"Singing Mary's Song"
A sermon by the Rev. Susie Bjork
Bay Shore Community Congregational Church – December 24, 2023 – 9:30 AM
Fourth Sunday of Advent – Lesson: Luke 1:39-56

Creator God, today we celebrate the good news of your incarnate love – love that shone through the life of Jesus and is present with us is still. May your love animate us, inspire us, move and encourage us this day, as we seek to live into your call to share it abundantly. Amen.

Well, we're on the final stretch. It's almost Christmas Eve. Yes, I know it's today – but it's not *really* Christmas Eve until tonight because a funny thing happens to the liturgical calendar when December 24th falls on a Sunday – it shrinks the entire fourth week of Advent to just these few hours.

Don't worry – we are going ahead and celebrating Christmas this morning and we will be singing as many carols as we can in just a little bit. But, before we get there, I'd like to invite us to wait in anticipation with Mary for just a little while longer, as we reflect upon the song she sang during her pregnancy – those words of prophesy and praise that she offered as a testimony to the work God was doing in the world.

Even before Jesus is born, long before John the Baptist calls out to people from the banks of the Jordan River, Mary is the one who becomes the first preacher of the good news in Luke's gospel. Mary has said yes to the angel Gabriel; she has accepted this path of life and demonstrated her faithfulness and courage. And now she goes to visit her kinswoman Elizabeth where she is greeted enthusiastically with joy and blessing. Elizabeth already knows what's going on too. And apparently so does little John, still within her womb.

By the way, Elizabeth has always had my utmost respect. I imagine that being the mother of wild and passionate John the Baptist was not always an easy gig.

And so, in the company of Elizabeth, Mary offers this song of praise to God. We often hear it referred to it as the Magnificat because that is its first word in Latin: *Magnificat anima mea Dominum.*

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.

Still early in her pregnancy, Mary joyfully praises the saving work of God that is already underway. She proclaims that God is already taking an interest in those who are like her – the poor, those on the margins, those who are often ignored or exploited by those in power. That is who God has taken an interest in, says Mary, because God has favored her, chosen her.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

The good news that Mary proclaims is not to be left behind in the first century. Hers is good news that has echoed through the millennia and continues to speak to our generation and to future generations. God's grace and love was alive and active in Mary's life and God's grace and love is alive and active in our lives too.

He has shown strength with his arm; 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.

These are powerful and provocative statements. Like many of the prophets of Israel who had gone before her, Mary's prophetic words speak of an upheaval of the status quo and reordering of the world. She challenges those whose pride has isolated them and blinded them to the struggles of others. Part of the mercy of God, which Mary is bearing witness too, is this vision and pursuit of a more just society.

When the powerful are brought down from their places of power and the lowly are lifted up, the playing field becomes more level. When the hungry are fed and the rich are denied from amassing more riches at the expense of the poor, then there is actually plenty for everyone to have enough.

Mary was a peasant who knew what it was like to be poor and hungry. Mary also surely saw how the rich and powerful of her day exploited people like her and grabbed more for themselves. I think Mary believed that God wanted something better for this world, that God wanted something better for God's beloved children. And she proclaims that God has already been working toward this vision.

He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.

Indeed, God's work of loving compassion and justice began long ago. God's promises to our ancestors are being fulfilled, Mary proclaims. God was now writing the next chapter in and through Mary's life.

I think it is important to revisit Mary's Magnificat during Advent because her words serve as a sort of overture to the rest of the gospel story. As we know, these themes of mercy and justice will continue to play out in Luke's gospel through the life and ministry of Jesus. God's work was already underway and would continue to unfold. Mary's song sets the stage and underscores some of what we ought to pay attention to in the gospel.

And, of course, God's work of love is still unfolding. We are invited to sing Mary's song alongside her. We are invited to accompany Mary and Joseph on their journey to Bethlehem. We are invited to visit the new born babe in the manger with the shepherds. And we are invited to consider for ourselves how the good news of Christmas will help shape our living this year, in this time and place, in our generation.

How shall we sing Mary's song with her? How shall we honor God's call to us to participate in God's redemptive, restorative work in this world? What might this mean for you this year?

