

SERMON: 3 Advent B

Luke 1:46-55

Preached Sunday, Dec. 14, 2008 at St. Philip's, Brevard

By RDF

You never know what might inspire a preacher.

This past week, I spent many hours wondering what message I should offer to you on this Third Sunday of Advent. In previous Sundays, we've heard about waiting and patience and we've heard also about John the Baptist. I'm guessing no one else is in the mood for my "Bah Humbug!" sermon about out-of-control consumerism. (I say this because I am one of the people who just doesn't want to hear it this year!)

So, here's what happened on my way to the pulpit:

Three things stayed in my mind all week. One was the rose-colored candle we light today on the Advent wreath. I kept pondering what it means and why the Church has this long-standing tradition. Did you know that some parishes have rose-colored hangings and vestments they use each year on the Third Sunday of Advent? The second thing that stayed with me is a modern version of the song "Ave Maria." It's a duet by Luciano Pavarotti and one of my favorite vocalists. The song was recorded just a few years before the great tenor died. I probably listened to it a dozen times this week at home or in the car, and it's played dozens more times in my head. And the third thing on my mind was the continuing news about our nation's economic woes.

First, the candle; then, the song and the news.

No one seems to know exactly how the custom got started, but for centuries, the Church has lit a pink or rose-colored candle on this Sunday each year. Some people say it stands for joy in the midst of a season which can feel somewhat gloomy. It can feel that way because the Church has often observed it as a season of penitence in preparation for the first and second comings of Christ. So, by the Third Sunday of the season, people seem ready for a bit more lightness and joy. It functions like the fourth Sunday in Lent — sometimes called "Refreshment Sunday" — when the tone lightens up in anticipation of Easter.

Others say the special candle represents the Virgin Mary. We can get so focused on John and Jesus — and shepherds and angels and poinsettias — that the Mother of Jesus can get squeezed out of the picture. In the Episcopal Church, we try to compensate for this by allowing the Song of Mary — the "Magnificat" — to be read or sung on the third or fourth Sunday in Advent. I chose to use it today as an alternative Gospel reading.

Whatever the reason, it feels to me like this is an especially good year to remind ourselves that Advent is a time of joy as we prepare for the Feast of Christmas. And there would be no Christmas, of course, without Mary — whom we honor throughout the Church with the title "Theotokos" or "The God-Bearer."

Which brings me to that version of "Ave Maria" I mentioned. In thinking about Mary this week, I realized that Ave Maria and the Magnificat both come from the Gospel of Luke, but are from different passages. Although I'm sure this is not news to the musically-minded, it was a revelation to me. Ave Maria is Latin for "Hail Mary," the first words that Gabriel the angel spoke when he first appeared to her. Magnificat, meanwhile, is Latin for "magnify." It's the first word

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in Mary's response to Elizabeth when the baby leaps in her womb and she proclaims her cousin to be "the mother of my Lord" (Luke 1:43).

Here is what's so striking about the Ave Maria I've been listening to: the setting is the same traditional tune composed by Franz Schubert, but it features modern words inspired equally by the Magnificat. Imagine that familiar tune — heard so many times in weddings and funerals — with these words:

Ave Maria,
Where is the justice in this world?
The wicked make so much noise, Mother
The righteous stay oddly still,
With no wisdom, all the riches in the world leave us poor.

Then, imagine the booming and unmistakable voice of Pavarotti singing the refrain in Latin:

Ave Maria
Gratia plena ("full of grace")
Maria, gratia plena (etc.)

The first voice then returns with this final verse:

Strength is not without humility
It's weakness that's an untreatable disease,
And war is always the choice
Of the chosen ... who will not have to fight.

