



“Love Song”

Micah 5:1-5; Luke 1:39-56

Rev. Dr. David C. Fisher

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Fourth Sunday of Advent

It’s part of the greatest story ever told. For centuries it’s been called “The Visitation.” The Visitation, the story of Mary traveling to visit her older cousin, Elizabeth, has inspired enough art to fill one hundred museums and more music than any choir can sing in a year of nonstop choral effort.

In fact, in the story of the visitation, Mary sings a song. It’s called “The Magnificat.” We’ve heard our choir sing one version of it; we’ll sing another at the end of the service. For better than fifteen centuries, The Magnificat has been sung every day as part of traditional Evensong services.

The story is familiar. It begins in a Judean village where Elizabeth and her husband Zachariah lived obscure lives. Elizabeth’s life was difficult. She had no children in a world where fertility earned rank in the neighborhood. Her world blamed her and she lived with public shame.

An unexpected pregnancy made Elizabeth a central character in the greatest story ever told. Even then, she kept the pregnancy a secret in the village. All along she knew that an angel promised that her soon-to-be-born son would be a prophet of almighty God and announce that God’s promised salvation was at hand. Somehow, in ways she could not begin to comprehend, her life was part of God’s great move to save the world.

Meanwhile, up north in Galilee in another obscure village, a young woman barely in her teens was informed that she was going to give birth to the one who is the savior of the world. Her name was Mary. She was unmarried and found herself pregnant. It’s not easy to be a pregnant teen in any small town, let alone a Jewish community two thousand years ago.

To escape the vicious tongues and prying eyes of the village gossips, Mary packed up and left town. She headed south to see her older cousin, Elizabeth. Perhaps there in the safety of family love she could sort things out and live in peace – at least for a few months.

When she arrived at Elizabeth’s door, she knocked and waited. Elizabeth opened the door and in shocked surprise invited her cousin to come in. Overcome by the emotion of the moment prompted by the Spirit of God, Elizabeth burst into song. Her song is quite famous. “Hail Mary,” Elizabeth cried, “blessed are you among women and blessed in the fruit of your womb.” Now let’s sit down and talk! You wouldn’t believe what’s happened to me....

Elizabeth’s song quickly became a prayer in the church, the “Hail Mary,” and it has shaped Catholic piety for centuries. It’s also a very famous and equally beautiful song,

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“Ave Maria,” sung all year long but especially at Christmas time. Its meaning points far beyond Elizabeth or Mary and goes much deeper than traditional piety. Elizabeth proclaimed loud and clear, “God is on the move, and wonder of wonders, God’s move is starting in the likes of me and Mary.”

Mary responded with a song of her own. It’s called “The Magnificat,” and it’s a universal Christian song. Mary’s song is being heard and sung in churches all over the world today. It is assigned to be either the Psalter or the Gospel Lesson on the Fourth Sunday of Advent.

The story of the Visitation is usually told or retold as a romantic tale with deep pious overtones. Over the centuries it’s become what we’d call a Hallmark card moment. Elizabeth and Mary seem to have halos, they sit piously in shining robes and freshly shampooed hair – thoroughly otherworldly characters in a luminous and otherworldly tale.

That’s not all bad. I know. In 2001 I spent six weeks living, working and worshipping at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. One of my favorite experiences was the Evensong service at four each weekday afternoon. Fifteen or twenty of us would gather in the choir stalls in the front of the Cathedral for the Evensong liturgy. It’s a lovely service in which the choir, ministers and people sing and chant the liturgy.

Part of ancient Evensong liturgy is the singing of the “Magnificat.” At the Cathedral the “Magnificat” is sung by the choir from the Cathedral School for Girls. Their pure adolescent voices bounced off the high stone walls of the Cathedral and landed deep in my heart – every time. It was consistently a beautiful and ethereal moment of the service and always moved me deeply. Tears are not unusual at Cathedral Evensong.

I couldn’t help noticing that the song and the service are far from the real world of the choir girls and us worshippers. In fact, I love the service because it is “otherworldly.”

And it is worth noting that the real story of the visitation of Mary is far removed from the version we usually hear in the music and message of the Christmas season. I suspect we like it that way. We can hold the story at arm’s length, safe from its power and its original meaning.

Listen to the story again and be warned: this story wants to do something in us, so be careful – hearing it might upset your life, even transform you.

