

## God on the Move

Luke 1:26-56

Fourth Sunday of Advent, (Dec. 22) 2024

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Years ago, John Updike wrote about a trip he made to Sweden. As part of the trip, he talked the *New Yorker* magazine into letting him stay five days in Finland, a place he had never been before. Updike was famous, rich, successful, and besieged by admirers everywhere, but on this particular trip he found himself alone in a sterile hotel room in a country whose language was utterly inaccessible to him, unable to sleep, exhausted from jet lag, and suffering from that 3:00 in the morning nameless dread. He went out on his rainy hotel balcony and looked at the sleeping town. He wrote, “Nothing moved, not even the clouds moved – yellow layers of nimbus that seemed the hellish underside of some other realm. I had never before been this far north on the planet ... the precariousness of being alive and human was no longer hidden from me by familiar surroundings and the rhythm of habit. I was fifty-five, ignorant, dying, and filling this bit of Finland with the smell of my stale sweat and insomniac fury” (*New Yorker*, September 28, 1987, “Five Days in Finland at the Age of Fifty-Five”).

Being awake at 3:00 in the morning is more common with me at my age now than it was when I was young. There are no worries like three-in-the-morning worries. Everything looks bleaker and harder, darker, and more depressing. Nothing moves at 3:00 in the morning.

There are times that I believe we live in a perpetual 3:00 in the morning with nothing moving – life is locked in and the future closed. The book of Ecclesiastes

says, “There is nothing new under the sun” (Eccles. 1:9). In other words, the same damn thing over and over and over.

If you have ever had debts you couldn’t pay, if you or someone you love has ever had cancer, and they couldn’t fight it any longer and after lengthy and exhausting struggle they died, or maybe it was a marriage that couldn’t be fixed, a child that did not turn out the way you wanted, or a problem that defied solution, you understand that nothing moves at 3:00 in the morning. If you are in despair because there are more wars and violence and authoritarian governments than we can count and there’s nothing we can do. If you are tired of the poor being ground down into the dirt and the rich getting richer with tax-free offshore accounts, and billionaires running the government. If you feel like the world is on fire and the arsonists are in charge, if you feel the ground slipping beneath your feet and know there is not one blessed thing you can do about it, then you know what Advent is. It is waiting, powerless, in the dark at 3:00 in the morning when nothing moves.

And in a small village, a poor teenaged country girl with little prospect of a future lay awake at 3:00 in the morning staring at the ceiling when suddenly an angel appeared! Emily Dickinson called angels “bisecting messengers” because they bisect heaven and earth, life and death, darkness and light. They cut through the despair; they upend. At 3:00 in the morning when nothing moves, the angel Gabriel intervenes and says, “Mary! God is on the move! Mary! Get ready! Buckle your seatbelt and hang on because God is invading this God-forsaken dead-end world and Mary – here’s the deal, you’re going to start it!”

Mary responds with every expletive you can imagine. “Holy cow! Who in the sam-hill are you?! And what are you talking about?! And, Oh! By the way, what are you doing in my room?!”

Gabriel calms his voice because he's excited too. He breathes, tells her to breathe, "Calm down! Don't be afraid! I'm sorry! I'm a little excited. In fact, I'm a lot excited! Indeed, all of heaven is excited! God is on the move!"

Pope Francis called Mary, "a simple girl from the country who carries within her heart the fullness of hope in God." As one theologian I admire put it, "If she was a simple country girl, her response suggests she is smart, wise, and intuitive." In other words, "she was prepared for this moment" (see Jane Webb Childress, *Reflections: Daily Devotional Guide*, December 20, 2023).

Mary was not prepared to receive this bisecting messenger and initiate the movement of God, by staying at home all those Sabbath mornings. She showed up and she had been showing up all her life. She showed up to Sabbath School, showed up to worship, she knew her Bible, she learned how to pray. She was prepared. She knew what was going on, grasped it quickly and intuitively. "I'm open and ready! What does God want me to do?"

