

*Feast of Fools?*

Luke 1: 46-55

Third Sunday of Advent, December 12, 2010

Whitefish UMC

- † *Magnificat anima mea Dominum:* so begins the glorious Bach composition that is only one of many musical renditions of the song of Mary in classical music. “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior....”
- † These words of exultation and praise belie what we might expect from Mary, given her circumstances. Having recently learned that she is pregnant, and not by her betrothed, Joseph, Mary has journeyed to be with her cousin Elizabeth. Now Elizabeth is pregnant, too, and she will ultimately give birth to John the Baptist, the quintessential wild child.
- † Elizabeth has greeted Mary with warmth and welcome, and has assured her that the child within her has leapt with joy in the presence of the mother-to-be of God. Have you ever wondered if Mary were simply whistling in the dark—taking to heart the admonition to praise God in all things, even those that appear to be a disaster-in-waiting.
- † If you were to stop half-way through the Magnificat, you could surely come to that conclusion. But Mary doesn't stop there, and neither should we. But there is joy, amazement, foolishness, and danger in this text, which forms the core of the Latin and Lutheran Vespers, and the Anglican Evensong. Does anyone really think about what they are reciting?

† For if you did, you'd have to think that Mary was more than a little crazy, delusional even, and that we are, too, when we repeat her words in worship. For here we come face to face with the upside-down world inaugurated by the incarnation of Jesus.

† To help us understand a little better what we are really saying when we, too, sing Mary's song in Advent, listen to Eugene Peterson's translation in *The Message*:

† *And Mary said, I'm bursting with God-news; 47 I'm dancing the song of my Savior God. 48 God took one good look at me, and look what happened - I'm the most fortunate woman on earth! What God has done for me will never be forgotten, 49 the God whose very name is holy, set apart from all others. 50 His mercy flows in wave after wave on those who are in awe before him. 51 He bared his arm and showed his strength, scattered the bluffing braggarts. 52 He knocked tyrants off their high horses, pulled victims out of the mud. 53 The starving poor sat down to a banquet; the callous rich were left out in the cold. 54 He embraced his chosen child, Israel; he remembered and piled on the mercies, piled them high. 55 It's exactly what he promised, beginning with Abraham and right up to now.*

† But wait a second. Unless I've missed something, it sure looks like the hungry are still hungry and the powerful are powerful. How, then, can we sing Mary's song as if it is real, true, and believable?

† I confess I've always been troubled by the Magnificat, as much as I've loved it, too. But in doing research for this sermon, I discovered something wonderful. Mary's song, incongruous and somewhat subversive, inspired what was known as the Feast of Fools, a name given to the Christmas revels that were celebrated for centuries throughout the church.

- † The Feast of Fools became a literal acting out of the Magnificat, an odd witness to the God “whose inclination is to topple human power structures and to raise the downtrodden to a position of honor and feasting.” And so we can learn from the spirit of the Feast of Fools, which subverted the pretensions and hierarchy of both the church and the society.
- † I love what one scholar of the medieval church says: “Throughout medieval and early modern Europe, Christmas was a time for festive reversals of status. As early as the ninth century, a mock patriarch was elected in Constantinople, burlesquing the Eucharist and riding through the city streets on an ass. And as late as Innocents Day (28 December), 1685, in the Franciscan church of Antibes, lay brothers and servants put on the vestments inside and out, held the books upside down...wore spectacles with rounds of orange peel instead of glasses,...blew the ashes from the censers on each other’s face and hands....
- † Cross-dressing, masking as animals, wafting foul-smelling incense, and electing burlesque bishops, popes, and patriarchs mocked conventional human pretensions. So did the introduction of an ass into the church, in commemoration of the holy family’s flight into Egypt, and the braying of the priest, choir, and congregation during mass.”
- † Well. Sounds more than a little outrageous, doesn’t it? But throughout history, we learn of the tradition of the holy fool, one who dares to challenge convention through helping people see things differently while making a joke out of it. Saint Francis was often thought of in this way.
- † But the ultimate holy fool was Jesus himself. His entire story turns the world topsy-turvy—where the last shall be first, and the tax-collector and the sinner will become dinner partners with the Savior of the World.

