

Jeff's Reflection – Dec 12

When we were infants, a parent, a grandparent, a care-giver, may have sung lullabies to us to help us calm and sleep.

When you google-search popular lullabies, some of the songs that appear are:

Lullaby and Goodnight
When You Wish Upon a Star
Danny Boy
The wheels on the bus
Rockabye Baby
Twinkle, Twinkle little star

Some studies have concluded that singing to a child in the mother's womb can calm the baby, and that, after birth, children recognize the tune after they are born.

In both of our scripture readings for this week, we have stories of mothers singing to their infants. Hannah, the mother of John the Baptizer, sings as she brings her son to the temple to dedicate his life to God. Mary, the mother of Jesus, while pregnant with Jesus, visits her cousin Elizabeth and as they meet Mary sings a song.

Neither of these songs is one you will find on any list of suggested children's lullabies. Neither of these songs are intended to sooth or to calm.

Both songs are songs of praise to God. Both are songs that celebrate God's agenda for the world, an agenda of sabbath economics and of a reversal of worldly power structures.

These are not songs to calm one to sleep, but to awake one to God's dream for the world.

The first song is found in the book of 1 Samuel.

The book of 1 Samuel begins with a story about Hannah and her husband Elkanah. We are told that Hannah cannot have children – in the words of the story – 'the Lord had closed her womb'.

As we noted a few weeks ago, Biblical stories about women who cannot have children have a way of becoming stories of a birth announcement.

That's what happens in this story. Hannah and Elkanah give birth to a son, whom they name Samuel. They dedicate the child to God and the child Samuel spends much of his childhood assisting in the temple.

God will establish Samuel as a renowned prophet. When the people say that they want

to become like other nations, they want to have a king, they want to be a power player on the world stage, it is Samuel who warns them that if they opt for a king there will be consequences – their children will become warriors in the king's army, they will be taxed to support the king's mandates, and sometimes to choose between the commandments of the king and the commandments of God!

And when the people persist in their demand, it is Samuel whom God will commission to anoint the first king of Israel- Saul – and Samuel who will later announce that God has chosen the shepherd lad David to replace Saul.

In this passage from 1 Samuel we encounter a recurring Biblical motif of a barren woman who gives birth to a child who will live attuned to God's presence and guidance.

In the scripture reading provided in this mailing, we have included only portions of Hannah's prayer, Hannah's song, so let us now hear all of her song:

“My heart exults in the Lord;
my strength is exalted in my God.
My mouth derides my enemies,
because I rejoice in my victory.
“There is no Holy One like the Lord,
no one besides you;
there is no Rock like our God.
Talk no more so very proudly,
let not arrogance come from your mouth;
for the Lord is a God of knowledge,
and by him actions are weighed.
The bows of the mighty are broken,
but the feeble gird on strength.
Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread,
but those who were hungry are fat with spoil.
The barren has borne seven,
but she who has many children is forlorn.
The Lord kills and brings to life;
brings down to Sheol and raises up.
The Lord makes poor and makes rich;
brings low, and also exalts.
God raises up the poor from the dust;
lifts the needy from the ash heap,
to make them sit with princes
and inherit a seat of honor.
For the pillars of the earth are the Lord's,
and on them God has set the world.
“God will guard the feet of his faithful ones,
but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness;
for not by might does one prevail.

The Lord's adversaries shall be shattered;
the Most High will thunder in heaven.
The Lord will judge the ends of the earth;
will give strength to his king,
and exalt the power of his anointed."

Hannah's prayer is a song of praise to God, praise of God.

These are words of praise from a person who had reached out to God from a place of deep grief, a place of powerlessness, a place of despair.

These are words sung in a world of haves and have-nots, of powerful and seemingly powerless, of wealth and poverty, of those fortunate and unfortunate.

Hannah sings, sings having experienced hope born from hopelessness, having experienced life born from barrenness, having experienced God-with-her in her times of despair.

And so she prays, she sings of this God, this God who makes a new world possible:
A world in which the weapons of war are left to rust,
A world in which those who were hungry now have a place at the table,
A world in which those whose faces have been dragged through the dust now take their place as royalty.

