

Sermon: Singing the Unexpected Song

Year C, Fourth Sunday of Advent

[Micah 5:2-5a](#); [Luke 1:46b-55](#); [Psalm 80:1-7](#); [Hebrews 10:5-10](#); [Luke 1:39-55](#)

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Most weeks, I put the bulletin together first. So it wasn't until Monday that I found out that we'd have Jocelyn at the piano, Megan as reader and me in the pulpit. Three women leading worship on the Sunday where we read Mary's *Magnificat*, Mary's response to God stepping into her life. It seemed like no more than a nice wink from the universe.

But as I read further, I realized that what we saw in the text was women in dialogue, with each other and with God,¹ so I wanted see what would open up today, if we also had women in dialog. Megan and Jocelyn were both kind enough, in a crazy busy week, to give it a try. So Megan, would you begin?

The Birth of Jesus Foretold: Luke 1:26-37

Megan: In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.'

Cath: But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

Silence for a 10 count.

Jocelyn: [music to ponder by, 30-60 seconds]

Silence for a 10 count

Megan: The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.'

Cath: Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?'

Megan: The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.'

Cath: Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her.

¹ Judith Jones, "Commentary on the Gospel: Luke 1:39-45, (46-55)" from "Lectionary Commentaries for December 20, 2015: Fourth Sunday of Advent", Working Preacher, https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2723 (accessed December 15, 2015).

Jocelyn: Music to ponder by, 30-60 seconds.

Cath: I can't say what Mary thought her life was going to be like. But I'm pretty sure it wasn't young, with a baby on the way and no husband. Her life is upside-down.² And God sent the angel Gabriel to make sure Mary was clear that, in fact, God saw and understood what was going on.³

All of us have parts of our lives that are not what we thought they were going to be like. Our parents were going to die peacefully in their sleep after a full and rigorous life. We were going to stay in our homes until the end. Our children were going to grow and thrive without much of a wrinkle in their lives. Maybe they'd have a little hardship to toughen them up a little, to show them how much they were capable of, but nothing they couldn't handle. But that's not how it turned out. Some part of our life is upside-down. Maybe all of our life is upside-down. But no one is showing up saying, "*Greetings, favored one. The Lord is with you.*" (Luke 1:28)

Or is there someone saying pretty much just that and you haven't heard them, haven't pondered what kind of greeting this might be? If we believe God is with us, God understands what's going on, then why wouldn't there be someone offering us that greeting?⁴ Now I'll admit it may be hard to recognize when it comes out of the mouth of your visiting relative whom everyone would vote "Least Likely to be Mistaken for an Angel". Quite frankly, in my life right now, I've been so flat out busy that I'm not sure what's right side up or upside-down. Unless someone sits me down and says "Ponder. For 60 seconds, just ponder." I'm not going to ponder. I'm not going to look for the signs God is sending me that God understands that my life is upside-down and that God understands that can be frightening. I am not going to hear in the mess of my life that I have found favor with God.

So, Ponder. For 60 seconds, just ponder.

Jocelyn: Music to ponder by 60 seconds at least.

Silence for a ten count

Mary Visits Elizabeth: Luke 1:39-45

Cath: In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb.

Megan: And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the

² Charles L. Campbell, "Fourth Sunday of Advent, Homiletical Perspective, Luke 1:39-45 (46-55)" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Volume 1*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009], 95.

³ Michael S. Bennett, "Fourth Sunday of Advent, Pastoral Perspective, Luke 1:39-45 (46-55)" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Volume 1*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009], 96.

⁴ Jones.

sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.’

Silence for a ten count

Jocelyn: Music to ponder by 30-60 seconds

Cath: From Nazareth to the Judean hill country is not a small distance.⁵ Mary isn’t crossing the street to visit Elizabeth. So going to visit her is a big deal. The kind of deal like loading the kids and the presents in the car and driving for hours. The kind of deal like loading the kids and the presents through the TSA screeners and flying. And yet, at this time of year, that’s what we do.

In the case of Mary, I can see it two ways.⁶ Maybe Mary is freaked out. *Baby known as the Son of God and of his kingdom there shall be no end.* Huh? She’s freaked out and she says whatever it takes to make the angel go away. *Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word* (Luke 1:38) becomes a kind of “whatever you say, dude.” Freaked out as she is, Mary wants to visit Elizabeth to get reassurance about the message God has sent about the baby. That’s how freaked out Mary is. She’s going to undertake visit that’s a big deal because confirming the message she’s gotten from Gabriel is a big deal.

