

A Sermon How does a weary world rejoice?
We sing stories of Hope!
Preached at Plymouth Presbyterian Church
St Helens, Oregon
Luke 1:46-55 and 1:67-80
By Rev. Peter J. Blank

Do you have a favorite song? I have to say, I marvel at people who have one favorite song because I can never choose just one! I have favorites for different times and purposes and seasons. I remember in the Catholic church listening to “Ave Maria” from the church balcony. And I listened to “You’ve Got a Friend” by Carol King on the radio. My Pandora tells me year after year that I listen to more Pentatonix than anything else, and every year, I am not surprised. And while I do love Pentatonix, they only hold part of my music-loving heart. There are other songs that dwell deep inside who I am—the songs that shaped and formed me into the person I am today. There’s contemporary Christian music from my youth at a local church, classic hymns that I somehow also picked up in childhood, and songs of the Civil Rights movement that I did not learn until much, much later but still wove their way into my soul.

I’m curious—what are the earliest songs that you remember?

- Who sang them to you?
- Were they lullabies from your parents at bedtime, or songs in Sunday School, or an album your family listened to at home?
- What did those songs make you feel? Did they make you feel safe or loved? Like you belonged because you knew the special version that your family sang?
- Did the song make you happy? Did it make you laugh?

How does it feel to remember it now? Is it bittersweet to remember a time when life was simple? Does it make you smile to remember the people you loved that made that song special to you? Are you thinking about several different songs as the memories flood through you? I certainly am.

Music has power—there’s no denying it. We sing for so many reasons, don’t we? We sing lullabies to babies and young children. We sing fight songs and school anthems at sporting events. We sing the National Anthem at public gatherings. We sing Christmas carols on our neighbors’ doorsteps. We sing protest songs, silly songs, and worship songs. Sometimes, we sing because, somehow, putting our words to music changes what we are able to say. Sometimes, the poetry of song captures the truth in our hearts in ways that prose simply can’t.

Scripture References: Songs in the Bible

Zechariah and Mary could think of no better way to respond to what God has done for them than to sing. As faithful Jews who knew the scriptures well, the language of the Old Testament is all over their songs. Zechariah’s song, found in **Luke 1:67-79**, is a blessing and benediction to his newborn son. “And you, my child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways.” In it, he harkens back to the last book of the Old Testament, Malachi, which ends with one final prophecy: “Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of parents to their

children and the hearts of children to their parents...” (**Malachi 4:5-6**). Zechariah is saying that John will be this new Elijah to prepare the way of the Lord. What an answer to the question of his friends and family: “What, then, will this child become?”

And then, there is Mary’s song, the Magnificat, found in **Luke 1:46-55**, which echoes loudly with the song I bet she knew by heart—Hannah’s song in **1 Samuel 2:1-10**. Mary’s song is a radical declaration of God’s desire to make the world right: “God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.” Her words are not just personal—they are prophetic, speaking to the transformation God is bringing into the world through Jesus.

Music Shapes Our Theology and Lives

I wonder, what tune do you imagine went with Mary’s song?

- Was it a personal prayer, like the Cantic of Turning?
- Or was it a chant, sung in a protest rally, proclaiming justice?
- Perhaps it was a lullaby she hummed to her child, Jesus, as she rocked him to sleep.

This is Jesus’ mother we’re talking about, after all—the woman who raised him and shaped his theology. The mystery of the incarnation tells us that Jesus was fully human, which means he learned and was shaped by the people around him. I wonder if Mary’s song was so deeply ingrained in him that it shaped his ministry—a ministry of lifting up the lowly, feeding the hungry, and proclaiming good news to the poor (**Luke 4:18-19**).

There is Power in Singing Together

Music is powerful, and it’s not just my opinion. Research shows that singing together reduces stress hormones, stimulates memory, and can even ease postpartum depression. Paul and Silas sang hymns in prison, uniting their spirits and proclaiming God’s presence even in chains (**Acts 16:25**). We have numerous stories of singing in cotton fields, singing in prison camps. Singing together changes us—literally, spiritually, and communally.

Why is church special? Why does this community feel different from the other important social groups we belong to? Perhaps it’s because we sing together. Every week, we sing both new and familiar songs. The words of the Gloria Patri or “Shine, Jesus Shine” are ingrained in us. This practice of singing forms us into the community we are. One of the things we most look forward to at Christmas is the music. Yes, you can sing Silent Night at home, but there is holy magic in singing it together in this space like we’ll do on Christmas Eve.

Application: Why Do You Sing?

Perhaps you thought of the great hymn, ‘His Eye Is on the Sparrow,’ made famous by Mahalia Jackson: “I sing because I’m happy, I sing because I’m free. His eye is on the sparrow, and I know he watches me.” Why do you sing? Do you sing because you are joyful, or because you are trying to find your way back to joy? Both are possible. Some days, we sing because we believe, and other days, we sing because we long to believe again.

This week, reflect on the songs that have shaped your faith. Share them with someone you love. Join us in singing today and every Sunday. And as we sing, may the music remind us that we are

not alone. From Zechariah and Mary to the people who formed us in song and spirit, we sing songs of hope together. Let us lift our voices in joy, in longing, and in faith. Amen.

AFFIRMATION OF FAITH ⁺⁺

We believe that hope can change the world.
We believe that God uses ordinary people,
like an unwed teenage mother,
for extraordinary good.

And we believe that each of these ordinary people
can make a difference.

We know that grief, fear, and suffering abound.
We know that suffering quells joy and makes it harder to hope.
But we choose hope anyway.

In the face of hardship, we hope together.
We hope with God.
We hope for a better world.

This is our song.
With God's help, we bring love into
a weary world.