

Sermon – Luke 1:39-55
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Grace Lutheran Church
4 Advent – Year C
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“A Song Sung Upside Down”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. My car radio has been dialed to 93.9 for weeks now. Each trip I take is accompanied by wall-to-wall Christmas music. I enjoy traditional hymns the most, even though they'll sound better next week in this room than they ever do on the radio (and goodness, am I looking forward to being together with y'all at Grace for Christmas this year). I like a lot of the secular tunes, too. I have nothing against songs about Santa, who isn't as secular as they might think, and I'm fairly certain I'm on his nice list. But my favorite subgenre of Christmas music is British pop. My childhood was pocked with such offerings, from McCartney's "Wonderful Christmastime" to Wham!'s "Last Christmas." And when Bowie sings with Bing? Pure magic. Preceding these hits, however, was John and Yoko's "Happy Xmas (War is Over)." It's a simple enough song, a lovely ballad in 6/8 time that, if it went a second past three and a half minutes would probably become unbearable. As it is, I quite like it. So, I was shocked to run across a diatribe against Lennon's song on the internet the other week. The author, whose heart is probably two sizes too small, thought the song treacly, its music simplistic and its message more so. But what the columnist really disliked was Lennon's choice of verb tense. *War is over?* What were John and Yoko playing at? Of course, war wasn't over, certainly not in Viet Nam, where war continued to rage when this song was released in 1971. Couldn't they see the broken, violent world for what it is? Did they really think a Christmas song could make things better?

2. If this denizen of the web disliked Lennon and Ono's "Happy Xmas," they would have really hated Mary's Magnificat. What in the world does Mary think she's singing about? Having travelled sixty or so miles to see her older relative Elizabeth in the Judean hill country, Mary bursts into song. And by the way, we often talk about the journey Mary made with Joseph from Nazareth to Bethlehem to be taxed and give birth, but pregnant Mary made this first trip on her own. Lutherans don't need to venerate Mary to acknowledge that she was one impressive, and impressively faithful, teenager. Anyway, Elizabeth sees that Mary has changed. Her young cousin is now also somehow the mother of the Lord. John leaps in the womb in the presence of Messiah. And in response, Mary sings. Oddly, she does not sing about what's going to happen, or even about what's happening now. She sings about what has taken place. What God has done. Listen: God looked, did, showed, scattered, brought down, lifted up, filled, sent, and helped. Our translation, like many in contemporary English, renders these verbs in the perfect tense, which conveys past actions continuing into the present: "has shown," "has scattered," and so on. But in the Greek, Mary's sung verbs are all aorist. Past tense. Completed. Done deals. Mary, pregnant with the Savior of the world, sings about what God has already done, all evidence seemingly to the contrary.

3. This, no doubt, would have driven Jerusalem's music critics mad. God *fed* the hungry and *sent* off the rich? God *threw* down tyrants and *lifted up* the lowly? Does Mary not have access to the local news? Is she unaware of the suffering all around her, ignorant of Rome's continued tyranny? Certainly, what Mary sings about has not yet taken place. Her song, however, is not simply prophetic; it is proleptic. Her song casts a vision of a better future, then draws that future into the past so that we can live in the present presence of the God who will do, and therefore has done, these things. As one preacher put it, this "paradox of the Magnificat is the paradox of our faith. This is the

- ‘already’ and ‘not yet’ of biblical eschatology. Already the reign of God has arrived, but when we look around at the world we plead that God’s reign might yet come.”
4. What will this reign look like when Mary’s child is crowned our King? Listen to the mother’s song, which is less lullaby and more protest anthem: the proud, powerful, and rich are scattered and sent off; the lowly and hungry are lifted and filled. Empires are overturned for the sake of the oppressed, the hungry poor who will be fully fed in the Kingdom of God. Mary sings of a full reversal, an upside-downing that will happen when the already begun reign of God finally begins. All who suffer yearn for this future and so find hope in the song; as Mary sings, this future is so certain that it is already accomplished.
 5. But how? In this world where tornados whirl and wars rage, where dementia and cancer prey upon our loved ones, how is Christ already at work? After all, Christmas will come and go in a week and not much will change. Happy Christmas, sure, but our war with sin and suffering will not be over. Our reading from Hebrews proclaims that Christ did not simply come into this world, but that he did so to offer his life for our sanctification. The coming of Christmas is only the beginning of God’s action in Christ. The child in Mary’s womb will also be our Savior in the tomb. This Jesus will go to Calvary’s cross. This Jesus will so identify with this world and its suffering that he will let it overwhelm him in order to save us. Christmas, joyous as it is, never saved anyone. But the Incarnation of the eternal Word begins this world’s redemption. Bethlehem is tied to Calvary, the simple wood of the manger that bore baby Jesus is not so different from the rough wood that would bear his broken body.
 6. Stacey Nalean-Carlson, a Lutheran pastor in Decorah, Iowa, tells of a time when she staged a short play as part of a Christmas Eve service. Rather than

doubling down on the familiar elements of the Christmas story, the play moved back and forth in time between Mary overcome with joy at the birth of Jesus and Mary weeping at the foot of the cross. Standing in the handshake line after worship, Pr. Nalean-Carlson was confronted by a woman who told her that she had ruined her Christmas. Apparently contemplating the cross at Christmas was just too much. But as our children proclaim each Christmas Eve at Grace, Christmas *is* cruciform. It is the beginning of the story that drives us to the cross and carries us all the way through death to the new life in which tyranny and hunger are overthrown and pride and power are cast down.

7. Mary sings to us a song of hope. It is a song sure and certain, calling us to trust in the promises. Trusting, we can also join the song now, helping bring the new world to birth today. Yesterday, about twenty members of Grace gathered in downtown Oak Park to sing Christmas carols. We sounded pretty good, of course; we are members of Grace, after all. But we hadn't rehearsed. We weren't perfect. But God doesn't need us to sing the new song perfectly; God simply desires us to sing. Mary's words in the hill country still echo today, calling us to work for justice, to resist oppression, to feed the hungry, to comfort those brought low by this life. We do this work, sing this song, knowing that it is not for us to complete. Indeed, in the mystery of God's grace, it is all already accomplished. Merry Christmas, friends. Sin is over. Suffering is over. Death is over. The life that grew within Mary has, like her song, burst forth upon this world. Living in the reign of Christ, we cry out, "Come, Lord Jesus!" Amen.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.