

Sermon for Sunday, December 20, 2015 Advent IV Canticle 15 “Battle Cry”

given by the Rev. Mary B. Thorpe

Women in the Bible get short shrift. They rarely are identified by name, they frequently are victims of one sort or another, and – most importantly – even when they are mentioned, they do not speak.

But today, that pattern is broken in dramatic fashion, with one of the most powerful and beautiful songs in Scripture, the Magnificat.

Mary, a young woman of Nazareth, engaged to be married to Joseph and pregnant in a mysterious way, travels to visit her cousin Elizabeth, who is also mysteriously pregnant late in life.

When Mary approaches, Elizabeth rushes up to her and greets her with surprising words: “When I saw you coming and heard your voice, the baby in my womb jumped. Why did you come to me? You’re the mother of the Lord...I should come to you, because you are pregnant with the one who has been named in the prophecies.”

This was, of course, before Facebook and Twitter. Mary didn’t change her status to pregnant. She didn’t post a sonogram or have a gender reveal party. Elizabeth may have heard whispers from traveling

family members of Mary's situation, but she didn't know much. Women were usually viewed as tools or chattel, not as smart and curious people.

But somehow, through the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth saw immediately what was going on. She cried out as a prophet in her own right...she wasn't merely parroting what prophets had said before, she herself issued the prophetic announcement as well as a blessing.

I'd note that the word that Elizabeth uses to name blessing is actually two different Greek words. When Elizabeth says that Mary is blessed among women, the word used is *eulogemenos*, which suggests that they will be honored and praised in future generations. No surprise in that – we know how the story goes. We also know that Luke is always about the long view, the historical perspective, so using that word gives us a sense of how this is a momentous event that will be cause for honor and praise

for generations to come. But here's the interesting part: when Elizabeth says "blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord," the word for blessed is *makaria*. *Makaria*, which can also be read as "happy." "Happy is she

who believed.” And that is the same word that is translated as blessed in the Beatitudes. Blessed are the poor, blessed are the hungry, blessed are those who suffer...because God is about to turn things upside down.

That would make you happy, right?

So here is this young woman in a socially precarious position, sitting with another woman who had had no social status in her community for decades because of her inability to have children, and God is turning everything upside down. Mary will not be shamed, she is blessed, she is happy because of what God has done and what God promises to do.

So she sings. Songs are powerful things in the ancient Middle East. There's a whole book that's a song in the Hebrew Bible – the Song of Solomon or Song of Songs. There's another book composed of a series of songs: the Book of Psalms, which were written and designed to be sung, not merely spoken. And then there are some songs that we might take a look at because they resonate so strongly with Mary's song.

Here's one from the Book of Exodus:

²⁰ Then the prophet Miriam, Aaron's sister, took a tambourine in her hand; and all the women went out after her with tambourines and with dancing. ²¹ And Miriam sang to them: "Sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea."

Miriam's song not about babies: it is in response to another kind of new life: the Israelites' safe passage out of slavery in Egypt and the Pharaoh's troops' destruction at God's hand.

Now look back at Mary's song: "He has shown the strength of his arm, *

he has scattered the proud in their conceit.

He has cast down the mighty from their thrones, *
and has lifted up the lowly.

He has filled the hungry with good things, *
and the rich he has sent away empty.

He has come to the help of his servant Israel, *
for he has remembered his promise of mercy,

The promise he made to our fathers, *

to Abraham and his children for ever.

Hmmm.

There's another song we might recall in the Hebrew Bible, sung by a woman named Hannah, who suffered from infertility just as Elizabeth did, who conceived a child by divine intervention, just as Elizabeth and Mary did. Listen to Hannah's

words:

"My heart exults in the LORD; my strength is exalted in my God. My mouth derides my enemies, because I rejoice in my victory.² "There is no Holy One like the LORD, no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God.³ Talk no more so very proudly, let not arrogance come from your mouth; for the LORD is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed.⁴ The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength."

Remember Mary's song: "My soul magnifies the Lord,

and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.

Hmm.

Do you see the common language? All of these women are joyful at what God has done, and the interesting thing about their language is that it is not just gratitude for passive reception of a gift from God.

No, all these songs are, in essence, battle cries.

They're singing it out loud, not murmuring it amongst themselves.

They all say the same thing:

God is working through me, and the world is being turned upside down, and the old rules and the old rulers are being cast down, and I am the linchpin of God's work.

These are battle cries, like Joan of Arc's "I am not afraid; I was born to do this!" Like Rosa Parks' "Memories of our lives, our works and our deeds, will continue in others...each person must live their life as a model for others." Like Malala Yousefzai's "When the whole world is silent, even one voice has power."

And here's the funny thing: women's battle cries most often have to do with turning the power structure upside down. Men's battle cries, sadly, usually have to do with gaining or regaining power.

So we approach the birth of this baby in this woman's womb, a baby that should be a source of her mother's shame, and instead we hear Mary's battle cry affirming that this act of birth will rebirth the world. Before Jesus is even born, his mother is announcing in no uncertain terms that those who think they rule are about to be made as insignificant as worms in the soil.

Whose voice will speak the battle cry today, this week, next year? Is it a mother whose child was a victim of gun violence in Gilpin Court? Is it a woman like Rachel Carson who names the destruction of the earth and the waterways by strip mining or by industrial toxins? Is it a woman

like Malala who says that girls should be educated just as boys are, or a woman like Kriti Bharti that child marriage is wrong? Is it a woman who has been a model of the power of economic opportunity for women and men

of color, like Maggie Walker.

Whose voice do we need to hear to turn the world upside down, with God's help and guidance? Remember the promise:

“God has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

Listen for the voice of change. Heed it. And don't be surprised if it is spoken in a woman's voice.

Amen.