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***“A Covenant of Love (Message Music)”***

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia  
Season of Advent, LOVE Sunday, December 20, 2020  
James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

**Holy Scriptures: Luke 1: 46-55; 67-79**

***Mary’s Song of Praise***

<sup>46</sup> And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord,  
<sup>47</sup> and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
<sup>48</sup> for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.  
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;  
<sup>49</sup> for the Mighty One has done great things for me,  
and holy is his name.  
<sup>50</sup> His mercy is for those who fear him  
from generation to generation.  
<sup>51</sup> He has shown strength with his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.  
<sup>52</sup> He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;  
<sup>53</sup> he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty.  
<sup>54</sup> He has helped his servant Israel,  
in remembrance of his mercy,  
<sup>55</sup> according to the promise he made to our ancestors,  
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

***Zechariah’s Prophecy***

<sup>67</sup> Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy:  
<sup>68</sup> “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,  
for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.  
<sup>69</sup> He has raised up a mighty savior for us  
in the house of his servant David,  
<sup>70</sup> as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,  
<sup>71</sup> that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.  
<sup>72</sup> Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,  
and has remembered his holy covenant,  
<sup>73</sup> the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,  
to grant us<sup>74</sup> that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,

might serve him without fear,<sup>75</sup> in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.  
<sup>76</sup> And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;  
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,  
<sup>77</sup> to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins.  
<sup>78</sup> By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us,  
<sup>79</sup> to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,  
to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

### Message Music

We miss communal singing, on key, off key, any key.

If you go into our church nursery  
you will see above the door a speaker,  
and loose wires indicating it is no longer connected  
to the church sanctuary sound system.  
Once upon a time nursery caregivers  
would listen to the worship service sermon and singing.  
Until I arrived on the scene 22 years ago.  
The caregivers asked if it could be disconnected,  
because every time I lifted my voice in joyful song  
the children burst into tears.

True story.

We miss having an open nursery and communal singing.  
We cherish sharing together in sacred space  
the music that emanates from within,  
bursting forth and making a joyful noise to the Lord.  
We accept and settle -- for now, for now --  
to listening to other souls sing for us,  
to humming along from beneath our masks,  
to looking forward to the day to come  
when we will rise up and lift up our heads  
and let forth the songs of our soul.

We miss the singing, yet we know the power of our song.

Aristotle maintained that music was the most moral of all the arts.  
Music and the message contained therein have the power to inspire.  
Never underestimate  
the depth and breadth of good music and a good message  
to inspire God's people to lead good lives.

In the first Chapter of the Gospel of Luke  
we're introduced to the people  
who raised and shaped Jesus of Nazareth.

When Mary's relative Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah were well on in years,  
God blessed them with a son, whom they named John.

The Scriptures say,  
*"Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son.  
Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord  
had shown his great mercy to her,  
and they rejoiced with her."* (Luke 1: 57-58)

We can well imagine the people of that time and place,  
folks who lived in a beloved community in a tight-knit village,  
Hebrews who gathered regularly in the temple,  
knowing one another, knowing each other's kinfolk.

Here in the South we know well enough  
to never say anything bad about someone  
because you might be talking to their kin.

Folks today or 2,000 years ago are no different in Nazareth and the areas of Judea.  
Stories were told and songs were shared in community.  
Folks sang the songs of their lives, and the songs they sang shaped lives.

Zechariah was so grateful for the gift of his son John  
that, even though he had been struck mute,  
he went to the temple, and to everyone's amazement, sang aloud.  
His song included verses and insights from Micah 7  
and Psalms 41, 105, 106, 111, and 132.  
Zechariah strung together his favorite phrases and poetry,  
passages which helped him to sing his faith in the Lord  
who saved him, redeemed him, forgave him,  
renewed and blessed his family.

Zechariah said, *"By the tender mercy of our God,  
the dawn from on high will break upon us,  
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,  
to guide our feet into the way of peace."* (Luke 1: 78-79)

The Scriptures inform us that *"all these things were talked about  
throughout the hill country of Judea."* (Luke 1: 65)

You better believe it!

Let's see:

A mute senior citizen bursts out with message music after having a son...  
yeah, throughout the hill country they talked about it.

Our imaginations will not need to stretch very far or wide  
to imagine that it is highly likely  
that Mary and Joseph  
either heard Zechariah offer this song of peace  
or they heard tell of the song.

Surely Mary and Joseph grappled with, grasped, got the message in the music.  
Their community was not so large or distant or removed  
that such a song of peace and grace was lost or ignored.

Hey, we have it, and we get to read it right here in the Holy Bible.

#### Message Music coursed through Mary and Zechariah

Zechariah sang as one filled with the Spirit of the Lord,  
giving thanks that the light of God  
is dawning *"to guide our feet into the way of peace."*  
We wonder whether the message and the music  
gave Mary and Joseph a bit more courage,  
courage to bear God's child.

Hark! the herald Angel Gabriel sang of the incarnation of God's promise.  
Visited by the Angel Gabriel,  
Mary received the message in the music,  
a message of courage, tender mercies,  
wholeness in times of upheaval and chaos, growth and change.

Mary heard the angel sing, and she lifted her voice as well.  
Mary lifted up to God and those who would listen  
her own song of truth and hope,  
bringing the marginalized into the foreground.