The heart of Christmas is the good news of incarnation. God is not out there somewhere beyond this world, outside of our lives, out of touch with our experience of reality. God is right here. God is with us. God is intimately present in the very fabric of creation. And God is radically invested in the flourishing of all of God's beloved creatures.

Every Christmas we intentionally welcome the presence of Christ into our lives once more. We welcome God's love. We welcome God's wisdom. We welcome God's Spirit in to move us, inspire

us, energize us, encourage us, comfort us, and challenge us. We welcome God's invitation to us to share in God's work of love in the world.

This is life-long work, of course. And God's incarnate love is here to stay, here to guide, here to enliven our work of love all year long.

I don't think I'm alone in admitting that there is a lot weighing on my soul right now – the violence and struggles in our world; the struggles and challenges of people I know and care about. It's times like these when we might especially need to be reminded that God is with us and that hope endures.

I love this reminder from poet Ann Weems:

The Christmas spirit is that hope
which tenaciously clings to the hearts of the faithful
and announces in the face of any Herod the world can produce
and all the inn doors slammed in our faces
and all the dark nights of our souls
that with God all things still are possible,
that even now unto us a Child is born.

Even now. Even here. God's love is being born anew. That's why we celebrate.

Like many people, I love Christmas movies. Every December I have to at least watch *Christmas Vacation, Elf, A Charlie Brown Christmas,* and *The Muppets' Christmas Carol* or my Advent and Christmas celebration aren't complete. And I often throw a few others in the mix as well.

One of the things I love about Christmas movies is that even many of the more secular stories contain elements of Christmas theology including themes of incarnation, redemption, and the transformative power of love.

Elf is a great example. Buddy (who is human, but who is also "more elf" than anyone else Santa knows) leaves the safe, magical world of the North Pole to journey to New York City where he encounters the ups and downs of every day human life. His reception is mixed. Some embrace him right away. Some find him a little odd (at least at first). But he is purely motivated by love and his mission is simply to find and create human connection, which he ultimately does.

Does this story sound familiar? Buddy and Jesus definitely have some things in common.

And Buddy's willingness to love changes things for the better. His father Walter (who was on the naughty list) is transformed and redeemed as he connects more deeply with his family and remembers what is most important in life. And all sorts of New Yorkers find their Christmas spirit again.

The message of *Elf* is that love changes lives.

This is true of *A Christmas Carol* too. People love a good redemption story and Scrooge's story is a classic. I especially love the Muppets' version (which stays very true to Dickens' original story, just with a few fun added characters). It especially focuses on how love changes hearts and minds. Just about every song in that movie comments on love.

Scrooge's story is of love that was lost and of love that is found anew. His life is ultimately transformed by love. His heart is softened and broken open to others and his eyes are opened to the needs around him. And he finds community that brings him out of isolation.

The ghosts of Christmas past, present, and future are his tour guides, of course. But it's the human characters that are most impactful on Scrooge's transformation. If he didn't get to know the Cratchit family on a deeper level, if his heart didn't break for Tiny Tim's suffering, there wouldn't be much of a story. Scrooge experiences compassion and that makes all the difference. He learns to love again. And he realizes that there is something he can do to make life better for other people. And, in doing so, he finds new meaning, new purpose, and a new sense of belonging.

If these examples piqued your interest, author John Zukowski wrote an entire book, *Christmas on the Screen*, in which he explores more Christmas movies than you probably knew existed through the lens of spirituality.

I think there is something innately human about this longing to experience transformative, incarnate love that breaks us open, brings us together, and can, if we let it, build a better world. This kind of love is what Mary's song is all about.

It's the incarnate love of God that still calls to us, still invites us to respond, and still urges us to join the chorus of angels, and of Mary, as we continue to lift our voices and sing this song of love into our world anew.

So, Merry Christmas!

And I'll leave you with a few words about Christmas that Scrooge learned from a cheerful Muppet chorus:

In all the places you find love,
it feels like Christmas

It is the season of the heart,
A special time of caring,
The ways of love made clear.

It is the season of the spirit,
And the message if we hear it,
Is make it last all year.

Amen.