"God is entering this world and God is going to enter it through you," says Gabriel. "So, come on! But pack light. God wants you to join the God Movement, the revolution." Mary says, "But there is no God Movement." And Gabriel says, "There will be after you get it started. Or rather you allow God to start it through you. So come on!"

Mary is almost shouting, crying, "All this is unbelievable to me! It's simply extraordinary! It is inconceivable! It's impossible!" And the angel Gabriel says, "Nothing is impossible with God!"

Mary says, "Yes, I'll do it. Here am I, the servant of God. Let it be with me according to your word" (Luke 1:37-38).

Luke tells us Mary went to be with older cousin Elizabeth, who was much further along in her geriatric pregnancy. Elizabeth immediately understands what is going on with Mary and how God is with both of them. God is on the move, and they are at the forefront!

And Mary starts singing! Now, I'm a preacher partial to preachers, but I'm the first to admit, our faith is better sung than said. There are times when singing is the only response no matter if we're good at it or not. Here at Austin Heights, we sing! And as I said over the years, what we do here is train you to see but singing is a way we learn to see. We sing the faith! It's why most of raised Baptists, Methodists, and Church of Christ hymn sing our way through troubles. Some things must be sung through, and some things are worth singing about and the intervention of God into this world is up at the top of the list. One of the ways we know Mary was prepared for this moment, is that she bursts into song. She knew how to sing the faith. It might not make sense and there is much she does not yet understand, but in singing, it all begins to come together.

David Brooks of *The New York Times* wrote a remarkable column this week and tells of a spiritual, religious experience, he calls "a quickening," he had in 2013 on a mountain hike while also reading 17<sup>th</sup> century prayers. He wrote:

*Most of the time we go through life governed by a straightforward logic ... But here was a moral logic radically at odds with that: The meek shall be exalted, blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who hunger and thirst, where there is humility there is majesty, where there is weakness there is might.*

*This logic struck me as both startling, revolutionary, and astonishingly beautiful. I had the feeling I had glimpsed a goodness more radical than anything I*

*had ever imagined, a moral grandeur far vaster and truer than anything that could have emerged from our prosaic world.*

*It hit me with the force of joy. Happiness is what we experience as we celebrate the achievements of the self— winning a prize. Joy is what we feel when we are encompassed by a presence that transcends the self. We create happiness but are seized by joy ... I wanted to laugh, run about, hug somebody. I was too inhibited to do any of that, of course, but I did find some happy music to listen to during my smiling walk down the mountain. ...*

*He goes on: Desire pushes me onward. The path is confusing and sometimes discouraging, but mostly the longing for the holy is a nice kind of longing to have. When the Israelites were slaves in Egypt, they led fearful, hard lives. Their spirits were crushed and they were, ... (borrowing from Oliver Sacks), “unmusicked.” But when they crossed the Red Sea on their journey home, Miriam led them as they burst into song. They had been “remusicked.”*

*My life feels remusicked...*

(David Brooks, *The New York Times*, December 19, 2024).

Seized by joy Mary, like her foremother Miriam is remusicked, and bursts forth in song, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.”

The theologian I mentioned earlier, who I admire so much – and who, by the way, is really smart, a really good writer, and really good looking – Jane Webb Childress is her name, writes, that when Mary says her soul magnifies the Lord, she is reminding us “that magnifiers not only make things look larger, but they

also reveal details. God’s fullest self and the details of God’s Way will be revealed in Jesus.” Webb Childress continues, “In knowing [and singing] God as *Savior* and *Mighty One*, Mary recognizes her own status as a lowly servant. This simple country girl has figured out the truth that eludes many: God is God and we’re not. Mary’s humility makes her a channel of God’s love, which includes mercy as well as might” (*Reflections*, Dec. 20, 2023).

In her saying yes and singing, Mary becomes the premier disciple, a model disciple. She was the first person to hear the announcement that God is on the move, and is entering this world to be with us, and she is the very first to believe. Despite all the darkness, despair, brick walls, blind alleys, and cold silent death, she believed! Despite nothing moving, she sang!

