

If you are paying attention, it might seem like there is a fair amount of repetition in our service this morning. The words of the Gospel are basically the same as the words in the Canticle we said together. This repetition is intentional. I wanted to show you that many of the prayers in our *Book of Common Prayer* actually come from the Bible. Canticle 15 and its Rite I counterpart Canticle 3, also known as the Magnificat, are found in the Daily Office, the section of the prayer book for the services we are to pray either together or alone every morning, noon, and evening. Today we are reminded this particular song or prayer comes from Luke's Gospel where it was sung by Mary, the mother of Jesus before he was born.

In repeating the words of the Magnificat today, I also wanted to impress upon you how this song is part of a long tradition of songs sung by women throughout the Bible, and how important it is to pay attention when Biblical women sing.

The women of the Bible have been singing for a long, long time. Scholars believe that the oldest portion in all the books the Bible is not the story of God creating the world in Genesis. It isn't the account of the Israelites fleeing slavery in Egypt. No, the oldest, most ancient written material in all the Bible is found in the fifth chapter in the book Judges in the Old Testament. That entire chapter is a song sung by a woman, the prophet, military leader, and judge Deborah. It tells how Israel defeated a threat to its people by the heroic act of another woman named Jael who killed the leader of their enemy. It's a song sung by a woman that lifts up the act of another woman as evidence of God keeping God's promise to protect God's people and rescue them from oppression.

Deborah's song isn't the only one that praises God and sees God active in the life of God's people. The song of Judith at the end of the book Judith has a similar message. There is also the song of Miriam in the book Exodus where Miriam played the tambourine and sang of God's saving act in rescuing God's people from slavery in Egypt by parting the waters of the Red Sea to make safe, dry land for them to walk on. The song of Hannah in 1 Samuel expresses gratitude that God ended her barrenness and in so doing also praises God by saying God notices, embraces, and frees the forgotten, those who go unnoticed by the rest of the world. The song of Hannah points to how God likes to reverse the world we created to make it more like how God intends us to live.

Today we hear two more women sing in the Gospel. Elizabeth's joyful song praises God and Mary for her belief that God will fulfill God's promises. Her song might be shorter than Mary's, but it is no less important. Elizabeth proclaims Jesus Lord, the first person to do so in Luke's Gospel. That she makes such a proclamation before he is born may point to these words being written long after Jesus' resurrection, but they are still meant to impress us with Elizabeth's belief that through Mary's obedient trust in God, the savior is coming into the world.

We can also see this when Elizabeth calls Mary "blessed among women". While this phrase has become a common religious way of referring exclusively to Mary, it was used in some of the other songs women sing in the Bible to refer to any woman in Israelite history who helped deliver God's people from danger or evil. This might disappoint some who like to think the phrase only refers to Mary, but it doesn't have to. It can help us realize how important women are in the salvation history in the Bible and recognize the salvation Mary sang about in the next song we hear in today's Gospel.

Mary's song, the Magnificat, has been both celebrated and censored for centuries. It is a song of liberation on many levels: personal, social, moral, and economic. It is a song that resonates with the oppressed, which means leaders of oppressive governments sometimes ban it, like the Guatemalan government did in the 1980's. It is a song of joy. Mary sings how God has finally fulfilled God's promise to save God's people and she is all too happy to be part of it. Her song names how God chooses solidarity with the suffering to heal, redeem and liberate all people. It's a song of revolution. Mary sings about how through her amazing pregnancy God has lifted up the lowly, sent the rich away empty, brought down the powerful, fed the hungry. The world has been turned upside down. God has acted not through the wealthy, influential, powerful, the royalty, the natural born leaders, or the men of high status. God has acted through someone without financial security, without high status, without all the things society deems of value: a poor woman in a small backwater town. And through this woman's sacrifice, God has liberated God's people from the tyranny of sin and evil.

This has led scholar and former Bishop of Durham N.T. Wright to call Mary's song "the Gospel before the Gospel." It has inspired other scholars to call Mary the first and model disciple because she believed in God keeping God's promise and lived into that belief by sacrificing any security she might have had.

We still sing or recite Mary's song to this very day, as we did this morning in place of the psalm. I wonder when we recite it, if we feel a connection to the words, or if we are inspired by the belief of a woman who said yes to God or if we notice the dark side to her song. The part where the rich are sent away empty. The powerful are brought down. Such reversal will not feel as good to them as it

does for the hungry who are filled with good things. Today, when I see people struggle with the many changes caused by the pandemic and changes in our economy, like people demanding higher pay and better jobs, I can't help but wonder if I am hearing the whisper of the Magnificat behind these changes. It makes me wonder at the discomfort. Like the discomfort previously large churches that once boasted thousands of people and million-dollar budgets now feel as membership drops and giving declines. Or institutions that abused power and employees or students and now struggle financially. Are they not the powerful feeling fearful they are being cast down?

Mary's song also makes me think about the times when I experience discomfort in a way that gives me hope. Because if I ever feel cast down or empty, it makes me look at what is happening around me and wonder if something good is going on. Something liberating, something revolutionary, something joyful that means change like the Kingdom of God is near. It makes me wonder if discomfort can signal God is at work in the world right now. And as for the those being displaced, the lofty who now feel lowly, hope is not lost for them. They are perhaps free for the first time to discover God has not forsaken them; God is with them. The promise of God is not the promise of punishment and violence, it is the promise of mercy, the promise of love. As Mary's song still testifies: God has not given up on us.

This is the promise we see in all the songs the women of the Bible sing about. And that is why when women of the Bible sing, empires break into a sweat and tremble at the threat of their decay. When women of the Bible sing, the past is remembered not with nostalgia but as times when God stepped in and saved God's people. When women of the Bible sing, the poor, the suffering, the lonely and the fallen hear the good news that God has not forgotten them and is with them and will lift them up. When women of the Bible sing, people find hope in difficult times. When women of the Bible sing, the Kingdom of God gets a little closer. When women of the Bible sing, there is joy and perhaps even the encouragement and strength we all need to carry on trusting God and growing closer to Jesus as we persevere in loving God and each other. All of this can happen when we listen to the women of the Bible sing.