The song, it seems to me, looks to God to defeat those then in power, to banish the wicked to darkness, to elevate the poor to the places of privilege and to 'lower' the privileged and powerful to places of poverty and powerlessness.

It is a song of revolution, of reversals of fortunes and societal positions.

Mary's song echoes and is perhaps inspired by Hannah's song. Mary, having learned that she will give birth to a child, visits her cousin Elizabeth, who is also pregnant.

They greet each other as women who are aware that their lives are part of a larger Life; that they will give birth not just to children, but to a new hope in the world. They are aware that as they greet each other, they do so in the presence of God. Elizabeth and Mary have both been told that their future sons are part of whatever God is up to.

Similar to Hannah's song, Mary's song begins with praise of God and then celebrates God's activity in the world.

Mary sings: "My soul rejoices in God, my saviour – God who saves."

God has looked with favour on the lowliness of God's servant – Mary is not a queen, not

a person with diplomas displayed on an office wall, not anyone of any significance to anyone but her family and friends. Yet, for no apparent reason, God's Spirit is being uniquely carried into the world through the child whom she carries in her womb.

God has just upset the status quo. The proud, the powerful, will be unsettled by this birth. As Hannah sang, so sings Mary, that God will bring down the powerful from their thrones and lift up the lowly.

God has a program – to fill the hungry with good things, to send the rich away empty, to remember the promises of the covenants God has entered into with the Jewish people.

Walter Brueggemann, formerly Professor of Old Testament studies at Columbia Theological Seminary, creatively invited people to imagine that these songs are the songs Hannah and Mary sang to their children; that these are the songs that shaped the faith, the understanding, the lives of John and Jesus.

I don't know if the infants heard these songs, but I think that the writers of 1 Samuel and of the Gospel of Luke imagined these songs being sung through the lives of Samuel and Jesus.

I think that Samuel and Jesus were in the tradition of prophets who heard God singing throughout creation, who were aware of a sacred tune playing throughout history, who tuned their lives to a melody emanating from the depths of God.

This song of God awoke in Jesus an awareness of the ways in which the world was out of tune with its Creator:

Out of tune in the disparity between those who possessed so much and those who struggled each day to survive;
Out of tune in the embrace of war and battle as the route to peace; out of tune in the culture of violence that claimed that the most powerful could take it all;
Out of tune in the divisions that fractured God's children – out of tune in the inequalities between men and women, between nations and cultures, between urban and rural, between successful and struggling;
Out of tune in the hunger of those with no land on which to grow crops;
Out of tune in the despair of those who were labelled unproductive- the lame, the blind, the wounded, the possessed;
Out of tune in systems and attitudes and excluded and segregated.

So Jesus opened his heart, his imagination to that song of God's.

So Jesus sang God's song:

Sang of feeding the hungry. Sang of sharing how little we might have, trusting that God could make a banquet out of just a few loaves and fishes.
Sang of being agents of healing – the healing that comes with being seen,

acknowledged, accepted, affirmed and loved.

Sang of welcoming all into God's love.

Sang of all creation as God's creation, of all people belonging to God's creation, sang of the blessing of creation implanted in every person.

Sang of peace and peace-makers.

Sang of forgiveness as the path to peace.

Sang of suffering, the suffering directed at those who choose to sing a different song and dance to a different tune; sang of singing of God's suffering love.

And sang a song of joy.

Jesus sings of the joy that is trust in God's love, whatever the circumstances and conditions of our lives.

Sings of the joy that is trust in what is promised, even if it has not yet emerged; that trusts that life is gift even in times of grief;

Sings of Joy that is deeper than certainty, deeper than happiness, deeper than suffering.

The Joy we affirm this Sunday as we light the Advent Candle of Joy, is the joy, the peace, the courage, the promise that we are loved by God, that at all times we live in God, and God is present in and with us..

And so we join in the songs of Hannah and Mary; we join in the song of Advent; we join in the song of Jesus; we join in the song of God.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.