

Psalm 80:1-7

Luke 1:39-55

When you think about the season of advent or Christmas, just around the corner, what comes to your mind first? Maybe there are some family traditions. Hanging up lights around the house, putting up the Christmas tree, baking.... cookies, pies, breads. Or getting the whole family together, given or chosen, and gathering for the Nativity Service, and a lovely lunch afterwards (maybe like some of you will do later this morning), or perhaps... it's the playing, listening, or singing, all of the music associated with this season...

Maybe you start playing some of that music, as soon as we hit November, or you can't STAND people who play them before Thanksgiving. Whatever the case, music certainly makes its mark during this time.

Music is all around us, it lives within us – it moves us, like the prayers held within our hearts, and the ones we share when we gather here. Music and prayer form our companions through the good times, the celebrations and milestones, and even the hard, difficult times, through a breakup, or low-valley. Music animates our lives, especially when we don't know what to say.

**Restore us, O God;
let your face shine, that we may be saved.**

In the psalm read for us this morning, the psalmist sings a song of lament. It's a prayer filled with longing – they're at a loss – God, please, where are you? Restore us? Save us? God, you've done it before, You guided Joseph, do it again and make things right!

In the opening pages of Luke's Gospel story, on the heels of the angel Gabriel's promise to Mary and his report of Elizabeth's miraculous pregnancy, Mary makes a choice. The text says, "*she went with haste.*" She wastes no time in thinking it through and heads off to visit with Elizabeth.

It's then, much like the beautiful artwork on the bulletin and our 4th Advent paper lace banner, we're given this lovely image of this encounter between the young Mary meeting the elder Elizabeth. And their meeting is unusual... a postmenopausal woman, and a middle-school-aged girl, both impossibly pregnant, two women filled with power in a world that grants them little of it, two women with little social status or economic might. And yet, they come together, and the babies inside them – John and Jesus – gladly respond to one another.

One commentator notes, "this dynamic—of deep kinship embodied in indispensable difference—is always present in the community of Jesus. This is powerfully exemplified in the bond between Elizabeth

and Mary. Both women bear in their bodies the children of promise, given wondrously by the Spirit; but they draw near to each other from different ends of more than one spectrum.”¹

In some ways their unusual gathering is much like what we mirror in our gathering together here this morning. Why does Mary go with haste to meet Elizabeth? Why do we gather as a community of faith?

Perhaps it’s for confirmation of the promise we’ve heard? Or the companionship with kindred hearts in tough times, or the exchange of wisdom for parched hearts, or the support and courage from others—that we gather together?

“In advent perspective, we see that, like Elizabeth and Mary, we stand between times, and like them, as different as we may be from each other, we are ‘**expecting**’ and rejoicing **together**.”²

Then there’s Mary’s song. After Elizabeth praises God for the promise that Mary carries within her, Mary sings the song on her lips. It’s a powerful song, that echoes the beating of her heart. It names the reversal that God brings with the advent of the Christ child. God’s promise of “scattering the proud, dethroning the powerful, and banishing the rich into emptiness.” She sings of a God who favors the lowly, and does great things for the broken-hearted, the vulnerable, the socially-excluded, the economically-deprived, the abused, and the oppressed. Mary’s song resonates a longing. It’s the same longing that fuels the psalmist to cry out:

**Restore us, O God;
let your face shine, that we may be saved.**

Mary’s song and the song of lament the psalmist sing, come from a deep well, not only of a people and their history, but of promises and truths that have been repeated, again and again, calling on God to do what God did in the past, and honoring what God is doing now. Maybe for some of us, it’s hard to see what God is doing now.

We live in difficult times. Last year at this time we held our drive-throughs on our campus here, and were preparing for our Christmas Eve walk-through. And while we are able to gather in-person, we still do so with caution because the pandemic hasn’t let up. This virus has attacked our colleagues, our friends, our loved ones and our neighbors. Our young people hear the news, of another school shooting, tornados rip through communities bringing death and destruction. It seems that our news cycles are filled with doom and gloom. It’s only natural that fear, worry, and anxiety creep into our consciousness.

In the midst of these realities, it can feel so hard to trust in God. But like Mary and Elizabeth coming together, we gather together as a community of faith, because we need God, and we need each other.

That’s what it means to be a Christian person. Christian faith isn’t learning how to navigate life perfectly. It’s to learn to rely on Jesus Christ and his body. It’s to learn that Christ’ **strength is made perfect in our weakness**. And ultimately, it’s to learn how to pray.

The psalmist turns to prayer. They plead with God to change the course their people's lives. Change our reality. Restore us, O God. **It’s a RADICAL prayer**. Not only do they hope and trust in God, but they PLEAD with God to change history.

¹ Connections Commentary.

² Connections Commentary.

In our modern world we tend to locate God as someplace else. And that makes it difficult to do this kind of pleading. **If God is distant and far off, how can God step into history and change things?** But the biblical understanding of God is that God is the source for everything. God isn't some distant God. God is in the midst of ALL life.

Our modern understanding of time is linear: there is a Past -- Present -- Future. But the ancient Hebrew understanding of time is circular; life goes in cycles where the people are always returning to God. And ultimately, this is where they find their hope because **God is in the midst of all of their lives.** Most of us today understand future as, what is to come – what lies before us. But the Hebrew people understood future as always behind them and their past as always before them.

In my Hebrew class in Seminary, we sang a song called, *Gol al Adonai*, based on Psalm 37:5, and translated the song says:

**“Roll your way onto the Lord,
and trust in him and he shall make your path.”**

We would get in line and sing the song while walking backwards on a circular path that someone was creating behind us with a roll of fabric. We couldn't see the path or where we were going, but we were trusting that the person was laying it down for us. Once we finished, looking back, we could see the path that had been laid down.

You see, the Hebrew people lived a culture of remembrance, with their eyes fixed on God, **remembering God's saving acts in their lives.**

This is what the psalmist is doing, *and another way*, Mary is doing too.

Their words echo a trust, that God is laying down the path before us, even when we might not see it, even when all we see is tears.

In the Word becoming flesh, in the vulnerability of a baby born in a feeding trough, God not only dwelled with us in our humanity, but God came into solidarity with our suffering, our pain, and our brokenness. And the good news, is Jesus invites us to claim the story of a loving God, who has conquered all pain, even death -- a God who redeems all things, a God who we can plead to, a God who draws near to the lowly, a God who we can trust... **This is our story.**

And yet, even in the knowledge of this good news, things aren't always easy. Things still may not turn out the way we wanted them to. But my roots in my church have not only taught me the power of unceasing prayer, but they've also illuminated to me the power of music. The gift of song, beat, and dance, that journey with us as a close companion, through struggle & pain, joy & sorrow, life & death. Music carries life-giving power; through whatever valleys we might be walking.

In this season of Advent, we wait and experience a deep longing... that echoes in the songs and prayers... we sing and pray. Like the psalmist and a young girl carrying the weight of the promise. In eager expectation, we wait, saying Come, Lord, Jesus, while acknowledging that our whole lives are a season of Advent.

Waiting for the new heaven, and new earth.

Waiting for all pain and brokenness to be made whole.

Waiting for justice and righteousness, to flow like an ever-flowing stream.

Waiting and acting with haste, drawing near to one another, and to the lowly in our midst,
praying unceasingly, showing compassion, seeking justice, loving one another, and trusting
in God.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.