The Fourth Sunday of Advent
December 18, 2011

We have been playing Advent and Christmas songs in our home lately. We have a whole stack of CDs each of us has collected over the years. There is one CD in particular that I really enjoy, *A Midwinter Night's Dream* by Loreena McKennitt. I like it so much that I have this habit of playing it over and over again. Instead of going to the next CD, I'm not averse to just repeating the one for a few times before going to the next CD. Do you do that too? Sometimes, if we don't play a song through the speakers, we will play a song over in our minds. All I have to do at times is hear a song once, sometimes it is a song we have sung here at church, and the song will be in my head, played repeatedly, for days on end.

Music has a way of getting our attention, pulling us in, and bringing us into a kind of special space. When I sing or whistle or hum a tune or sing a song repeatedly it means that the song is lodged deeply in my heart. And if I have heard it the first time and it really gels, it isn't long before the music goes straight to my heart. It's not so much that I have captured the song, the song has captured me. Maybe the song you like to hear or sing or play repeatedly is a song that conjures up memories or brings you in touch with certain feelings or moves your heart. Such music grips us, takes a hold of us, and captures us.

Over the centuries, many songs have captured the imagination of the church. Naturally, most of them come straight from the Bible. One in particular is the Song of Mary, also known as the *Magnificat*. The Magnificat is sung in many ways and goes by many tunes. We sang it just a moment ago between the first and second lesson. It is a song we like to sing each year during Advent and Christmas. But it is a song that we sing throughout the year, too. Centuries ago, the Song of Mary made its way into the daily evening prayer office, sung by communities of faith, most notably monastic communities who sing it each day... Why is this song so endearing, so captivating, so moving? Why do we want to hear that song over and over again? Why do we want to hum or whistle along or sing it repeatedly?

The angel Gabriel tells Mary that she will give birth to Jesus. Mary, at first, wonders how this can be and then says "let it be." She accepts the news and the call of God. Then she runs to visit her cousin Elizabeth to share the news. Elizabeth herself is pregnant with John the Baptizer. After their meeting, Mary bursts into song. And it is an all out, no holds barred song of praise to God.

Mary praises God for choosing her to do God's work, but that is only a slice of the song. The song is a kind of preview of what God will do for the world but do you notice how the work of God is described in the past tense? ".. 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. He *has* helped his servant Israel in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise first made to Abraham and Sarah and their descendants."

Mary sings of God's deeds as if they have already been accomplished. So confident is she, so certain is she about God's work that she sings of it as though it has already happened. Already taken place. Already accomplished. Mary sings in the assurance that what God has done, God will do!

No wonder this song has captured our imagination. In this song we get a lively sense of who God is and that for Mary, God is very much alive. God is very much alive. Through her song, Mary proclaims that God is doing something in the world. God is up to something. God is on a mission and if we pay close attention to Mary's song we see that this mission is nothing less than changing and transforming the world. God is turning the world upside down: Raising up the lowly ones, giving dignity to the poor, feeding the hungry, lifting up the oppressed and powerless. What God did for Mary herself, a poor young girl, is the very thing God will do for all the maligned and forgotten ones. And in that arc of turning the world upside down, the rich are sent away empty handed, the proud are being humbles and the arrogant ones and the power brokers of the world are being toppled.

The song is nothing less than a preview of Jesus' speech at the Synagogue when he says that he is the fulfillment of what was spoken by the prophet long ago … "to bring good news to the poor, sight to the blind, release to captives, to let the oppressed go free." And it is an overture, if you will, of what Jesus will do when he touches people's lives and what God does through Jesus in the mystery of his death and resurrection, and it is what Jesus continues to do!

We need this song and to play it and sing it and songs like it over and over again because we have this habit of forgetting.