- † By coincidence (or who knows why), I am reading a novel by Gregory Maguire (author of Wicked) called The Next Queen of Heaven. It takes place in a fictional town of Thebes in upstate New York just before the millennium turns in 1999. It charts the spiritual journey of an unlikely Mary-figure named Tabitha, who is a troublemaker who gets pregnant by her boyfriend who ditches her.
- † Tabitha's mother is Leontina, who belongs to the Cliffs of Zion Radical Radiant Pentecostal Fellowship, located right next door to the Catholic Church. Leontina risks descending to the basement of the Catholic church to borrow some 2% milk for her church's coffee hour, only to be bonked on the head by an old statue of the Virgin Mary, which falls off the refrigerator.
- † Leontina ends up in the hospital, and when she comes out, she is not herself. She speaks only in punning and slightly profane versions of scripture and can't do anything she used to be able to do. That leaves Tabitha to take over care of her brothers and her mother, which is not what she wants or ever expected.
- † Leontina's accident brings together all kinds of odd characters from the little town of Thebes. These include Our Lady's music director, Jeremy, still pining for his former lover, now married; Jeremy's HIV-positive friends Sean and Marty, trying to make it big in the a cappella choir business before Sean dies of AIDS; Pastor Huyck and Father Mike; and various congregants, in-laws, and nuns.
- † Of particular sweetness is the precarious fellowship that develops between Jeremy and his friends, who are practicing in a convent for elderly retired nuns, and the residents, the Sisters of the Sorrowful Mysteries, the only remaining members of their Order.

† *In youth we accepted a life without children, believing that we would not die alone," says Mother Clare. "But the modern times play tricks on us. . . . Nuns in our 70's and 80's, we find ourselves bereft of a younger generation, our sisters who would also have been our daughters. . . . For gay men who are threatened by AIDS, who are dying young and childless too -- it is not such a different situation. Perhaps, perhaps God brought us together."*

Indeed.

† Tabitha is transformed from a misguided and aimless youth prone to profanity into the responsible and resourceful mother of her family, including her own mother. She is pregnant much like Mary the mother of Jesus found herself, and so the Christmas pageant depicting the birth of the baby Jesus is eerily parallel to the birth of her baby, who she could name as Jesus, too.

† Once again God, even though in fiction this time, brings together the most unlikely characters to enact a story of love and redemption—a Feast of Fools, if you will. But as you know, truth is stranger than fiction. We see it every day.

† That's why we love children's pageants—because we put away our conventional way of seeing and love the story of the birth of Jesus through children's eyes. That's what Advent asks us to do. That's what Mary's Magnificat asks of us as well.

† In Steve Garnaas-Holmes' meditation of the Magnificat this week, he writes: "Jesus says, 'Go and tell what you see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them' (Mt. 11.5). In Advent we who are blind to God's presence learn to see; we who are deaf to the good news begin to hear;

we who think we understand have something new brought to us. God breaks in like a birth, like a death, and changes everything. God reverses the ways of the world.

† This Advent contemplate this mystery: that what is done is hidden in what is not yet, that God's blessing is hidden in powerlessness, that God's judgment is masked by riches and power, that God's presence is embodied among the lowly, that God's Christ is born among the poor. This Advent contemplate the birth of the Prince of Peace, the Servant of Justice among us, whom we cannot see, but who is already here, reigning in the great power of his mercy.”

† This Advent, practice standing on your proverbial head. Play the Holy Fool and do your part to bring in the upside-down kingdom. Be a part of the Feast of Fools, in which Mary’s Magnificat is the dinner music.

† And sing “I’m bursting with God-news—I’m dancing the song of my Savior God.”

† May it be so. Amen.

*Sources:*

*Gregory Maguire, The Next Queen of Heaven. 2010.*

*Charles L. Campbell, “Luke 1:39-55” in Feasting on the Word. 2010.*