

‘Praise and Protest’
Rev. Dr. Ann C. Kemper
December 24, 2017 (4th Sunday of Advent)

based on Luke 1:26-38 and Luke 1:46b-55

We are almost there folks! Only a few more hours until we celebrate the coming of the Great Mystery become baby.

A few weeks ago I invited you to tell me your favorite Christmas hymn. I wanted to know what hymn touched your heart as we approached Christmas.

Your first choice we hear on Christmas Eve ... and wasn't Silent Night!

[Even though according to the D&C, Silent Night is the most-recorded holiday song next in line to ‘White Christmas’ and ‘Jingle Bells’.]

This evening we will open our hearts to your very favorite Christmas hymn with Tracy and Kevin's rendition of: ‘Oh Holy Night’.

But this morning ... we will look at how our favorite hymns and our singing prepares us for O Holy Night.

When we put written words to music we connect the heart and mind. When Jesus says we are to love God with our heart, mind and soul ... I'm not sure there is a better way to do that than through our singing.

Singing has always found a way to the heart faster than any written or verbal word alone.

Today we read the lyrics to Mary's Song – the Magnificat ... even though it wasn't put to music, it is still a powerful and prophetic poem that speaks to the beauty and grace of God.

Mary's Song isn't just a song about obediently answering God's call. Mary's Song is a Song of Resistance.

Mary's words give voice an ancient plea of a people who feel abandoned, abused and alienated from those in power.

Mary not only sings of her own personal commitment to God, but challenges the high and mighty; the oppressors and those in power.

Mary puts those on notice who are distanced from God because of power and privilege and announces to the world God loves the lowly. God frees the oppressed and scatters the proud.

Maybe that's why Mary's Song of praise and protest continues to touch our hearts thousands of years after she lifted her voice acknowledging how God's holy name brought salvation to the lowly, the hungry, and the downtrodden.

Mary's Song both praises God and challenges human beings to see how the Great Mystery of God compels us to not only open our hearts to God's love and grace, but challenges us to confront the human disparity between the rich and the poor; the hearty and the lame; the powerful and the powerless.

Songs of resistance are not isolated to Mary's Song. We sing them today. Many of our Christmas hymns are songs of resistance ... because they announce the coming of God's kingdom and gives notice to those who would throw a stumbling block in the way of the Savior.

Do you ever think of 'Amazing Grace' as a song of resistance? Think for a moment how the words and tune to Amazing Grace harkens back to the anti-slavery movement; and the power of collective action and leadership.

Let's sing the first verse and listen for the voice of resistance.

UMH 378 verse 1

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found; was blind, but now I see.

Imagine how the lost and blind must receive this gift of grace? The author John Newton penned words of resistance to those who were lost and blind to the suffering of slaves and through his words offered them the freedom through the gift of amazing grace.

Amazing Grace is a Song of Resistance ... familiar and adored by people around the world because of the powerful way it connects heart and mind to God's amazing grace.

Advent is a perfect time to invite God into our lives in the hymn 'O Come, O Come Emmanuel'. We rarely sing all seven verses ... but the 6th verse is particularly challenging:

UMH 211 v 6

O come, thou Dayspring, come and cheer

our spirits by thy justice here;

disperse the gloomy clouds of night,

and death's dark shadows put to flight.

Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.

This hymn not only helps prepare us for the coming of Christ ... but helps in opening our hearts and minds to a justice-seeking God.

In 1940 Edmund Sears wrote a hymn of resistance that reflected his struggle with the ethics and justice issues of the Mexican-American war.

This Christmas carol didn't focus on Bethlehem, but on the contemporary issue of war and peace. This hymn was Sears' plea for a just end to an unjust war.

We will sing this Christmas carol as our reflecting hymn in a few moments.

In 1962 Noel Regney and Gloria Baker wrote a song of resistance as a plea for peace during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Their Christmas Carol ‘Do You Hear What I Hear’ was so inspiring given the nuclear threat ... neither artist could perform the song without breaking down in tears.

*Said the king to the people everywhere
Listen to what I say (Listen to what I say)
Pray for peace people everywhere
Listen to what I say (Listen to what I Say)
The child, the child
Sleeping in the night
He will bring us goodness and light
He will bring us goodness and light*

You see, there is nothing more powerful or poignant than a heartfelt song giving voice to our inner most desire: to lift up our voices in praise to God and in confrontation to powers that threaten peace on earth.

It is Mary’s heartfelt song that gives voice to God’s desire to lift up human beings held down and oppressed by evil.

That’s the essence of the Gospel message ... that God’s good news of salvation and redemption wasn’t destined for the high and mighty, but was conveyed to us all born as the son of a peasant carpenter.

The angel Gabriel ... a messenger of God ... announces to a simple maiden the blessed favor of giving birth to God’s son. Her response to that amazing revelation isn’t just one of submission ... but one of resistance.

Mary, (God bless her), doesn’t refuse ... but raises her arm in resistance and repeats Hannah’s plea that the lowly be raised; the brokenhearted be healed; the oppressed be freed ... and the most humble be elevated to a place of honor.

After Mary tells the angel Gabriel to “Let it be with me according to your word.” she goes forth to stand and sing the song that summarizes the entire Christian movement.

Mary’s Song of Resistance is a song that says:

- power is no longer in the hands of the rich; God lifts the lowly.
- freedom is no longer confined to those who wield governing power; God scatters the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
- and by God’s grace abundance and bounty will fill those most hungry for the gift of grace.

May it be so with us all as we sing Edmund Sears’ Song of Resistance in the hymn ‘It Came Upon the Midnight Clear’.

Amen.