

Advent 4B (Christmas Eve) 24 December 2023

Luke 1:46-55

St Peter's Lutheran Church, Elizabeth

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Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

*And Mary [sang], "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour;"* Let's pray: ...

We're blessed in this country to dwell alongside an ancient people and their culture; people from whom we can learn a great deal about our own spirituality – the Australian aborigines. They can help to open the ear of our heart to hear our holy scriptures in a new way. They offer us a way of connecting our inner world with the world around us. They show us a sacred way of navigating life. How?

Some of you may be familiar with songlines. Songlines are an integral part of aboriginal life. The aborigines tell a creation story in which creation ancestors wandered the continent singing out the name of everything that crossed their path – birds, animals, plants, rocks, caves, waterholes – thereby singing the world and all of creation into existence. It's akin to Adam naming the animals (Genesis 2:19-20). These paths that their ancestors charted are called songlines.

Their songlines form a web over aboriginal Australia. By singing the songline one can navigate the land and traverse long distances because the sung word corresponds to a particular feature or landmark. Songlines are routes through sacred time and space and the means by which the people locate themselves, orient their lives, and navigate the continent.

Another songline I've learnt about comes from my curiosity concerning a pastel drawing Kathy and I bought in South Africa 28 years ago. It features a Himba woman and her child. The Himba live in northern Namibia. It's the custom of the Himba tribe that when a woman decides to have a child, she goes and sits alone under a tree, and she listens. She listens until she hears the song of the child who wants to come.

Once she hears the song, she returns to the man who will be the child's father and teaches the song to him. When they join to conceive the child, they sing the song to call the child to them.

When the woman is pregnant, she teaches the child's song to the midwives and old women of the village so that when the birth time arrives, the people surrounding the mother sing the song to welcome the child among them.

Then as the child grows up, the other villagers learn the song. If the child falls or hurts his knee someone picks him up and sings the song. When the child does something wonderful, the people of the village sing this song. When the child goes through various rites and becomes an adult, the villagers sing the song.

It goes this way through life. At a wedding, the songs of husband and wife are sung together. Finally, when this child grows old, and lies in bed ready to die, all the villagers know the song, and they sing it for the last time.

This is the way I hear today's Psalm, the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55); as Mary's songline. The Magnificat is a songline for the heart and soul. Mary sings of celebration and thanksgiving, blessedness, compassion and hospitality, mercy and justice, nurtured life and fulfilled promises. Ultimately though she sings of conceiving the Word and life of whom God spoke and planted in her womb.

However, Mary's songline isn't limited to the words of the Magnificat. "Let it be with me according to your word" (Luke 1:38) is a verse in her songline. Her silent pondering and treasuring (Luke 2:19, 51) are additional verses. The sword that pierced her soul (Luke 2:35) is a part of her songline. "Do whatever he tells you" (John 2:5) is another verse and so is her constant devotion to prayer following the ascension of Jesus (Acts 1:14).

Today's Gospel tells us of a pregnant woman who sings a song — a song about her child, who he is, and who he'll become.

Mary's song is her response to her cousin Elizabeth's spirited greeting, but it's so much more than that. It comes from deep inside her. It knits together the sacred experience and language and hope of her people in a new way, like small pieces of fabric in the hands of a skilled practitioner arranged, sewn together, and transformed into a magnificent quilt.

Nowhere in this song do we hear the name of her child, but he's there in every phrase. Mary's song isn't hers alone; it's the song of the child who wants to come, who comes to do the will of God. This song echoes in the events of her son's life, his death, and his exaltation. The song celebrates the God who keeps promises — not only to Abraham, but also to us.

The Church has picked up Mary's songline and sung it often. Mary's song, The Magnificat, is a foundational text in the liturgy of the historic Church. Who knows how many settings musicians have composed for it over the years? Who knows how many voices have joined with Mary's in singing her song over the centuries?

This is the song about Jesus sung by the human being who knew him best, influenced him most, and remained faithful to him always.

With his mother singing these words from her heart, it shouldn't surprise us that Jesus grows up to preach the Beatitudes as part of his Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5). His song, "Blessed are" is sweet music to our ears.

The Magnificat announces that God scatters the prideful, dethrones the powerful, and drives away the rich. The God of the Magnificat lifts up the lowly, providing a feast for the destitute.

Like mother, like Son! The Beatitudes call happy those in need, those who hunger, those who weep. It announces hope for the humble. The doorway to the kingdom has a low lintel and all who would enter must bow. Jesus calls happy those who don't find that hard to do.

The Magnificat echoes through the lifetime of Jesus and through the lives we live as well. It points to a redemption achieved once for all, but that continues to unfold wherever the Good News establishes itself. The overthrow of oppression that Mary's song proclaims turns out to be a continuous revolution. The battleground is every community of people and every human heart.

If we're a parent, that song may be about our child, because for a parent there's a way our future is carried on in our children.

But whether we're parents or not, each of us sings a song about our future. It's about hope, it comes from the heart, it reveals who we are, and it shapes the time ahead. What we sing with our lives becomes our legacy to those who follow after us.

So, what will our songline be?

Maybe a commercial jingle that entices us to spend ourselves on things that can never satisfy. That could be our song.

Perhaps a pop tune that sidesteps deep sorrow and true joy. That could be our song.

The problem isn't with the classics or pop tunes or commercial jingles. The problem is in thinking that The Magnificat is only Mary's song. It's not. This wonderful songline proclaims God's hope and purpose for everyone.

So, Mary's songline is our songline. We can live in a way that magnifies and rejoices in the Lord. We can do this by the grace of her Son, our Brother, Jesus Christ. The song that turned out true in his life is just as true for us as well. After all, it's the sacred way that we navigate this new life we've been given in Jesus. And each of us sings this song from deep inside.

May we continue to sing our songline, The Magnificat, with our lives. May it become our legacy to our children and all who come after us. When our final hour arrives, may we hear this song of divine triumph sounding in our hearts and ringing all around us and know it as our own. For the God who kept faith with Abraham, the prophets, Mary, the apostles, and every past generation, will keep faith with us as well, to life everlasting. Amen.

And the peace, joy and hope of God, which surpasses all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds safe in Christ Jesus our songline. Amen.