

Holy Space

Luke 1:39-55

Fourth Sunday of Advent/ 19th December 2021

As you listened to these words, the story of Elizabeth and Mary and Mary's song, I'm curious: what feelings, what emotions were stirred in you in the hearing of this text? What images came to mind? We know these stories so well, maybe too well. Perhaps a way to approach these texts in a new way is to be attentive to how we feel around them, allowing the words to touch something in us. What feelings and emotions surface in you?

Awe is what stirs in me—these verses in Luke 1 and everything that comes before it and after it. Awe before the way Luke—master storyteller, pastor, theologian—bears witness for his community to the meaning of Christ's birth. It's not so much *how* he tells the story that generates awe, but that toward which the story *points*, bearing witness to the birth of God's good news. Luke wants us to see something; he wants us to know something; he wants us to experience something, feel something so profound and extraordinary that we are changed and moved to respond with awe, with joy, with praise and song, running "with haste" like Mary who runs to Elizabeth or like shepherds who after hearing, "To you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, the Messiah, the Lord" (Lk. 2:11), also run "with haste" to Bethlehem.

Yes, awe before it all, before Luke's grand vision of God, who knew that the birth of Jesus is "good news of great joy for all the people" (Lk. 2:10). And awe is related, perhaps grounded in something else for Luke and it's *joy*. Joy is busting out all over for Luke. He can't contain it. For Luke, Jesus is all about joy. Jesus means joy. Jesus is joy. Jesus is the birth of joy. Jesus brings joy. And he causes God's people to sing with joy, to rejoice, and the heavens too begin to sing, all creation joins in the chorus. We have four songs or canticles in Luke's Gospel, they're only in Luke, the song of Mary (Lk. 1:46-55), the song of Zechariah (Lk. 168-79), the song of the angels to the shepherds (Lk. 2:14), then the song of Simeon (Lk. 2: 29-32), and they're all connected to the birth of Christ. All connected to this joy.

And the joy isn't experienced in isolation. Sure, we can experience joy when we're alone or isolated. But joy is extra-special when it's shared, isn't it? Joy is seldom complete until it's shared with someone we love, shared with the people who mean the world to us. Joy is perhaps best shared and experienced together with others. Maybe because when we are conscious of our joy in the presence of another who understands and shares our joy, the reality of that joy is magnified, intensified, multiplied, increased, enhanced. When that happens, joy pulls us together, it draws us in and close to the other, and our reality is transformed; the world is transfigured and transformed. This happens whenever human beings share in joy, whether it's over the birth of a baby or when the Ravens win the Super Bowl.

Mary runs to Elizabeth with her joy. Even before Mary says a word Elizabeth knows, the Holy Spirit tells her, and she is filled with joy. It comes alive within her. And then John within her leaps for joy because he's also happy. For the one growing within Mary's womb is the source of joy. And then Elizabeth and Mary rejoice together. They each make space for the other's joy. Space for joy. And isn't this what the church can be like, a space for our joy? Elizabeth and

Mary take refuge in each other, forming a kind of refuge, a sanctuary or holy space. It was certainly a refuge for Mary, an unmarried, pregnant teenager about to give birth to God's good news. They were together for three months. What a gift that must have been for them as they waited for God's joy to come into the world.

If this is true for the way joy works in our lives, just imagine what can and does happen when we know something of God's joy, and experience the joy of God, and experience the presence of God's joy, when we delight in the things that God delights in and enjoys, when we share in the work that brings joy to God and to God's people! Joy accompanies the presence of God, for God is joy. God's coming, and God's presence is always "good news," glad tidings for all people. And there was absolutely no doubt for Luke that Jesus is the joy of God because he brings good news to the poor—because in the empires of this world, it's the poor, the oppressed, the marginalized who especially need God's joy (Lk. 4:18-19). And, according to Luke, it's the poor, the oppressed, the marginalized who are most open to it and are to receive God's joy.

And if there's any doubt about this, just read Luke. Listen to Mary's song, the Magnificat. Sing her song. Or, maybe better, feel something of her joy as you sing her song, which is also sharing in God's joy. She knows that God's salvation, God's determination to save and heal and restore God's people, comes not through the rich and powerful but through the birth of a vulnerable baby to a teenage mother, poor and powerless, invisible to the most powerful in the empire. Powerless really needs to be in quotes here, "powerless." Mary is powerless from the perspective of Rome. But make no mistake, there is power here. Luke wants us to see there is a different kind of power at work in the world. The coming of God's good news means bad news for the empires of the world. The angels didn't bring their glad tidings to the halls of power, but to lowly shepherds, to those on the margins.