So either Mary’s freaked out OR Mary’s all in. *Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word* (Luke 1:38) is just a full throated “amen.” In this case, Mary knows how frightening it is to have your life be upside-down and to know, to truly know, that God sees and understands what that is like for you. Mary has seen the signs and knows how much fear there is, even when, especially when, you are all in. Mary knows all that and realizes that *Elizabeth* must be freaked out. It is a big deal to know that God sees and understands what an upside-down life is like for you. You need someone to talk about it with. And what better person than someone else whose life is upside-down and seen by God?

And all of us have some portion of our lives which are upside-down and all of us are seen by God. So who could you talk with when you are freaked out by the signs in your life? Who could use some time with you when they are freaked out by the signs in their life?

Jocelyn: Music to ponder by 60 seconds at least.

Silence for a ten count

Mary’s Song of Praise: Luke 1:46-55

Megan: And Mary said,
‘My soul magnifies the Lord,

⁵ About 80 miles. Stephen A. Cooper, “Fourth Sunday of Advent, Exegetical Perspective, Luke 1:39-45 (46-55)” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Volume 1*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009], 95.

⁶ Robert Redman, “Fourth Sunday of Advent, Theological Perspective, Luke 1:39-45 (46-55)” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Volume 1*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009], 92 & 94.

and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

Cath: 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.

Megan: His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

Cath: 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.

Megan: He 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 for ever.⁷

Silence for a ten count

Jocelyn: Music to ponder by, 30-60 seconds

Silence for a ten count

Cath: Mary and Elizabeth talk, one or both of them freaked out by what has happened in their upside-down lives. The conversation concludes with *blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord* (Luke 1:45). Mary's response is to sing her *Magnificat*, her magnificent song of love for God. Mary points away from her life and points to God.⁷ Upside-down, right-side-up, Mary reminds us of where we should be looking.

I would not sing my *Magnificat*. I would probably embroider it. Or maybe cook it. Or perhaps create a gorgeous filing system with plenty of cross-references so no matter which direction you came at it from, you could always find "Praise and Rejoicing". We all create things of beauty in different ways. We all use the beauty in what we create to point beyond ourselves in different ways. For myself, I have learned when my life is the most upside-down and it seems I am the furthest away from someone to talk with about how freaked out I am, that's when I need to sit down with my embroidery the most. That's when I need to create beauty that points beyond me to the Source of Everything, including beauty.

So for one last time, ponder. Ponder what is your *Magnificat*, how do you bring beauty into the world to point away from yourself and towards the Source of Love?

Jocelyn: Music to ponder by, 60 seconds at least

⁷ Mark Hillmer, "Luke 1:46-55." *Interpretation* 48, no. 4 [1994]: 392.

Silence for a 10 count

Cath: When we sing the unexpected song, when we sing the song that comes out of a life turned upside-down, a song out of the realization that God has sent signs to us to let us know that God sees and understands our fear. When we sing a song out of freaking out about that, a song out of talking with others who are also upside-down, frightened and freaked out, when we sing that unexpected song, we are singing with Mary. And we are singing with God. Because that is the message of Advent and Christmas; you do not have to reach perfection on your own.

The burdens of this world are not to be shouldered by you alone in some Herculean effort of human goodness.⁸ You do not have to self-produce hope, nor can you do so.⁹ Joy will be to you a gift, not a human right or an achievement.¹⁰ And it comes.¹¹ Be not afraid.

As we head into Christmas Eve and Christmas Day and everything gets turning round and round pretty quickly, take a few moments to ponder the choir you join when you use your life to point to God.

Jocelyn: Music to ponder by, 60 seconds at least

Silence for a 10 count

Cath: Thus ends today's reading. Blessed be the word of the Lord. Will the ushers please come forward for our Ministry of Sharing.

⁸ William H. Willimon, "Be not anxious." *The Christian Century* 96, no. 41 [1979]: 1235.

⁹ Willimon, 1235.

¹⁰ Willimon, 1235.

¹¹ Willimon, 1235.