

G.L.O.R.I.A.

December 13, 2020 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

Rev. Daniel A. Smith

Texts: Luke 1: 45-46

I don't know about you all but one of things I'm missing most in this Covid Advent is the chance to sing and belt out hymns with you all. There I said it. Yes, it helps to be here but it's just not the same without all of you filling this space with your bodies and voices! Though we cannot gather and even as we long to sing together at this time of year especially, we can still be grateful for what we do hear, the gifts of Peter's magnificent voluntaries, his live-streamed accompaniments, his preparing virtual choir introits and anthems like Vivaldi's Gloria. Thank you, Peter, and thank you choir. I'm also grateful for our Advent song that we've been singing for three weeks now. Give us light in the darkness to sing our souls awake, indeed. It's been popping into my mind and mouth in the kitchen or shower lately and is definitely helping to carry me through. I hope and pray you are all finding ways to keep the gifts of music alive in your homes this season. If not, know it's not too late!

Today, we turn our attention to one of the most powerful songs of all time! The Song or Cantic of Mary, also known as The Magnificat. We often enjoy it in our hymns or anthems but today I wonder if we might hear it a little differently, first as a product of its own culture and then as a decidedly *counter-cultural* musical manifesto.

Our Janet McKenzie banners have helpfully reminded us again that the historical Mary was a young woman of color, a first century Palestinian Jew from a podunk town! But what else can we know about the real Mary and how did she come to sing this song? For one thing, her name in Hebrew was Miriam, that's what her parents would have called her. Miriam is often translated as beloved, but another translation of Miriam is rebellious! Sounds like a good fit for a teenager, right? This all leads me to wonder what Mary did for fun, what she listened to? Can we imagine her doing the first century equivalent of thumbing through her parents records and pulling out the gems that spoke to her heart? And what were her early influences before her amazing Magnificat debut! The Magnificat itself offers some helpful clues. In fact, it holds echoes of Hebrew scriptures that Mary must have heard as a kid and that would have shaped her. Scholars have found in the Magnificat connections to Psalm 113, for example, and to the biblical songs of Deborah and of Judith. Most agree that the Magnificat's greatest influence is from a deep track found in 1st Samuel, chapter 2, recorded centuries before. It's called The Song of Hannah, Hannah was the once infertile mother of the great prophet Samuel and here's her song:

*"Hannah prayed and said,
My heart exults in the Lord;
My strength is exalted in my God...
The Lord makes poor and makes rich,
He brings low, he also exalts.
He raises up the poor from the dust;
He lifts the needy from ash heap,
To make them sit with princes
And inherit a seat of honor.
For the pillars of the earth are the Lord's*

And on them he has set the world.”

Sound familiar? Seems to me that it was on Mary’s pre-Magnificat playlist. Both Mary and Hannah’s songs emphasize themes of exaltation in God’s strength and greatness. They stress God’s justice for the poor and downtrodden and a genuine disruption of social order. Let’s not be mistaken here...this is radical stuff, especially coming from the lips of girls in patriarchal cultures set in the midst of oppressive imperial regimes. When Mary sings her own first century version of these ancient texts, she lives up to her name and then some. She’s a rebel with a cause. She’s a young girl who has found her voice and purpose in life and who is ready to joyously and defiantly sing it out for all the world to hear.

Since learning that Mary, or Miriam, can mean rebel, I’ve had this image in my head of Mary as something of a young punk rocker, maybe a first century Palestinian Patti Smith, that great 70’s singer-songwriter and so called “punk poet laureate.” I didn’t grow up listening to a lot of punk, but I always loved the spirit that seemed to drive its often aggressive and decidedly counter-cultural songs and ethos! Yes, we can think of tattoos, piercings and spiked hair. I’d love to see that on a banner! But more deeply, think of the lyrics forged in the gritty emergence of 70’s class and gender struggles, a decidedly anti-establishment movement that sought to overturn religious, political and socioeconomic hierarchies and convention. Punk was and is about defiance, and authenticity and a do-it-yourself mentality that flouts capitalism and consumer culture. As Scott Carter has noted: “Punk... is all about violation of the social order, of the expected order” Indeed, we can see this in the Magnificat’s great reversals - the lowly shall be lifted up, the rulers shall be brought down and the rich sent away empty! Carter goes on to say: “Christianity is a movement about violation. Violation of God into the World. God showing up and not looking like anyone expected. A Messiah who didn’t fight. A Son of David who included the Gentiles, who verbally attacked religious leaders, who chased bankers, and who hung out with outcasts.” That’s Punk! “Somewhere along the way Christianity became what was normal, what was expected.” But it wasn’t always this way and Mary reminds us of a new and different future.

Do y’all know Patti Smith by the way? Turns out that 45 years ago today, December 13, 1975, she released her debut album “Horses” and with it the breakthrough track that happened to be called, get this: “Gloria (In Excelsis Deo)” like the anthem we just heard. Here’s [how Rolling Stone described the impact of it](#) after naming it No. 26 on their recent list of the 500 greatest albums of all time: “From its first defiant line, “Jesus died for somebody’s sins, but not mine,” the opening shot in a bold reinvention of [Van Morrison’s](#) Sixties garage-rock classic “Gloria,” [Patti Smith’s](#) debut album was a declaration of committed mutiny, a statement of faith in the transfigurative powers of rock & roll.” That opening line that “Jesus died for somebody’s sin but not mine” was part of why the song and album grew so popular! Much like the Magnificat on the lips of a young girl from Nazareth, it challenged theological orthodoxy and channeled Smith’s desire to have Christians start taking some DIY responsibility for their sins and actions! Smith later commented that she was merely rebelling against her Jehovah’s Witness’s upbringing and questioning what never made sense to her but that she believed in Jesus all along. When she performed the song in 1989, she changed the lyrics “Jesus died for somebody’s sins, why not mine?” I wonder if Smith might consider Mary and her Magnificat one of her early and lasting influences.

