

Rejoice in God's Blessings

Micah 5:2-5a

Luke 1: 39-55

Bloomfield Presbyterian Church on the Green

Fourth Sunday of Advent

December 23, 2012

Do you have a "celebration song"? When something good happens to you, what song comes to your mind? Your lips? What song wells up within you? What do you want to play really loud on your MP3 player or sing along with in your car?

Me? I have two celebration songs. One is the "Hallelujah Chorus." I find a parking place in a crowded mall the week before Christmas and I'm singing: "Hallelujah! Hallelujah!" You'll never guess what my other celebration song is, so I'll just have to tell you. It's "We Are Family," by Sister Sledge. The louder, the better.

What is yours? Is it one of the great hymns of the church? A Mighty Fortress is our God? Morning Has Broken? Amazing Grace? Or is it James Brown singing, "I Feel Good."? Or "We are the Champions" by Queen?

The Magnificat in today's Gospel reading was Mary's celebration song. When a very good thing happened to Mary, that is the song came to her lips.

*My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant...
The Mighty One has done great things for me.*

By the time Mary sang what we now call the Magnificat, it had already been around in the Israelite songbook, so to speak, for hundreds and hundreds of years. Before it became Mary's celebration song, it was Hannah's. Hundreds of years earlier, as recorded in 1 Samuel 2:1-10, Hannah sang the very same hymn when she learned that she was pregnant with the prophet Samuel.

The song doesn't say a word about being pregnant. But it does say a great deal about who God is and how God acts:

*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.*

Mary's particular way of being blessed fits in with the overall pattern of how God works. Likewise, our individual blessings are part of a larger pattern. They are part of the larger and longer story of how God acts in human history.

Just as the Lord's Prayer teaches us how to pray, I would say that the Magnificat teaches us how to praise. If you do not already know the passage by heart, I invite you

to try memorizing it. Post it on the front of your refrigerator. Internalize it. Carve it on the walls of your soul, as Mary did.

Using the Magnificat as our celebration song will help us to connect our personal experiences to history of God's mighty acts. It will help us to see the big picture and locate our own joyful experiences within it.

Imagine a giant mural being painted. The subject is God's mighty acts in history. There are various panels: God bringing down the powerful from their thrones and lifting up the lowly, God filling the hungry with good things and sending the rich away empty, God looking with favor on God's lowly servants and doing great things for them. Imagine that whenever the Mighty One does a Great Thing for you, it gets added to the mural.

We connect *our* story with *the* story. This saves us from selfishly focusing on what we can get from God for ourselves. And it redirects us to look for the ways that we are--each of us--blessed to be participating in God's transforming work in history.

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We *are* blessed to be participating in God's transforming work in history, but sometimes a blessing feels more like a burden. Mary's blessing from the Mighty One found her suddenly and, in the eyes of society, inexplicably pregnant. Poor and unmarried, she would have been the subject of social scorn, finger wagging, rumors, or worse.

Then there was that business of traveling to Bethlehem during her third trimester. Last I checked, cross-country donkey rides weren't recommended during the 36th week of pregnancy! As for giving birth in a stable, jeez, it's hard enough giving birth in a sanitary hospital room. (Am I right, fellow mothers?)

Later, when Herod went on a killing rampage, Mary and family self-deported to Egypt. And still later, when Jesus was grown and began his ministry, he attracted enemies as quickly as he did disciples. Within three short years he was executed on trumped up charges and crucified outside the city gates as a common criminal.

We *are* blessed to be participating in God's transforming work in history, but sometimes a blessing can be burdensome.

Like many of you, I have been thinking a great deal about school teachers this past week. The blessing of working with young children comes with the burden of the weight of responsibility for their wellbeing, as was made heartbreakingly clear at the Sandyhook Elementary School.

Last Sunday we elected new church officers scheduled to begin their service on Session and the Board of Deacons in 2013. Is church leadership a burden? Or a blessing? Or both?

Not long ago one of my friends remarried. It was interesting to attend a wedding planned carefully by a couple who, I would say, are in the "older and wiser" stage of life. They chose a Franciscan prayer that, if you haven't heard it before, will, I think, take your breath away:

May God bless you with discomfort at easy answer, half-truths, and superficial relationships so that you may live deep within your heart.

May God bless you with anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so that you may work for justice, freedom and peace.

May God bless you with tears to shed for those who suffer pain, rejection, hunger and war, so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and to turn their pain to joy.

And may God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you can make a difference in the world, so that you can do what others claim cannot be done--to bring justice and kindness to all our children and the poor. Amen.

Discomfort, anger, tears, foolishness. Pay attention to them, as to every other kind of blessing.

Discomfort, anger, tears, foolishness. Honor them, as signs that God has chosen you for a difficult piece of work. Praise God for them! Magnify the Mighty One who has done great things for you and now has great things for you to do.

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You know, the funny thing about God is, the cast of characters God chooses to work with. God chose Mary for the important and difficult work of bearing Christ into the world. We know almost nothing about her circumstances other than that she was young and unmarried. God chose shepherds as first witnesses, and let me tell you the perceived credibility of shepherds in those days was zilch. They were the riff raff.

When it comes to the giving out responsibilities, God is egalitarian, across the board. There is important work for all. ALL of us.

God calls us to continue Mary's work of bearing Christ into the world. We bring his name into the world. We tell his story. We sing his worth. We are his body, his hands and feet and eyes and heart. In his name we serve the poor, welcome the stranger, comfort the broken hearted and support the weak. In his name we contribute our resources. We let go of our hard earned money to pay for the ministry of the church which is his body. We share our time. We offer our talents.

We are no more or less deserving than the cast of characters God chose in the past, the characters who people the pages of our Bibles, whose imperfect lives nevertheless contributed to the mural of Great Things that the Mighty One has done.

To paraphrase the words of another familiar Christmas character, Tiny Tim, "God blesses us, every one!" God burdens us, every one.

God always has been, is still, and always will be, in the words of the Magnificat, scattering the proud in the thoughts of their hearts, bringing down the powerful from their thrones, lifting up the lowly, filling the hungry with good things and sending the rich away empty. The Mighty One has done, is doing, and will always be doing Great Things.

From Bethlehem--the "least" of the cities of Judah--came a Savior, Christ, the Prince of Peace & King of Kings. In a lowly cattle shed in royal David's city, Mary laid her baby. Her soul magnified the Lord and her spirit rejoiced in God her Savior, who looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant and made her the mother of our Lord.

Let us make Mary's song the celebration song of our hearts, now and in the years to come.

To the glory of God. Amen.

~Ruth L. Boling

