm going to put on my shoes, gonna walk *all over* God's heaven” came to signify more than a desire for escape to heaven. It foresaw a whole different world—a world where those who had been denied would have shoes, a world where the restrictions of segregation would be forever lifted. Songs that we had appreciated in their melodic beauty, their blend of pathos and joy, suddenly took on something of a revolutionary flavor.

Last month we celebrated the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. Lurking in the background of that great event, perhaps largely unnoticed by us at the time, there loomed a gathering of the people of Leipzig for prayer and song. It began in the early 1980's as a small Monday evening gathering at St. Nikolai Church. Sustained by prayers for peace, song and the recitation of the Beatitudes, the gathering grew from a handful to a thousand to thousands and tens of thousands. Following the government's brutal crackdown on protestors in October 1989, it burgeoned to 70,000. As one German official put it, “We were ready for anything, except for candles and prayer.” And on the evening of November 9, a month after the mass demonstrations, jubilant East and West Berliners began dismantling the Berlin wall.

Far from safely inconsequential, song and prayer can become the harbingers of deep, lasting, revolutionary hope and change. Think now of two voices in the wilderness—well, almost. Think of two women embracing on a well swept front doorstep in the hill country of Judea. Far removed from the people and places of power, they are of low estate. The one person of any standing—Zechariah, an ordained religious professional—is mute. The storyline, the blessings and songs must be placed upon the lips of these two unlikely candidates.

But notice, if you will, the dissimilarity between the two women. Their lives are almost the inverse of one another. Elizabeth has waited and prayed her whole life for a child. She and Zechariah are now old, and she is barren. She stands in the line of other mothers of the faith—Sarah, Rachel and Hannah, who were blessed by God in the midst of their barrenness with a child.

Mary, on the other hand, is young. She has not known Elizabeth's “disgrace” of being childless (Lk. 1:25). She has only now reached the age of childbearing. God extends to her a promise that, in the words of Gail O'Day, “is not even on the horizon of her hopes. . . . God gives Elizabeth that for which she has always yearned, but had long since despaired of receiving. God Gives Mary that which she could never imagine in even her most daring moments” [“Praise of New Beginnings,” *Journal for Preachers*, 1990]. What we have here is nothing short of a new beginning—a new beginning that embraces both the older Elizabeth and the young Mary. “No one,” O'Day affirms, “stands outside the transforming power of God. The God of Elizabeth and Mary heals old hurts and opens new futures.”

God's faithfulness in the past is the guarantee of God's promises for the future. Be sure to take notice: the new day being heralded in the birth of Jesus has its strong roots in the past. Elizabeth and Mary sing praise to the same God. Mary picks up on the centuries old song of Hannah and sounds the same notes sung by her namesake Miriam, sister of Aaron, on the banks of the Red (or Reed) Sea. God's new future will be woven out of threads from the past. In her Magnificat, Mary easily moves between past and future. Remembering the God of reversals, the God who has intervened on behalf of the suffering and oppressed since the days of the Exodus, the God who has been giving and keeping promises since the time of Abraham, Mary envisions a future so certain to the eye of faith that she can sing of its hope as if it were already accomplished.

Mary sings her song of praise ahead of time, before the hope of which she sings has become an

actuality. And yet she sings in the past tense as if God's anticipated deliverance has already happened. "Prophets," Barbara Brown Taylor suggests, "almost never get their verb tenses straight, because part of their gift is being able to see the world as God sees it—not divided into things that are already over and things that have not happened yet, but as an eternally unfolding mystery that surprises everyone—maybe even God" [*Home by Another Way*, p. 18].

We wait in community. Mary's song comes to us and the people of every age and every circumstance as an invitation to move into God's unfolding future in confidence and hope. Mary, however, did not wait upon the fulfillment of her hope in isolation. Upon learning that she was with child, she went "with haste," Luke tells us, to seek out her older cousin and remained with her for three months. Perhaps Mary felt a special comradeship with her cousin because of their shared status of pregnancy. Perhaps she shadowed the older woman in to learn from her experience. Whatever the motivation, Elizabeth's tender openness to Mary pronounced blessing upon the new future breaking in upon them; and Mary valued and blessed Elizabeth in return.

The Navaho tradition has an ancient ceremony known as the Blessingway. Observed at significant moments of passage in a person's life, it is a practice particularly enacted in support of expectant mothers shortly before they are to give birth. The women of the community encircle the young woman, passing on to her songs and words of wisdom passed down by their tradition. The young woman finds herself supported for the experience of birth and parenthood that lie ahead, and the community circle open to include her and the young child and gifts the child will bring to the community.

Perhaps that is as it was with Elizabeth and Mary; and hopefully, that is the way it is with us both in our biological families and our family of faith. Far from a thing of scorn and repudiation, the past from which we come is a tradition rich in story and tradition. The past, however, must not become a prison beyond which its children may not go. We gather in community to bless and enrich one another, to support and encourage one another, to connect our individual stories to the story of God, to be more than any of us can be alone, to wait upon God's beckoning us into the new thing God would do with the future.

In the season of Advent, our waiting is accompanied by the beautiful, moving music of the centuries that speaks, as someone has put it, to the deep places of our wandering from God and wondering about God. Perhaps that is why this music is so beloved, so imprinted on our hearts and souls. In a world that longs for a gentle peace, a generous sharing of the goods of the earth, a time of quiet joy and healing, we stand by the window with Mary and Elizabeth, expectant with hope and filled to the brim with joy because our tenses have been jumbled, too; and we have seen in every moment of tender love and forgiveness the promise of what is yet to come. We sing with Mary, and we move forward to embrace one another and the future with her song of hope and peace.