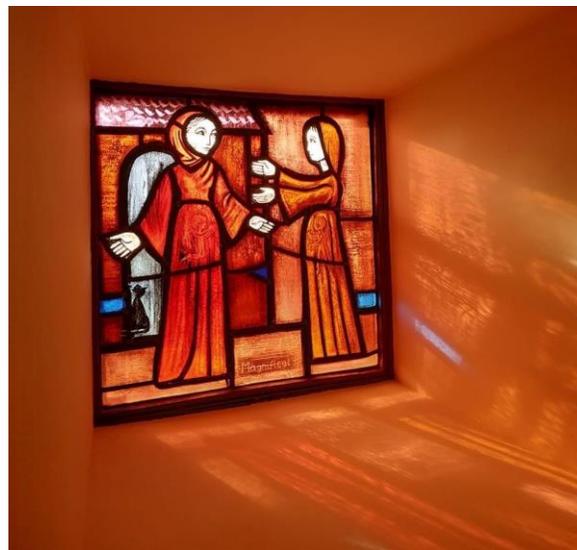
And it's extremely rare in ancient literature to have not one but two women as protagonists in a story. Contemporary writer Kaitlyn Schiess writes, "Every discussion of 'biblical womanhood' should include the fact that in Luke 1, two pregnant women celebrate their new motherhood by passionately discussing the coming overthrow of every earthly empire."¹ And note that their holy space of three months took place, Luke tells us, in a hill town of Judea, far from the centers of power in Jerusalem. They are on the margins, on the edge. But that's where God often chooses to act. The inspired bell hooks (1952-2021), Black scholar, feminist author, and activist who died this past week, reminds us in her groundbreaking work on marginality, "Marginality is much more than the site of deprivation."² Viewing it as a place of deprivation is a false assumption people of privilege make from the center. People on the margins know, hooks says, "It is the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance." hooks could be talking about Mary and her song. Mary's joyful with radical possibility. Why? Because she knows that with the birth of her son, "the world is about to turn."³ Her song of joy is a space of resistance.

Friday evening, we were at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. to hear the National Symphony Orchestra and the University of Maryland Concert Choir perform J. S. Bach's *Magnificat* and the first part of G. F. Handel's *Messiah*, the Christmas section. To hear the *Magnificat* sung in that public space, in that city of enormous power, was striking, almost subversive. A secular space became a holy space with the singing of these words, "He has shown

strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly, he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty” (Lk. 1:32-32).

Preaching courageously during Advent in Nazi Germany, in 1933, the Lutheran pastor-theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1909-1945) said, “The song of Mary is at once the most passionate, the wildest, one might even say the most revolutionary advent hymn ever sung. This is not the gentle, tender, dreamy Mary whom we sometimes see in paintings.... This song has none of the sweet, nostalgic, or even playful tones of some of our Christmas carols. It is instead a hard, strong, inexorable song about the power of God and the powerlessness of humankind.”⁴

For Luke and his community, this is what the birth of the Messiah means for the world. It’s no less radical for the church to preach and sing today as it was nearly 2,000 years ago. The advent of God’s joy continues to “shake the heavens and the earth” (Haggai 2:6-7). Luke invites us to draw strength and hope from this good news, to know this joy, to share in this joy, to join voices with Mary, and sing this joy. So let us sing Mary’s song!⁵



Elizabeth and Mary (stained glass) in the chapel of the Taizé Community, Taizé, France.

¹ Tweeted by Kaitlyn Schiess on December 14, 2021, @KaitlynSchiess.

² bell hooks said these sentences were “The entirety of my intellectual and creative project.” See her essay, “Marginality as Site of Resistance” (1990).

³ This is an allusion to the refrain in the carol “My Soul Cries Out with a Joyful Shout” (Canticle of the Turning) written by Rory Cooney (1990), set to the Irish folk tune STAR OF THE COUNTY DOWN. “My heart shall sing of the day you bring. Let the fires of your justice burn. Wipe away all tears, for the dawn draws near, and the world is about to turn.”

⁴ Edwin H. Robertson, ed. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Christmas Sermons* (Zondervan, 2005).

⁵ The sermon was followed by singing the Canticle of the Turning, a contemporary paraphrase of the Magnificat. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F9QeTmRCpW4>