Mary sings but I do not think it was an easy song to sing. Think about it. She has not planned or chosen this child. How will she explain this to her fiancée? The angel told her to “fear not,” but later in Luke 2, old Simeon tells Mary the truth of what it will mean for her to be “blessed among women.” He predicted that “a sword will also pierce your side.” Motherhood would not be easy for Mary. There is pain mixed in with the joy when Mary sang:

*My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.*

At the same time, this is no lullaby Mary sings. The words thunder forth like a battle chant in the most powerful, revolutionary song in the entire Bible:

*He has shown strength with his arm, he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, he has put down the mighty from their thrones . . . and the rich he has sent empty away.*

This is not a sweet little Christmas jingle! This is a song about those on the bottom going up, and those who are “high and mighty” being brought low. This is revolutionary singing!

“Music hath charms to soothe a savage beast,” said William Congreve. That is true, but music also has the power to empower, to release, to cut loose, to pull down and raise up, to dream, to imagine, to heal, and to give hope!

Think of all the people who have lost the ability to sing. When people lose hope, when they give up in despair, they no longer sing. From what I read about hunger and starvation when a child moves close to death from malnourishment, there are no more cries, only silence. When people are defeated and ground down enough, they withdraw and are silent. Sometimes because of illness or dementia people cannot sing anymore.

Why do you think that the first people dictators arrest, imprison, or have executed are the artists, the poets, the singers, and the dancers? These are the people with imagination. These are the folk who can dream an alternative to the life of oppression and despair under a tyrant. People singing can break despair and give hope. Revolutions start with singing and dreaming and imagining. Singing can break the bonds of depression and helplessness. Singing helps us endure and never give up. Singing transforms us.

When I was living in Atlanta in 1985, I occasionally had a chance to listen in to former associates of Dr. King’s, like Dr. C.T. Vivian. Vivian reminded me that the Civil Rights Movement was a “movement” because God and God’s people were on the move! He said that at the heart of the movement was singing and he said you can tell a lot about a church by how they sing. He said, “If you show me a church that sings! I’ll show you a church on the move!” I’ve always felt that way

about Austin Heights. We're a singing church. And any of you who are relative newcomers need to know that it is one of the things expected of you. Everybody sings when we sing congregational hymns. Everybody. We sing because we believe but we also believe because we sing. Singing prepares us.

Bernice Johnson Reagon, died this past July. She was a founding member of the Civil Rights Movement's Freedom Singers, and later founder of the singing group Sweet Honey in the Rock. You can look her up, but she was among the most powerful singers I ever heard. She said that you have to sing. No sitting back. You sing because, she said, "you can never tell when you're going to need it." Do you hear me? In other words, like young Mary, singing prepares us.

The Freedom Singers got their start in 1961 in Albany, GA during the mass meetings that went on every night in the churches. Two young teenaged women, Rutha Mae Harris, and Bernice Johnson, and two young teenaged men, Cordell Reagon and Charles Neblett had started singing freedom songs and hymns in these meetings. Historian Taylor Branch wrote:

*The songs harked back to the moods of the slavery spirituals. There were tragic, sweet songs like "Oh, Freedom" and rollicking ones like "This Little Light of Mine." . . . The spirit of the songs could sweep up the crowd, . . . Into the defiant spiritual "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around," Sherrod and Reagon called out verses of "Ain't gonna let Chief Pritchett turn me around." It amazed them to see people who had inched tentatively into the church take up the verse in full voice, setting themselves against feared authority (Branch, Parting the Waters, p. 532).*

So hear me this morning. Even though there are raging King Herods and grieving refugees, a hurting world and suffering people – there still is singing. All



the Powers of Darkness and Evil in this old world try to silence the singing but somehow, someone keeps on with the songs. The Powers build walls to make sure nothing moves and put soldiers on every corner to keep everyone quiet. Just when the Powers think, or perhaps, we think, that the singing is finally silenced, just when we think nothing is moving and we're ready to give into defeat and despair, a teenaged girl in a little country town starts singing, defiantly, hopefully, from her heart, from her bones – God is on the move.

Can you hear it? Are you ready to join in?

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,  
Mother of us all. Amen.