

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

December 22, 2024 (4th Sunday in Advent, Year C)
Luke 1:39-55

There is something about a song.

There's a song that I used to sing to my wife, Wendy, when I was courting her. That's how I got such a beautiful girl to FALL for a big lug like me, you know. I held her in my arms as I sang to her.

After Wendy's brain surgery, something changed, though. I would stay with her in the hospital all day, and then drive back to the place I was staying for the night. Somehow, in that 20-minute drive, our song would come on the radio EVERY night, and this went on for WEEKS. I would listen to it, and think about texting her right before she went to sleep, about calling our kids each night before they went to bed, about sleeping WITHOUT her, about the time apart.

It's called Faithfully, by Journey: Listen to the words of the first verse and see if you can spot why I connected with it in that time.

Highway run into the midnight sun
Wheels go round and round, you're on my mind
Restless hearts sleep alone tonight
Sending all my love along the wire
They say that the road ain't no place to start a family
Right down the line it's been you and me
And lovin' a music man ain't always what it's supposed to be
Oh, girl, you stand by me
I'm forever yours, faithfully

I would sing along with those words as I drove, and hope for the best, because I couldn't SEE ANYTHING through the tears. As the kids say these days, "it had ALL the FEELS." The MEANING of the song had CHANGED for us, but it was the SAME SONG. Somehow that song RELEASED all the pain I'd been holding in, and I wept, and I found comfort. There's something ABOUT a song.

Flash forward to this week. Last night, we gathered for the Longest Night Service. It's a Blue Christmas Service for those who are hurting in this season, for those that are grieving. That night, as we do every year, we gathered here for prayer in darkness, with just candlelight. And we sang Silent Night, but for THOSE folks, the song meant something DIFFERENT. Think of THEM as we sing it now:

Silent night, holy night
All is calm, all is bright
Round yon Virgin Mother and Child
Holy Infant so tender and mild
Sleep in heavenly peace
Sleep in heavenly peace

There it is – Peace. We sing it, and it comes over us.

There is something about a song. It expresses emotions that we can't PUT into words. It grabs our attention like nothing ELSE CAN, and speaks right to our hearts. Heavenly peace.

I was at a concert recently by a Contemporary Christian singer named Matt Maher. He said something that has stuck with me. He said that we can believe something in our head, and we can

believe something in our heart, but they may not be the SAME THING. Sometimes they're disconnected. And a SONG is the best way to RE-connect them.

That's what happens at CHRISTMAS – we RECONNECT our heart and our head. There's just something about a song.

NO SEASON of the year SINGS as WELL as Christmas. This is true whether you're a saint or a sinner. The world around us has songs for patriotic days or other occasions, but only at the season of CHRISTMAS does the MAJORITY of the population SING, or LISTEN to the singing of others.

This isn't surprising really, because Christmas was BORN in the MIDST of song. Have you ever noticed the number of songs that are in the first few chapters of the Gospel of Luke? You can't read those chapters without seeing words in VERSE, again and again. The words delivered by Gabriel to Mary, by Mary to Elizabeth, by Zechariah when John is born, by the angels when they share their "good news of great joy" with the shepherds, and by Simeon in the temple, they were ALL SUNG. They were TOO jubilant to be merely spoken.

There's just something ABOUT a song. It's what our SOUL does when it encounters something BIGGER than us, something overwhelming, something HOLY, and our cup overflows.

Look at Mary. With the words of Gabriel still ringing in her ears, Mary set out with haste, it says, to see Elizabeth. Mary had a song in her heart, and she was going to BURST if she didn't SHARE it with someone. That's why Gabriel TOLD Mary about Elizabeth, so she'd have SOMEONE to share her miracle WITH. Elizabeth, who'd received a miracle too, would rejoice WITH her. But Mary had to HURRY, because she couldn't keep it to herself long.

And when she arrives, barely does she set foot in the door, and her song comes spilling out. She sings of the wonder of what God has done for her and through her.

And then she sings something unexpected. Listen to her words:

His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.
He ... 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.

Now do those sound like the words of a 13-year-old peasant girl? No. God had GIVEN her that song, a song that SINGS God's WILL for the world, what God's KINGDOM in all its GLORY LOOKS like. The promises of vindication and justice she sings have stirred the imaginations of hymn writers for 2000 years. There are COUNTLESS arrangements of the Magnificat.

She COULD have just SPOKEN the words, but when you encounter something holy and your cup overflows, your SOUL sings.

And then, something WONDROUS happens. The song spreads. Songs are contagious. Have you noticed this?

It's a remarkable thing. My wife will hear a song on the radio and wake up the NEXT MORNING STILL singing it, then as I walk to the kitchen I find MYSELF singing it too. I hear someone singing a song around HERE, and it gets stuck in my head for hours.

There's something ABOUT a song. It's MORE than the WORDS. It's more than the notes on the page; it's more than the combination of voices and instruments; it's MORE than the SUM of its parts. It's GREATER than that; it's a GIFT from GOD. A song is a vision. It captures our imagination. It draws us in. Something deep inside us stirs, and we CATCH the vision. It speaks to us in ways words ALONE could NEVER do. And the song BECOMES OUR song.

Something even GREATER happens in MARY'S song. Today, in spite of everything I have seen, in spite of tragedy, in spite of hardship, in spite of all the cynicism, when I hear and sing Mary's song, I believe.

I believe in Christmas. I believe in God's good news.

I believe that God brings hope in the midst of despair and healing in the midst of hurt.

I believe that God brings peace in the midst of strife and comfort in the midst of grief.

I believe that God brings companionship to the lonely and family to the forgotten.

I believe that God brings power to the weak and justice for the oppressed.

And most of all, I believe that God brings new life in the MIDST of death.

This isn't just Mary's song; this is OUR song. This is OUR HOPE. This is our VISION as Christians.

And this is the TRUE MEANING and purpose of CHRISTMAS. It's why we're HERE. It's no WONDER Elizabeth's baby leapt for joy in the womb.

It's a song of hope. And it's the KIND of song that calls you to JOIN in.

GOD'S song is being sung in YOU now. God's Spirit SINGS it to your heart all the day long.

That's what happened to Mary in our reading today. And if you LET it, that's what happens to YOU when YOU sing.

This Christmas, pay attention to what your HEART is TELLING you when you sing the songs. Nothing HEALS your SOUL like a song. Amen.