

My husband, who is a fine photographer, was telling me the other day that he was a little disappointed in some photographs he'd taken of a snowy owl recently; he hadn't focused his camera quite perfectly, so there was more visual noise in the picture than he'd like. There was more fuzziness and less clarity to the image than he thought ideal. Visual noise is an interesting concept to me, bringing together both vision and hearing into one metaphor. But then I thought how this whole season leading up to Christmas is somewhat an exercise in visual noise, as well as audible noise, isn't it? In ways both ridiculously beautiful and ridiculously goofy. I think the visual beauty of our sanctuary is exquisite right now, but we're also constantly bombarded by sights of giant blow-up Christmas dinosaurs in front yards and stores that look like Christmas exploded all over the aisles. Likewise, I believe I hear some of the most poignant and lovely music of the entire year within these walls at this time, but we're also hearing every which kind of novelty Christmas carol blared over loudspeakers featuring the Chipmunks or some raucous rock band that is headache inducing. All of this visual and audible noise may prevent us from experiencing, with clarity, the true meaning of Christmas. How to tune in to what is beautiful and tune out what is just noise, whether visual or audible?

Maybe we can learn a lesson from a surprising source, the world of Greek mythology. As you may know, the ancient Greeks believed that you had to be wary of sirens, especially if you were a sailor. Not sirens like we hear on police cars or ambulances, although this is where the word derives, but sirens as in beautiful sea nymphs whose singing would lure sailors to their deaths on rocky coasts. Many ancient sailors wished to hear these incredible songs, but they could not do so without risking death. One legendary Greek figure, Odysseus, came up with an ingenious idea: he asked that he be lashed to the mast of his boat, so he could sail past the sirens and hear their song without being lured to his death. But, it was another figure of Greek mythology, Orpheus, who showed real wisdom in dealing with the songs of the sirens. As we pass by them, he told his crew of sailors, we don't need to close our ears or be tied to the mast-- we just need to sing a *better song*. And so they did.

The metaphor is obvious and accurate for us. All around us the siren song of noisy commercialism and cheap promises of gratification and happiness from worldly things are luring us towards any number of rocky coasts—financial stress, anxiety over creating the perfect Christmas, unrealistic notions of what will actually make us happy, leading ultimately to frustration, worry, and distress. This kind of siren song is all around us right now, both visually and audibly. It's pretty difficult to close our ears and eyes to this noise and these sights, and I'm not sure it's practical to tie ourselves to the mast of our boats. But I am absolutely certain that we can sing better songs. Better and more beautiful and richer songs that rob those shrill sirens of any power they might otherwise have. You know how impactful and soulful the music we hear from so many sources in our church are: Carol and Lawrence, our dulcimers and bells and Sticks and Strings and JOYFUL and other musical offerings---the quality is amazing. Just singing the hymns is powerful enough to overcome any number of sirens and their songs. During this season, we sing Advent and Christmas songs that are hundreds of years old, songs composed in the middle ages, like O Come , O Come, Emmanuel; and most of our carols are hundreds of years old. But the song we look at today, Mary's song, is the oldest Christmas song you can sing, because it was written about 2000 years ago, give or take, and it was written before Christ was even born. You cannot sing an older Christmas song than this one. In fact, Mary is the first hymnwriter in the New Testament. Her song is called The Magnificat, this title based on the first words of her hymn in Latin—"my soul magnifies the Lord." Her song has been sung, daily, for most of the past 2000 years, somewhere in Christendom. It's a part of the traditional daily liturgy for evening prayer, or Vespers. We sing this song every Sunday during the season of Advent, and it comes out of the Holden Evening Prayer Service. So, the song upon which we are reflecting this morning is likely very literally one of the most frequently sung and ancient songs in the world. And consider this, it's not a song by Irving Berlin or Taylor Swift---it was written by someone who was *no one* within her culture---a young woman, pregnant before her formal marriage, a peasant, without rights or importance in the eyes of her world. And we are *still* singing her song. This morning, with our assigned text, we learn *about* Mary and her song, and we learn *from* Mary and her

song. A song that is truly a better song to sing than those of the sirens around us. And one of the things we learn from this song is that *Mary* bears witness to *change*.

I want to challenge us to broaden the picture we have of Mary in our minds today. When we think of Mary, we typically think of her humility, faith, and obedience; her willingness to bear the Christ child into the world. All of that is good and true. But we may forget that Mary also had a bright and creative mind. We see that in the song she sings. She is not merely a meek and passive vessel for the Christ child; she is an intelligent woman, and she is a teacher for her Son, and she has some radical notions which she must surely have passed onto Him. They are expressed in this song, a *song* about *change*.