Ave Maria

Ave Maria*

If that sounds too modern or un-scriptural to you, don't forget the traditional words of the Magnificat — found in several places in our *Book of Common Prayer*. In these words, Mary says:

God "has shown the strength of his arm,
He has scattered the proud in their conceit.
He has cast down the mighty from their thrones,
And has lifted up the lowly.
He has filled the hungry with good things,
And the rich he has sent away empty."
(BCP, Canticle 15, p. 92)

Biblical scholars and theologians often call this the "Great Reversal." Found in many parts of the Gospel, the Great Reversal tells us that the oppressed will be raised up, while the rich and the wicked will be brought to their knees.

So, where am I going with all this? To one single conclusion. If you are ever puzzled — as I am sometimes — about the source of Jesus' social consciousness, we can remember that he got it primarily from ... his mama. Where do most of us get our best and worst traits? From our parents and families, of course! And in the Magnificat, Mary tells us what kind of Messiah her son will grow up to be — one who defends the poor and the outcast; "the least of these."

In the Bible, so many people have the wrong ideas about the rule of the Messiah, including many of the disciples. But it is the mother of Christ who saw clearly from the beginning that the only force Jesus would use is the divine and non-violent power of servanthood. And we are called to do no less as his followers.

Martin Luther, the German reformer, surmises that Mary came from an impoverished family. Luther says her surprise and humility in response to God can probably be explained by her socio-economic background. "We must believe," he says, "that she came [from] poor, despised, and lowly parents.... Even in her own town of Nazareth, she was not the [child] of one of the chief rulers, but a poor and plain citizen's daughter, whom none looked up to or esteemed."**

Why did Jesus relate so well to the needy and the outcast? Why did he proclaim that we are to always have special regard for them? Why did he challenge the principalities and powers of ancient Palestine? Simply because he, his mother and family were counted among the poor and oppressed. He understood and empathized with them — because he was one of them. "Foxes have holes and birds have nests," he once said, "but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head" (Matt. 8:20 & Luke 9:58).

Which brings me, finally, to the third element of my message today, the economy. I am the last person to ask what will become of our nation's financial situation. But this much seems clear from the standpoint of the Good News: we can see the coming of the Great Reversal and the possibility for greater Gospel justice in our current economic upheavals. Yes, it will be scary and painful for many. We must be more diligent than ever to care for and defend the poor in our midst. And for this reason, we do well to remember charitable causes more than ever now, and in the coming year.

But if we want to continue to follow Christ faithfully, there is another thing we might ask, as the mother of Jesus reminds us on this day: "Where is the justice in this world?" Can we hear this question as the privileged without getting too dismissive or defensive? Will the righteous remain "oddly still" — or will we be part of "lifting up the lowly" and "filling the hungry with good things"?

You may prefer the traditional words of the Magnificat. If so, I commend them to your Advent and Christmas meditation. But in case contemporary words also speak to you, I close now with another modern translation, written just a few years ago as a hymn text:

My spirit magnifies the Lord, my soul is filled with love,
For God has sent an only Son to earth from heaven above;
To earth from heaven above; so sing the birth of such a boy:
My spirit magnifies the Lord, my soul is filled with joy.

My spirit magnifies the Lord, my soul is filled with peace,
For God has sent an only Son the prisoners to release;
The prisoners to release; and all the tyrants destroy:
My spirit magnifies the Lord, my soul is filled with joy.

My spirit magnifies the Lord, my soul is filled with grace,
For God has sent an only Son the wealthy to displace;
The wealthy to displace and fill the hungry they annoy:
My spirit magnifies the Lord, my soul is filled with joy.***

Footnotes:

*“Ave Maria” as sung by Bono of U2 and Luciano Pavarotti at the “Pavarotti and Friends” concert in Modena, Italy, May 2003. English words by Bono. Commercially available on a version of the European import CD single by U2, “Sometimes You Can’t Make It On Your Own” (Island Records CDIX 886/987-11-5).

**Luther’s Works, vol. 21, pp. 301 & 329, quoted in Richer Fare by Gail Ramshaw.

***“Magnificat” by Michael Counsell in 2000 Years of Prayer (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1999), p. 565.