

Feast of St. Mary the Virgin
08/14/11
All Saints Episcopal Church

During the summer before I started 7th grade, my family and I moved to Nashville. This was the fifth move in my lifetime and I was not happy with the turn of events. I moped, I cried, I grumbled around a lot. It was not pretty. After a lot of attempts by my parents to make me feel better, my mother took me to see "My Fair Lady" at the local movie theater to cheer me up. I had never seen a big movie musical before and it didn't take long before I was hooked. I couldn't get enough of them - West Side Story, Music Man, The Sound of Music, Funny Girl - I loved them all! My brother called me whatever the then-current word for NERD was. While I was listening to "old people" music, he was listening to Led Zeppelin, Pink Floyd and other bands I can't name now.

But I totally got the point of musicals in general. When Eliza Doolittle got home from the ball, she couldn't go to sleep - she HAD to sing about how she could've danced all night. When Tony and Maria were being kept apart despite their love for each other, singing that there was a place for them somewhere conveyed all the hope they had for a chance to be together. Whenever something great happens or even something really sad, spoken words just aren't enough - you have to sing in order to express yourself adequately.

A West African bishop wrote, "one who does not sing or does not react to singing by dancing or clapping the hands or by nodding the head in rhythm is [assumed] to be dead." There is a proverb which says "take the song from the heart of anyone and that person dies." Even St. Augustine gets into the act by writing that "one who sings, prays twice." It is why we fill our service with not only the spoken word, but the sung word as well, using hymns and parts of the service such as "glory to God in the highest," the Psalm, and "holy, holy, holy, Lord God of hosts."

I mention all of this because today we celebrate the Feast of St. Mary the Virgin, transferred from tomorrow, the 15th. And it is literally her song - the Magnificat - that we are singing and saying and hearing in one form or another today. The Magnificat: "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord - for the Almighty has done great things for me and holy in his name." While we mention Mary often, especially in the Eucharistic Prayers, we don't really talk about her except on this

feast day, so this is our chance to understand more about Mary and, in particular, her song.

What the Bible tells us about Mary can fit in just a few sentences. But, according to Barbara Crafton, "the list of factoids about Jesus' mother is a long one. Not all of them became important feasts of the church year, like this one, but each had its adherents -- born without the stain of original sin that besmirches the rest of us, dying outside of our normal rhythm of life and the decaying return of life to the earth. She vowed perpetual virginity at the age of three, some have believed, and lived in the temple at Jerusalem after that, until her engagement to Joseph -- you can find a depiction of her toddling up the temple steps in a pulpit frieze at Chartres. Several places vie for the honor of having been her final residence -- Ephesus, Jerusalem, the island of Patmos, the summits of both Mt. Sinai and Mt. Olivet -- and her travel schedule since her death has been rigorous, taking her from Fatima to Guadeloupe to Medjugorje to Lourdes and many, many other places (including, apparently, on grilled cheese sandwiches, telephone pole vegetation, and on walls, doors and potato chips). Most of these personal appearances have been either to children or to poor people. I guess the more established among us are too busy."

But let's go back to today's reading. In Mary's song, the magnificent Magnificat, she tells of her Savior who has "looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant." Lowliness. The Greek behind our English word is not talking simply about humility, but about poverty. Mary is poor -- dirt poor. She is poor and pregnant and unmarried. She is in a mess. But she sings! Why? Because Luke knows -- from the vantage of hindsight -- that this lowly one, this one not considered as anything more than property, this woman is raised up by God. Mary, shamed and rejected, is favored by God and will bring the Messiah to birth. And so, she sings.

What is more, Mary sings not just a solo about her own destiny, but a freedom song on behalf of all the faithful poor in the land. She sings a song of freedom for all who, in their poverty and their rejection, still believe that God will make a way where there is no way. Like John the Baptist, Mary prophesies deliverance; she prophesies about a way that is coming in the wilderness of injustice. She sings of a God who "has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts"; who "has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly"; who "has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty." She exults in the

God of Abraham; she exalts the God of Jesus Christ. Here at the beginning, Mary rejoices in God's destiny -- for her, and for a world turned upside down.

Mary's song is a prophetic one about how God will level the playing field between the rich and poor, the proud and the humble, the hungry and the satisfied. Instead of the traditionally-emphasized meekness and submission by Mary (read: doing what all women are expected to do), it is the no of her message that is most important. NO to the rich, NO to the proud, NO to the haughty, NO to thrones, NO to lowliness. Her song is a song of freedom and hope and deliverance for herself, for the poor of her land, and for the poor of the whole world.

This should make most of us a little uncomfortable. Since we are rich by the world's standards, Mary's song can stick in our throats. We are not in a very good position to sing with Mary. But Mary just keeps singing anyway, soaring in her expectant and revolutionary lyrics, because God has reached out so unexpectedly to where the least and the lowly still struggle for life.

And, there is hope -- even for the likes of us. Our call is to embrace this reversal of the ways of the world, to help bring about God's leveling of the inequities of human existence, to oppose oppression and marginalization. And let me say that, despite what some people may think, how we make it happen may be up for grabs, but as Christians, whether we participate or not is beyond dispute. There is no doubt that God's kingdom is realized by the subversion of our ordinary ways of doing things social, economic and political.

But don't be anxious. This subversion does not mean turning the downtrodden into the oppressors. The idea is to make us all whole in God's world. That can be applied to anyone who is marginalized by society, by culture, or even by the church. This leveling out of the powerful and the non-powerful will bring freedom and hope to victims of racial, gender or sexual orientation discrimination. It will bring hope and freedom to someone in a wheelchair or a nursing home, or in the midst of grief or loss, or to those suffering from barrenness of body or of soul. It will bring the message of freedom and hope to those whose worth has been judged by those who demand conformity to certain beliefs, conformity to certain definitions of truth, conformity to certain paths to salvation.

I don't know how many of you have read the book, [The Help](#), or have seen the movie just released that is based on the book - quite a number of you I suspect. For

those of you who have done neither, it is the story of several women in the South of the early 1960s. One of the main characters is Skeeter, who has just graduated from college and wants to become a journalist. She is white and privileged. On her return home from school, she becomes aware of her friends, also white and privileged, and who almost all left school early in order to get married and start having babies, and their relationships with the 'help' - the black women who work for them. Skeeter sees that the way the women are treated is not right. So she decides that she wants to write a book about these relationships from the point of view of the 'help.' She asks Aibileene, one of the maids, if she would help by telling her story.

This is no small request. In those days, such a thing could lead to Aibileene losing her job, going to jail, or even being killed. So she says no immediately. The request sticks in her mind, however, and one Sunday morning, sitting in her church, the preacher begins to preach about courage. He says, "Courage isn't just about being brave. It's about overcoming fear and daring to do what's right for your fellow man." After that, Aibileene tells Skeeter that she will help her with the book. When Skeeter asks her what made her change her mind, she says, "God."

I'd like to think that that preacher might have had not only God in him but Mary's song as well - a song that the whole world longs to hear.

So sing it again, Mary. Sing to us of your God. Sing on, till your song at last becomes ours. Sing, till all the world hears you and makes your lines its own. And may we join you and your Son and the whole company of heaven in singing, "Glory to God in the highest!" AMEN.