Along with moving away from decidedly white images of Mary, maybe we can set aside the images that Mary was some buttoned up, meek and mild, choir girl. Humor me if you must, but can we instead imagine Mary in a mosh-pit - that is on a sweaty dance floor - a teen full of vigor, thrashing her head in

joyful, defiant praise and driving purpose. Can we see Mary as that teenage rebel, enlisting in, as Broderick Greer has noted “an underground scene of Hebrew resistance, envisioning an Israel free of occupation, and ultimately, a God who keeps God’s promise of liberating God’s people.” The fact is “Mary’s song is no timid solo, but a loud, robust protest song. She, along with Elizabeth, is belting the first note of revolution.” And the fact is Christianity at it best is just such an underground scene, a resistance movement of liberation, of faith-rooted love and prayer activism that cries out from the margins with those living at the margins. If nothing else, I hope you can see what I mean by turning up the volume on the Magnificat this year, letting some of its edgier, grungier notes ring free. Our world needs her spiritually rooted defiant message now more than ever. And yet, its punk lives on and with it hope for a better future!

Consider young female teen leaders today, Greta Thunberg, Malala, Yousafzai, or Emma Gonzalez of Marjorie Stoneham Douglass High School. Just a few days ago, Nadya Tolokonnikova, activist, artist and founder of the feminist punk band and art collective Pussy Riot, penned the following lines for the New York Times:

In 2020 we were not only hit by a global pandemic, but also by police batons. We watched as protesters around the world breathed in air thick with tear gas, lost their eyesight from rubber bullets and endured torture...[arrest] and [imprisonment] for participating in peaceful protests. This was a year of radical political imagination: 2020 invited us to take our dreams seriously and inspired us to envision a better, alternative future.” After recounting her arrests and jail time following anti-Kremlin rallies, she speaks powerfully about police reform efforts and celebrates the work of global activists who have achieved so much in recent years, in part by combining the struggles for racial justice, economic justice, gender justice and environmental.” Have you been wondering what’s been good about 2020? Hear what she says: “The mass social movements of 2020 taught us to think holistically and intersectionality, to ask big questions and imagine a better future. The virus has sometimes limited our ability to protest in the streets, but we’ve learned new ways to perform our civic duties and have become more effective digital activists. Our future has yet to be written. When Pussy Riot writes new music, we ask ourselves: What will activist punk sound like in 2030? What will it talk about? They have a new album coming out soon, so we will see but she concludes by saying that “Sustained, organized, creative, peaceful and smart activism will bring us closer to realizing a fully democratic world in 2021, and in the years to come.”

Maybe not quite a Magnificat for our time, but I love her defiant hopefulness! If we look carefully, we might trace the thread of powerful, countercultural, anti-establishment words and songs being sung by bad-ass, persistent women from Hannah to Mary to punk-rock legends like Patti Smith and Pussy Riot! What’s more, we might be inspired to create our own spiritual and values rooted activist sound, be it classical or punk, folk or funk!

Before I close, I’d like to share just the beginning of a poem by Wislawa Szymborska. Its titled *Classifieds*:

Whoever’s found out what location
compassion (heart's imagination)
can be contacted at these days,
is herewith urged to name the place;
and sing about it in full voice,
and dance like crazy and rejoice

beneath the frail birch that appears
to be upon the verge of tears.

Friends, Advent orients us to the location of compassion, and with it to the space where God's justice and love are made real! It is born through Mary! It is born in Jesus! And we are urged to align our hearts with our spiritual ancestors in singing it out and letting it be born again, whether in classical music, carols and hymns, or through protest songs, punk anthems and slam poetry. That's where justice and joy meet! When we can contact the very ground of our compassion in God and Christ and align ourselves, our every word, song and movement with our deepest values, acting out of conviction, and authenticity and deep purpose! We can name the place - it's wherever we find Jesus, in poor and lowly places, in the streets, in cries for justice, in the aching of our hearts, in songs of sorrow and joy. And so, we are urged to sing about it in full voice and dance like crazy and rejoice, even amidst a frail earth that is weeping, even when we can't gather to sing together!

We'll sing a hymn together soon, but I have some homework for you all after the service. By invitation of Mary's magnificat, do yourselves a favor sometime today or this week and find a favorite song, whether online or by thumbing through some old vinyl! Maybe it's a carol! Maybe it's Bach! Maybe it's Aretha, or Reggae or hard-core heavy metal! Maybe it's Patti Smith's G.L.O.R.I.A. Gloria! Just make sure it has some rebellious kick. Whatever it is, listen to it and locate yourselves in God's revolutionary love! And don't worry about doing it alone! It might even be better if you do! Turn up the volume! If you can sing with it, go ahead and belt it out! In so doing, let your hearts too magnify God's name, let your spirit rejoice, for our God has done and is doing great things! With Mary, may all our hearts sing out in joyful and defiant praise! Amen!



