

Samuel 2:  
Luke 1:26-38  
Luke 1: 39-55

Songs in the Dark  
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Hannah and Mary sang songs. One woman sang a song 3000 years ago out of gratitude that she had given birth to a child, and that she was able to dedicate that child to God. The other woman (or young girl) sang a song 2000 years ago out of joy and the hope that the child she carried would change the world. We sing songs too, especially at Christmas time: songs of gratitude and joy and hope. For some of us, music is the quintessential expression of Christmas – we might be able to give up presents and shopping and big meals and decorations and parties. But Christmas carols and other seasonal music are at the heart of our emotional experience of welcoming the Christ child. Out of joy and sorrow, out of memory and hope, comes the human need to burst into song, and to share songs in important moments.

There is also something about the experience of singing that unites the physical and the spiritual. It's the way that breath and words come together, and the way that people with different voices come together and form something new, something both embodied and ephemeral. We are actually acting out the metaphor of a religious experience: God bringing many together to sing one song, sometimes in unison, sometimes in harmony. You may love to sing alone too...but none of us can deny the spiritual power of many voices joining together.

We rarely hear Hannah's and Mary's songs read together, but it seems clear that Mary's Magnificat is modeled on Hannah's prayer. It's like a Psalm in the Hebrew tradition that the two women shared. Luke, the author of today's Gospel, loved to work songs into the story, and we love to hear them. There's the song of Zechariah at the birth of John the Baptist ("Blessed be the Lord God of Israel"); there's Elizabeth's song when she greets Mary ("Blessed are you among women") and Mary's song in reply ("My soul magnifies the Lord"); there's the angels' song at Jesus' birth ("Glory to God in the Highest"); and Simeon's song in the temple when he sees the infant Jesus ("Now dismiss your servant in peace"). All demonstrate the expansion of the human spirit when confronted with a sense of God working in the world. But though they are all written as the individual expression of one person in the narrative, they clearly strike a cord with a larger group. They become songs of community. The personal becomes the communal. Those women start out singing alone, but end up in a chorus of thousands.

I want to explore this connection between song and spirit. Whenever people feel inspired with a passion and want to speak in heightened form, they will end up singing. It's not just a matter of transmitting information: it's a way of sharing life and breath and conviction and longing. Now, we all know (I think) that we need to breathe in order to sing. Take a deep breath...now you are ready to sing. The choir spends a lot of time intentionally taking in oxygen. And the word *spiritus* in Latin means...breath. When we are inspired, we take in the Spirit (with a capital S) taking a deep breath. So Mary sings, "My spirit rejoices in God my Savior" as an expression of the joyful inspiration. Let's say that together: "My spirit rejoices in God."... In order to do that, we had to all take a breath and use it at the same time. We weren't just inspired. We were conspiring. "Con" means together, and "spire" means breathe. We were breathing together, and conspiring to rejoice.

Even though Mary is depicted as singing her Magnificat alone at this point in the story, we know that she could not do what she had to do alone. She needed co-conspirators. It seems that she found them. At her cousin Elizabeth's house, she found the older woman welcoming her and her suspicious condition with open arms. No condemnation, no tears, just elation; "Blessed are you among women...and why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?" Flying in the face of all expectations and social custom, Mary finds an ally in Elizabeth. She had another ally. We don't hear much about Joseph in the Gospel of Luke...it's in Matthew's Gospel that we hear of his several dreams. Dream messengers tell Joseph not to reject Mary, when to leave Bethlehem, when to return to Nazareth. Joseph doesn't seem to be much of a singer. He is more of a silent co-conspirator. But without his acceptance and protection, all of Mary's inspirations might have come to nothing. He joins in the song through his actions. So here was have a conspiracy of three: an old woman, a teenage girl, and a carpenter. Not much with which to start a movement. But, as the angel Gabriel had said, "Nothing will be impossible with God."

We have become so used to these Bible stories that they have become surrounded with the vague glow of a fairy tale. We are happy that Hannah's sorrow turned to joy and that she had her baby. We see Mary as a beautiful young girl in a blue robe with a serene expression on her face. But if we strip away that comfortable veneer, and read the stories as if for the first time, we might ask the question, "What did these women have to sing about, anyway?" Hannah was about to give her son Samuel up to be raised by priests in the temple. Mary was poor, young, frightened, pregnant for the first time, unsure of her reception by family and friends, legally subject to the death penalty for her condition...why isn't she cowering in a corner with morning sickness, swallowed up in shame? In the annunciation story, we hear that the angel Gabriel says to Mary, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you..." This has usually been interpreted as explaining how Mary got pregnant. But what if it means that Mary was actually inspired with the Holy Spirit, inspired to believe in fulfillment? What if the miracle is that she begins to believe and sing about what God can do with people like her? "He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted the lowly." God has kept promises. What does Mary have to sing about? As a faithful, inspired person, Mary sings a song of triumph in the midst of a dark time, looking shame and sacrifice in the face. She has joined a conspiracy. Far from being meek, mild and serene, she is belting out a song of defiance to the status quo. Lately, I can't help but think that Mary would be on the streets these days, chanting with the crowd, "Not in my name!" or "Black Lives Matter!"

Throughout the ages we have appropriated scriptural songs for ourselves. But what do we have to sing about? The seasons of Advent and Christmas do not put a hold on the tragedies in our broken world – in fact, if anything, sorrow and injustice are thrown into higher relief at this time. War rages in the Middle East; young women are oppressed; the racial wounds of are nation fester; the powerful take advantage of the lowly. Children in Vermont are homeless and cold. Just as many people are sick or grieving as there were a month ago. How can we sing Mary's song or our Christmas carols in the face of this? I think that there is only one way. We can join the conspiracy. We can breathe together and sing about what God can do with people like us. We can look at the darkness around us and say, with Mary, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." With our songs, we consent to be co-conspirators, instruments of God's mercy and justice.

Now, there may be some Josephs among us who breathe and find other inspiration and expressions for God's word. The scope or range of Mary's song does not come to all of us. Some of us are given very partial visions of God's promises. These songs may not be as majestic or polyphonic as Mary's, but they are all we have to go on. Maybe for you the voice of the angel says, "Just take care of this one person, treat them with respect and love, make their life matter, and you will be doing God's work. The music of God's kingdom is rich with harmony. At times we sing all of the notes together, but at times we must each discern our own ministry in that kingdom. Just know that your neighbors hear the notes of your song, however silent, and respond with joy.

Hannah and Mary sang songs. They became musical instruments through which the Spirit of God played. We sing songs too. And as we sing, let us breathe together, and feel the Holy Spirit coursing through our bodies and our lives. Let us conspire to work for God's justice, peace, and love.

I close with the words of Meister Eckhart, a 14<sup>th</sup> century co-conspirator:

"We are all meant to be mothers of God. What good is it to me if this eternal birth of the divine Son takes place unceasingly but does not take place within myself? And, what good is it to me if Mary is full of grace if I am not also full of grace? What good is it to me for the Creator to give birth to his Son if I do not also give birth to him in my time and my culture? Then, then, is the fullness of time: When the Son of God is begotten in us." Amen.