Mary's Magnificat brings to the foreground  
what was once hidden, what was intentionally ignored,  
God's beloved rendered invisible & insignificant & inconsequential  
by the principalities and powers and people's prejudices.  
She sang God's Truth in Love, making visible the invisible.  
The pauses between her notes

causes the forgotten and forlorn  
to be brought into the foreground.

*“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.  
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.  
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.”*

We know this song.

We know this story,  
for this is our narrative, this is our music, this is the song of our lives, our hope.

We get it,  
that a young woman kept in the background  
is brought into the foreground.

Mary was initially introduced in terms of her male counterpart,  
Joseph, of the house of David.  
Suddenly Gabriel, the voice of God,  
brings her into the forefront  
by how he speaks of her, to her, about her,  
calling her “the favored one of God.”  
Inspired, confident, filled with divine purpose,  
Mary self-identifies as “a Servant of the Lord”  
and “a member of God’s household.”

Brought to the forefront,  
we begin to see Mary’s lasting influence in those who knew her best.  
John the Baptist, her nephew.  
James and Jesus of Nazareth, her sons.  
John, James, Jesus all shared in common  
the influence of Mary, their aunt, mother, mentor.

All three men of God spoke of poverty,  
identified its inherent wrongs, its cruelty and harmfulness,  
and all three, like Mary before them,

lifted up the poor in spirit as well as the broke and broken,  
the lost, the last, the least.

We – the Church of Jesus Christ -- who so easily  
and sometimes all too casually  
trace our song back to the Magnificat  
dare to wonder aloud:

*Is our place to be a marginal community that will mother the revolution?*

A revolution in which unconditional love is the weapon of choice.  
A relationship in which love in action – grace – is the modus operandi.  
A Body of Christ that celebrates a resurrection-drenched creation.

Is our calling to bring forth from the margins and marginalized  
into the foreground, into the Light,  
the Kingdom of God, the Beloved Community?

We sing not of a traditional kingdom, a traditional communal experience, a status quo.

Let us lift every voice and sing of a Mighty God, Everlasting Counselor, Prince of Peace  
who is calling into relationship the whole people of God,  
a relationship in which power and grace and love  
are borne in new ways.

Message music is inclusive, unifying, engaging.

Today is Love Sunday.

We cherish in Christ that we have a New Covenant, a Covenant of Love.

May every day be a day for creating loving relationships.

Love requires that the whole people of God work and play and sing together, in unity.

There is love

when people are brought together for a common cause,  
a common song, a common purpose which benefits all,  
including those who are not present  
to speak for or defend themselves.

When you sing, dare to ask who is not made welcome.

Whose voices are we missing?

Where is the missing ingredient, the missing descant,  
the missing element necessary  
to create a compound called peace on earth?

And what are you and I going to do about it, together,  
to make our harmony complete?

Remember, my friends,

that what you win someone with  
is what you win them to.

Message music is liberating.

Never underestimate the power of good music and a good message  
to inspire God's people to lead good lives.

How many of us have returned from camps and retreats and worship services  
happily humming and hearing again and again the music and the message?  
We claim every opportunity to sing Christmas carols in worship and in our home,  
are you like me, so easily able to recall  
singing carols in another place and time?

Message music is transformative.

Message music gets beneath your skin.  
It goes to work below the surface, burrowing into your soul.  
It becomes a connecting thread in the fabric of your life.

Consider our brothers and sisters who are coping with memory loss.  
They may wrestle with many of the memories of their past and present details,  
yet they often remember music.  
Our beloved often recall songs,  
songs that shaped their lives and gave them joy and meaning.  
The memory of music is a new dawn that *"guides our feet into the way of peace."*

Message music is subversive.

Consider the poor people's movements that changed society.

Americans from all walks of life marched and fought nonviolently for civil rights,  
singing "We Shall Overcome" and "Down By the Riverside".  
Never underestimate the power of good music and a good message  
to inspire God's people to lead good lives, to be guided in the way of peace.

Consider that in each generation in recorded history and theology  
the oppressed have lifted every voice and sang songs of liberation,  
each note and phrase giving strength to the dispossessed and disinherited  
while striking fear and doubt in the hearts of oppressors.

To quote Gil Scott Heron:

*"The revolution will not be televised; it will be live."*

Songs of freedom and justice will be sung live, in community  
– and hopefully in the faith community! --  
proclaiming the news the Good News  
that God’s will for liberation is dawning  
*“to guide our feet into the way of peace.”*

This Christmas, give the gift of Message Music

When I was growing up in NYC  
our church youth and adults went caroling along the sidewalks of East Harlem.  
We would go out after the Christmas pageant on a Sunday evening,  
some of us still in our costumes of shepherds and kings and angels,  
Mary and Joseph showing us the way.

No matter how cold it was nor how dark the night,  
we sang as loud and true as we could  
so that our voices would carry up, up, up to the top floors  
of the low-income projects,  
and we would pray for lights to come on,  
and they would!  
Lights overcame the darkness, and a new peace was created.

Faces and families would gather at the windows  
and open them wide – despite the presence of Jack Frost –  
to hear the singing, to welcome into their lives the love,  
the receive the music with a message that  
*“Christ, the Savior, is born, Christ, the savior, is born.”*

*All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!*