

“Let it Be”
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
Luke 1:26-55
December 18, 2016
Fourth Sunday of Advent

I know that some people have been taking a hiatus from the news for the past six weeks. But there is no tuning out the cries of the children of Syria. The world has watched in horror — and then more horror; and even more — as the regime of President Bashar al-Assad has unleashed wave after wave of violence upon the people of Syria over the past five years. Hundreds of thousands have died in that time, and the focus in recent months has been upon the city of Aleppo, where rebel holdouts have lost control as the government has tightened its grip, killing innocent people and bombing the city relentlessly. On Friday, the most recent attempt to evacuate residents from the last rebel-held section of Aleppo broke down, with thousands of people still trapped inside. There were reports that a convoy of a thousand evacuees were stopped by a pro-government militia. The gunmen shot several passengers, and then sent the rest back into the city.

“Aleppo is now a synonym for hell.” So said United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon.

Through each of the first three weeks of Advent, we have subtly talked about a drumbeat. On the First Sunday, we heard the story of Daniel and the lion’s den, and how it was resistance literature against an oppressive empire, and how the “drumbeat of incarnation” was beginning to be heard in the shadows, and the Cagle family drummed us through our second hymn, “My Soul in Stillness Waits.” On the Second Sunday, we heard the *rat-a-tat-tat* of a snare drum in a small village in Germany, and we heard it calling us to return to God with our whole hearts torn open. And on the Third Sunday, we heard *pa-rum pum pum pums*, as we pondered how to respond to the glory of God, deciding that we are delivered for deliverance, saved for salvation, resurrected for resurrection work, and given life in order to give life.

And here on the Fourth Sunday, joining the drumbeat of incarnation and return and life and God’s big move in history, we hear the constant percussion of artillery tanks breaking a cease fire. Who dares to try to speak a hopeful word today? Who can see light amid such destruction?

Let’s turn to some who have seen the worst of what humanity has wrought. The Reverend Dietrich Bonhoeffer was part of the resistance to the Nazi regime in Germany. He was killed in the Flossenburg concentration camp just two weeks before it was liberated by American forces in April of 1945. In 1933, Bonhoeffer wrote in an Advent sermon:

“The song of Mary is the oldest Advent hymn. It is at once the most passionate, the wildest, one might even say the most revolutionary Advent hymn ever sung. This is not the gentle, tender, dreamy Mary whom we sometimes see in paintings... This song has none of the sweet, nostalgic, or even playful tones of some of our Christmas carols. It is instead a hard, strong, inexorable song about the power of God and the powerlessness of humankind.”

It wasn't only during the rise of the Third Reich and from the position of lowliness that the power of Mary's song has been noticed. The Christian churches of India were banned from singing it during the days of British colonization. The military junta of Argentina during the "Dirty War" of the 70s and 80s, found that the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo — a group of moms whose children were "disappeared" by the state — were displaying the words of Mary's song on posters. So the government banned any public display of the Magnificat. In the 1980s, Mary's song was banned by the Guatemalan government, as they saw that it was stirring up the poor.

When the boot of empire has been on the neck of the lowly, Christians have looked to Mary. Mary, whom the Angel approached with such reverence, courting her to be a conspirator with God. Mary, full of grace...and courage and strength. Mary, startled by the angel, and perplexed and willing to challenge a holy messenger for an explanation. Mary, whose presence causes John the Baptist to leap in his mother's womb. Mary, who hears God's plan and says "Here am I...let it be."

Mary, whose song is a manifesto fearlessly delivered in the home of a temple priest. She is not shy in proclaiming that she believes God has a new song for the world and that she has been summoned to be its lyricist. God will turn things upside-down, and it will start with a young woman in the middle of nowhere. For nine months, she will carry a child in a world hostile to health and birth and precarious life. That child will be born, and the heavens and some shepherds will rejoice, but the world will, by and large, not notice yet. This child will proclaim a new realm, a new peace, a new hope. And the powerful will demand that he stop stirring up the lowly. He will be executed by men filled with fear. They will barely notice when his followers are stirred up again on the third day. But these fearful men would be footnotes to history but for their connection to the son of Mary.

I don't know what Mary thought would happen to her child, but she could have been excused for being terrified. Just getting by was hard for her people under Roman occupation. What a world to bring a child into! If she had any inkling that he would challenge the status quo, she surely knew that his fate would be hell for her. And yet: "Let it be." She saw beyond Nazareth and beyond the adventure of nine months of pregnancy and beyond a countryside childhood and beyond whatever trouble might be ahead. She saw God pouring out the Spirit with favor for the lowly, to bring comfort to the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable and to change the world, though the world would resist with all its supposed might.

In that same Advent sermon from 1933, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote: "For those who are great and powerful in this world, there are two places where their courage fails them, which terrify them to the very depths of their souls, and which they dearly avoid. These are the manger and the cross of Jesus Christ. No one who holds power dares to come near the manger; King Herod also did not dare. For here thrones begin to sway, the powerful fall down, and those who are high are brought low, because God is here with the lowly. Here the rich come to naught, because God is here with the poor and those who hunger. God gives the hungry plenty to eat, but sends the rich and well-satisfied away empty. Before the maidservant Mary, before Christ's manger, before God among the lowly, the strong find themselves falling; here they have no rights, no hope, but instead find judgment. And even if today they think nothing will happen to them, it will come tomorrow or the next day. God puts down the tyrants from their thrones; God raises up the lowly. For this Jesus Christ came into the world as the child in the manger, as the son of Mary."

Seven decades after Bonhoeffer's death, we are weary and we struggle to hear Mary's song, and the songs of the angels. Yet they bring us light. Just yesterday I read in the *New York Times* about ten-year-old Bayan, a Syrian refugee living in Toronto. This child and her three siblings and very conservative Muslim parents were welcomed into Canada just over a year ago. They were met with a cadre of volunteers — teachers, pediatricians, and others — seeking to help them settle and acclimate while holding on to their Syrian culture as much as possible. In fact, the article was mainly about the struggle within the family as little Bayan states, "I just want to be Canadian" while her parents seek to instill in her their faith, values, and memories of home. In the end, of course, Bayan mostly gets to do what she wants. I think this is what happens when people have seen a light shine in the darkness and are fortunate enough to have watched the darkness not overcome it.

Canada's government can barely keep up with the requests from sponsors seeking to adopt refugee families. These are people who have said: "I cannot stop war. I cannot stop atrocities. But I can help. I can make a difference. I can change the world — the future! — for a young girl and her siblings. I can bear goodness into the chaos. Let it be."

We have just six days until we fill this sanctuary with light. Six days until the organ gives fanfare. Six days until the choir breaks open our hearts. Six days until the handbell choir gives a few hundred angels their wings. Six days until we light candles and turn down the lights and sing an Austrian hymn first sung in 1818, accompanied by the guitar. Six days until we declare joy and peace to all.

In this week, may we seek to hear the song of Mary. You have to listen really hard, because the melody is way *up here* and the words are echoing through a pair of violent and chaotic millennia. But it is there, I promise. Listen, and when you find it, let it into your bones. And let your response to the Word of God be, forever: Let it be. Amen.