The writer Anne Lamott talks about how through much of her life she believed in a "patchwork God" – sewn together from bits or rags and ribbons with a little bit of East and a dash of the West, a piece of the pagan and the Hebrew, a little of this and that and yes a bit of Jesus. I suspect that each of us, on some level, carries with us a "patchwork God." We've sewn together a bit of this and a bit of that and the problem is that our notions of God can be so subjective, so private, so me- centered, that we may, in fact, fail to notice that God is indeed alive. At worse, our self-made notions of God may keep the living God at a safe and comfortable distance, away from and uninvolved in our own lives, let alone the world. With such an image God can be rather passive and docile.

Yes, I suspect that is why we need and even enjoy singing the Song of Mary for the song pushes us, again, to trust that Jesus is the face of God. IN Jesus we come to know the heart of God. And through Jesus this God, who is alive and well and active and involved, likes to interrupt our lives. Like Mary, we are being enlisted in God's work in the world. And like her we are surprised again and again at this God and this God continues to call us and beckon us to participate in the on-going work so eloquently described in the Song of Mary: lifting up the lowly and forgotten and oppressed neighbors, tending to the suffering ones, giving dignity to the poor and marginalized, and daring to name the truth about those whose rule is corrupt and who have gone stark made with unchecked greed and power.

We are invited to sign this song again and again and allow it to enter every fiber of our beings as individuals and together as the very body of Christ.

I don't always know what God is up to, but we are invited, you and me, again and again to discern and attend to the story and to our common worship so that we are reminded and so that we may be touched by God to perceive God among us.

So, one of the places I like to begin is to wonder what God might be up to among us in this little community. Lately, I've had this image of the open door. Now, an open door suggests hospitality. Now, that's more than simply being nice and friendly. Hospitality is the risky gesture of truly opening ourselves to all people. I do get the sense that God is doing something among us and calling us, beckoning us to get on board. Just last week we welcomed several new people into our midst. One person is preparing for baptism. The others are preparing to renew their baptism which means they will be on a journey to discover what it means to follow Jesus and get on board with this very work that God is doing in the world. And we are called to journey with them. I get the picture of the open door when I know that next Sunday we will open our door to whoever wants to come and eat Christmas Dinner here. All are welcome. That door is open each day when we host the Gathering Inn for the poor and homeless. But that's just a beginning. I wonder where God is calling us to open that door wider and wider, not only to be a hospitable place for all people but for us to open it so wide that we can see outside and get on board with God's work in the world.

This month we launch our visioning process or strategic planning process and it is all about being a missional church and the process is really bout listening to God and getting in sync with the song of Mary, getting on board with what God is doing in the world.

If in this process we focus on ourselves or on self-image or get all hung up on numbers and equate growth with largeness then we are surely missing the beat and our song is sorely out of rune with the Song of Mary. We end up singing a very different kind of song. But if we allow God to turn us not inward, but outward to the world of the neighbor and the needy ones, then I suspect we will be quite in sync with the rhythm, the tune, the beat and the wonderful lyrics of the great Song of Mary. With that song we cannot help but be focused don mission, not ours, but on God's mission and work among us and in the world.

Advent is winding down. Four candles are now lighted. The circle is almost complete. In another week we will celebrate Christmas Day. And as we wait and yearn and watch and wonder, we are being called to continue our Advent vocation of praying and listening to God and we are called to sing. Like Mary, we sing of what we already know. We sing the sure confidence and certainty of the one whose coming among us we will celebrate again with great joy a week from now. We will sing of the God who has come to earth in the flesh of the Child born in Bethlehem and whose reign of love and justice and mercy is made visible on the wood of the Cross.

Like Mary we may sing with certainty and in confidence that yes, God has acted and that God has done marvelous things. In Jesus God has come among us and through Jesus God is continuing that saving and healing work throughout the world and what God is doing nothing less than turning the world upside down. Can you hear the song? Do you catch the beat? Can you sing it and play it over and over again? Will you join the song? Will join in the singing? Can you say "yes … let it be, O God, according to your Word?" May we sing it again and again knowing that what God has done, God will do! Amen.