One of the things that's so remarkable about this song is the circumstances under which it was written and sung. Think about the teen-age girls you know, maybe a 15 or 16 year old, and then think of Mary. She is that 15 or 16 year old girl. She's in an entirely different cultural setting, of course. She doesn't expect to have the prolonged adolescent period of our teens, where a whole commercial culture is created to cater to them and angst about educational choices and job opportunities will eventually prevail. No aspect of her culture catered to Mary, nor did she have any choices to make. She would do as she was supposed to do—learn to be a wife and mother, marry young and bear children, raise those children and keep her home. She pretty much knew what her future looked like. Quite likely the arrangement for her to marry Joseph, an older man, possibly a friend of her family, had been made when she was even much younger than she was when we meet her. She knew from an early age on just what her life would be like---and then, all of sudden, she didn't know a blessed thing about what her life would be like, after all. God turned her world upside-down.

Within the course of a short period of time, this teen-age girl is visited by an angel; impregnated by the Holy Spirit; and must bear the shame of being pregnant and un-married before her family, friends, and neighbors, none of whom are likely to credit her wild story. She must fear whether or not Joseph will break the engagement, leaving her an unwed mother, the lowest possible situation she could have in her culture. She must endure the physical discomforts of pregnancy, along with the very real possibility of dying in childbirth when the time came due, in an era when that was far from rare. I mean, talk about troubles! This gal has her

hands full. And in our text, now 6 months pregnant, she goes to visit her cousins, Elizabeth and Zechariah. It is worth noting the kind of welcome Elizabeth gives her. After all, her young cousin is pregnant out of wedlock, a highly shameful state for that time and place. Elizabeth might have greeted her with judgement, condemnation, and curses. Instead, she does the exact opposite: she greets her with a blessing. “Blessed are you among woman and blessed is the baby in your womb”, she tells Mary. Elizabeth is another woman who seems quite capable of independent thought and genuine compassion. Perhaps inspired by this welcome and by the astounding changes she is experiencing through her pregnancy, Mary is moved to compose this song. This song is based on the Song of Hannah, from the Old Testament, another indication that Mary, for a young girl of her time, is acquainted with Scripture and has a creative mind. As I’ve said before, given Mary’s changed circumstances, wouldn’t we expect this song to be a different kind of song? Maybe one of those whiney country songs where your man has left you, and your son is in prison, and your dog’s been hit by a car? But, no, Mary composes a praise song, a hymn of joy, a Christmas carol that celebrates these changes in her life, rather than lamenting them. Mary’s willingness to embrace this risky, scary change; her obedience to God’s will for her life; her response of joy-- all of this make her a wonder for us. And her wonder is expressed both in joy and in *prophecy* of a sort---she perceives that God is at work, and that God’s work will turn the world upside down. She sings of *change*.

Look at this song with me, if you will. It begins, as we have said, with praise. Mary declares, “My soul magnifies the Lord.” *Mary* magnifies the *Lord*. What do *we* all too easily magnify *instead* of the Lord? Our troubles? Or the faults of our families or friends? Or the shortcomings we perceive in our circumstances? Why magnify the negative? Why not magnify the Lord instead? Why not see the abundance of blessings that God provides for us, even in times of difficulty? That’s what *Mary* does. And so she begins her song with a statement of magnifying God, rejoicing in God, and praising God.

But she then goes on to describe the actions God has taken, and they are actions of *change*. God changes things. The proud, Mary sings, are scattered. The powerful are brought down. The lowly are lifted up. The hungry are filled. The rich are sent away empty-handed. God changes things---God turns upside-down our

conventional notions of the way things are. God sees things differently, and God is at work to make things different, to change the status quo of this world. *That's* what Mary sings about.

These are not tame ideas. These are not flimsy or shallow ideas, either. These are the ideas of a young woman with a clear mind and a courageous heart. We tend to fear change rather than celebrate it. Even if we see it may be change for the better, we still must often be dragged towards it, kicking and screaming. Because we just get very comfortable with things as they are. It's safe; it's familiar. But God is about change at times, and Mary embraces that change, embodies that change in her pregnancy, and sings about that change---a song of *praise*, not of lament. Any of us who have had a baby, know that babies always bring change, and especially that is true in the case of the birth of the Christ child. God is so very often up to something new in the world, looking to bring change, to create in our world the justice, the peace, the love that is God's will for our world. Nowhere is God more passionately determined to change the world than through the birth of the Christ child.

This morning as we ponder Mary and her song, we are invited to turn a deaf ear and blind eye to much of the visual noise and blaring audible siren songs around us, and to instead sing a better song---a song that magnifies the Lord and expresses trust in God's work, even amidst change. As we sing this better song, we might ask ourselves a few questions. The questions could be these: Am I willing to partner with God to bring change into this world? Am I willing to make changes in my circumstances or within myself, in order to be a part of God's plan? Am I able to perceive that change, although scary, can also be a way that God's Spirit is active in the world for good? As we ponder these questions, we may begin to experience something of the joyful trust of Mary. Because it would seem from her song of joy that she experienced this turning of *her* world and *the* world upside down as a blessing rather than a curse. Instead of wringing her hands, she bursts into song. She is willing and ready to be a part of the change God brings to humanity. In the words of the compelling version of the Magnificat which we are about to sing, Mary is ready for the world to turn. Amen.