The featured characters of the story are most unlikely heroines – especially in the first century. They were women in a man’s world. Elizabeth and Mary had no legal standing. They were the property of their fathers, then their husbands. They were illiterate. The rabbis denied girls the right to education. Women were considered dangerous and the source of sin.

Mary and Elizabeth were peasant women. Their lives were harsh. Jesus taught his disciples to pray for “daily bread.” It was that kind of world. Men were paid one day at a time – if you could find work. Most people had one, or at most, two suits of clothes. Village women were restricted to lives in the kitchen and trips to the market place – always accompanied by other women or a man.

They lived in occupied territory. There was a large Roman presence in Galilee and Jerusalem. Like occupied peoples everywhere, they suffered the daily indignities and humiliations freely given by their superiors, the Roman conquerors. The Romans hated the Jews and vice versa. Women were often the victims of violence and rape perpetrated by military men far from home.

Add to all that, Elizabeth was an infertile woman and the object of village scorn. Mary was an unwed teenager, pregnant in a village short of compassion for girls like her.

By the time Mary went to visit Elizabeth, the angels were long gone and reality had set in. It seems that when God comes to our world, things tend to get messy. Human nature does not take a vacation even when God is at work. Elizabeth was still hiding her pregnancy, and Mary was probably wondering if the whole thing was nothing more than her imagination.

And, when God moved into human history, God picked the most unlikely heroes imaginable. As usual, God upset the wisdom of the wise and confounded the strength of the powerful.

Elizabeth answered the knock at her door. To her shock and surprise, there stood her younger cousin, Mary. Elizabeth immediately knew something larger than she imagined was going on. God was at work. Her baby leaped in her womb and Elizabeth began to sing that song now known over the entire world, *Ave Maria*. “Hail Mary. Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb.”

Oh, Mary. What on earth is God doing! You! Me! The salvation of the world! How can this be? We’re just, well, Elizabeth and Mary!

Mary responded in song – the great *Magnificat*. It starts gently enough. “Who, me? How can this be? I’m just Mary a peasant girl from Nazareth.” God’s choice of her, of all people, is beyond words of surprise and blessing.

Then her song becomes a shout of defiance. “Look what God has done. God has scattered the proud and lifted up the humble – like me and Elizabeth. God has brought down the powerful and lifted up the marginal. The rich are sent away hungry, and the poor are filled with good things.”

That casts a very different tone on the old story as ordinarily told. When God goes to work, things change dramatically, and nothing is what one expects. The world of conventional wisdoms and values is overturned. Christmas means, at its very outset, a radical reorientation to God and the world. It’s not what we’d like it to be.

There’s more – and it is equally revolutionary. Christmas is always about God at work in this dark world of suffering, pain, oppression and war.

We long for the peace, quiet and candlelight of Christmas Eve – and we should. We gather here and sing our carols, listen to the old story, and wonder at the grace of God.

What we may not take into account is that this story lays claim on us and our world. The first Christmas happened in the world of Caesar and Herod. It was a world of petty misdemeanors and high crimes. Powerful men twisted the law for their own ends and government officials tended to themselves, not those they served. Most people paid little attention to God or God’s ways. It was a lot like our world.

The Christmas story takes us and our world seriously. God enters into, engages and struggles with the powers that be in our world – and with us. And in the end our hero, Jesus, the Christ, dies at the hands of the corrupt system.

And wonder of wonders, the cross and his death and suffering are precisely the instruments God uses to save the world. God, as usual, upsets conventional expectations and wisdoms. God’s ways are not ours. Our ways tend to blind us to what God is doing all around us.

God calls us to the same engagement and struggle in our world. So, reconsider Mary’s song – God’s love song to the world. In the deep night of her own fear and anxiety, Mary flung a defiant song into the darkness. It is a song of profound faith. God has not yet overthrown the powers that be, but Mary sings her song in the present tense. God is

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on the way and things will change, mainly my life! And she sang her song with a sword piercing her heart. Her boy was born to die.

Mary's song is God's love song. God loves the world too much to let it stay the same. God loves us too much to leave us alone. God calls his people to the mission of replacing the "things that are" with the biblical vision of all that can be: the kingdom of God on earth.

Join Mary's defiant song. Gather here on Christmas Eve, away from all that makes this world what it is. Sing the sweet, familiar, and, yes, defiant, songs of Christmas. And sing with a smile. God will not give up on us or our world. And we will not give up on ourselves, one another, and God's world.

Amen

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