

Advent 4, Sunday December 19, 2021
 Luke 1:46b-55

Christmas Improvisations

Prayer:

You have come, Lord Jesus, to bring joy into our grief, light into our darkness, singing into our mourning; and it is an act of healing and proclamation to believe and embrace the joy you offer. Help us in this moment of reflection to see and to welcome your Christmas presence.

On a branch
 Floating downriver
 A cricket singing

This Haiku is by the Japanese poet Kobayashi Issa and translated by Jane Hirshfield. Issa died in 1828, outliving, to his horror, his younger wife and both their infant children. He has left a legacy of over 20,000 poems. If you are procrastinating on your Christmas preparations, I recommend this rabbit hole – reading Issa, he is meaningful, witty, smart, insightful. All in just 17 syllable poems. A quick diversion. In this poem, I love the suspense between the movement of floating downriver and the cricket singing. It is a reminder of mortality, and of beauty in the moment. Crickets sing because that's what they do, and a river flows downstream because that is what it does. And this is beautiful and tragic at the same time – haiku points to enlightenment by juxtaposition. I'm going to be seeking to share with you some reflections on singing today. Here's the first one:

*On a branch
 Floating downriver
 A cricket singing*

2. The singer is Mary. If you saw our Christmas pageant last Sunday, you saw Sophia portraying Mary. In the middle of the pageant, she set down baby Jesus, stood up, and sang. She sang *Silent Night*, and it was beautiful. I liked several things about that moment: musically, it was a demonstration of how it is so much better to perform a piece of music that is simple well, than to stumble through something that is challenging and outside your comfort zone. This has many life applications. It also puts words in Mary's mouth. Mary is often portrayed as silent or near silent in Christmas pageants. The New Testament gives her a substantial speaking part and even a singing part. Mary has intelligent things to say about the future. They are beginning together with the birth of her son, it's written in scripture, for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear.

You already likely know about Mary:

- She features in the birth narratives in Matthew and Luke's gospels.

- We see her and Joseph discover that they have left the 12 year old Jesus at the Temple by accident... recording a version of the thrills and spills of parenthood that every generation gets to live through. "I don't have him, I thought you had him. If neither you nor I have him...where is he?" (My husband and I had that exact conversation when we realized we each thought our son was with the other one, when we split up at a mall while visiting relatives in Boston.) Mary also had a moment like that.
- Jesus and his mother attend a wedding at Cana in Galilee where they ran out of wine early. Mary tells the servants to do whatever Jesus tells them to, (wait for it now – do whatever he tells you) he performs his first miracle. She knows her boy.
- She is in the synagogue with their family as was their custom, when he stands up to read from the Isaiah scroll "*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free*" And in the mouth of Jesus, in their own community, the words sound new, and challenging, and fresh.
- And finally, she is at the foot of his cross. A witness to his crucifixion.

In these moments of her life there's a wide range of experiences. The new work that the spirit is doing takes shape in her life, all the way through.

3. The song is in Mary's own voice. You should know that she sang. She sang her own version of a song that had been already sung by other women at other critical points in their personal lives and in salvation history. This song she sings is at least three layers deep with other women's voices. It is similar in theme to the song of Hannah in 2 Samuel 2 when she gives thanks that after years of infertility, she has a son whom she names Samuel who will be a blessing to his people as priest and the anointer of kings. Hannah's song in turn is a new variation on Miriam's song in Exodus 15. Miriam is Moses' sister who functions as prophet and chief morale officer while the people are in their wilderness journey. She leads them in singing and with her tambourine, celebrating who they are and what God has done for them already. On the defining journey for the children of Israel, she is an optimistic companion – one who places a melody in their hearts to keep them going.

Mary sang around the year 1 in the common era, on our calendars. These words are called the Magnificat because it is Latin for the first words "my soul magnifies the Lord." She introduces the themes of Jesus' life and ministry. In our Tuesday zoom Bible study, we listed them:

- God's mercy is generational.
- God brings down the powerful in politics and lifts up the humble in this world.
- God fills the hungry with good things, sending the rich away empty
- God is faithful to his promise to Abraham and to his descendants (that's all of us) forever.

These are the themes of Jesus' ministry; it is good news, it is hard to hear for some, it presents challenges and opportunities in every generation. Larissa and I will be preaching about this for the next 52 Sundays and for the rest of our lives. It is preached in churches all over the world in different languages and communities. There is so much to say about this, it's just in poetic outline here, waiting to be literally fleshed out. A song to sing, a melody in Mary's voice as she and Elizabeth meet and consider what is happening in their lives.

Miriam sang her song in the Exodus likely about 1400 BCE. Hannah sang around 1100 BCE. Mary sang in the year 1 on our calendars. Which brings me now to the question of our singing. The songs on our hearts, the music we remember, the faith we embody in our own lives, in our own skin, in our own voices.

There's a lot of music here this week. None of it is new, although it is voiced fresh today, you may hear echoes of other years, or new things in it this year.

Mostly I want you to know that when Mary sang her Magnificat, which is a tour de force, she was improvising on the themes of other music that she already knew. She was a young girl, likely not older than 16, but she already knew everything she needed to.

This Christmas it is time for our own improvisations. God loves us. How will you give voice to that love? How will you improvise a way for someone to know that? How can you say it in your own words?

Maybe on a branch
Floating downriver
Singing your own song

Friends do not underestimate how difficult a year this has been for people right here in S Glastonbury, and around the world. If ever there has been a time to be gentle with each other, this is it. If ever the world needed to know good news, that time is now. If ever we needed a savior, this would be a time to welcome that birth.

Merry Christmas! Take a moment now to wish the people on either side of you sincerely a Merry Christmas and a joyous Noel.

© Reverend Erica Avena, 2021
Congregational Church in South Glastonbury
949 Main St.
South Glastonbury, CT 06073