

Epworth Chapel on the Green
December 23, 2012
Advent 4
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Micah 5:2-4
Psalm 80
Hebrews 10:5-10
Luke 1:39-56

As we continue to try to process the tragic events of the last 10 days, not merely in Connecticut but also in other places, a common phrase I've heard during this time (from celebrities to our President) is the phrase: *there are no words*.

In times of great agony and pain, words often fail us. But while that is true, I have observed a parallel reality that is also true. In times of great agony, grief, and pain, *prose* may lose its power, but *poetry* does not. What I mean is that in times of pain -- times when words fail us -- there is often a power in music and song that has the power to help us and heal us.

Think about it. At almost every critical point in our lives -- times of grief, times of transition, times of celebration, from birth to death and everything in between, in those times when words fail us, we cope and are empowered to move forward through *song*.

A few months ago while listening to NPR I heard the acclaimed tenor Noah Stewart sing these words:

*Without a song the day would never end,
Without a song the road would never bend,*

When things go wrong, a man ain't got a friend without a song.

*That field of corn would never see a plow,
That field of corn would be deserted now,
A man is born, but he's no good no how without a song.*

*I've got my trouble and woe,
But sure as I know the Jordan will roll,
I'll get along as long as a song is strong in my soul.*

*I'll never know what makes the rain to fall,
I'll never know what makes the grass so tall,
I only know there ain't no love at all, without a song.*

Why is the message of this old spiritual true? It's because *song has the capacity to touch us on a level that mere prose cannot do.*

When I was 10 years old, my grandmother died. Her passing was one of the first experiences of death in my young life. On the way home from the cemetery my stepfather turned the car radio on. Sitting in the back seat, I heard a man singing, "Let's all go down to the river, there's a man whose walking on the water." That was 40 years ago, and I remember it perfectly. And every time I hear that song, I'm transported back to that moment.

When words fail us, the power of song can heal and restore us. And in those times when the pain is nearly unbearable, our songs often take the form of *lament*. It's the honest language of a heart in pain, like we often find in the Psalms. Laments express our grief and fear, helping to honor these deep and difficult

emotions. But by naming and facing these difficult emotions, we discover that we strip them of their power to incapacitate us.

Hymn writers have helped us here at Epworth to express lament during this Advent season. Take, for example, these verses from our hymn, *Thy Kingdom Come, O God*:

*Where is thy reign of peace, and purity, and love?
When shall all hatred cease, as in the realms above?
When comes the promised time that war shall be no more,
Oppression, lust, and crime shall flee thy face before?*

Or perhaps more familiar to us is Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's famous hymn, *I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day*, where he says this:

*I heard the bells on Christmas Day
Their old familiar carols play
And wild and sweet, the words repeat
Of peace on earth, good will to men.*

***And in despair I bowed my head:
"There is no peace on earth," I said,
"For hate is strong, and mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good will to men."***

If you live long enough on this earth, you will come to know what it feels like when there are no words. So in those times when words fail us, what we need is something that can touch us and reach us at the deepest levels of our being. What we need as we travel through this life is a *song*.

And not just any old song will do. We need a *real* song, a song of substance, a song of purpose. We need to be able to sing with the psalmist when he said:

*I waited patiently upon the LORD; he stooped to me and heard my cry.
He lifted me out of the desolate pit, out of the mire and clay;
He set my feet upon a high cliff and made my footing sure.
He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God. (Ps. 40:1-2)*

We need a song like we hear from Psalm 30 where the writer says:

*Sing to the LORD you servants of his;
Give thanks for the remembrance of His holiness.
For his wrath endures but the twinkling of an eye,
His favor for a lifetime.
Weeping may spend the night,
But joy comes in the morning. (Ps. 30:4-6)*

We need a song that names our hopes and helps bring them into being. We need a song that restores in us the joy we have longed for of late and wondered whether we'd ever experience again. We need a song that reminds us that this upside down world is about to be turned right side up. *We need a song with a promise big enough to change the world.*

And on this fourth Sunday of Advent, have I got a song for you! In what may be a Guinness record for the length of time it takes for a preacher to get to the text, we are introduced today to one of the greatest songs ever written. It's the song of Mary, also known as the *Magnificat*.

Mary sings here of God's mercy, naming God's promise to lift up the lowly, the downtrodden, and the oppressed. But her singing doesn't merely help her to name these things. *Her singing draws her into the actual experience and reality that she voices.* God has promised to change the world, and in singing this promise Mary *enters into that work and participates in it.*

A wonderful adaptation of Mary's song was written some years ago by Rory Cooney, entitled *The Canticle of the Turning*. It goes like this:

*My soul cries out with a joyful shout
that the God of my heart is great,
And my spirit sings of the wondrous things
that you bring to the ones who wait.
You fixed your sight on your servant's plight,
and my weakness you did not spurn,
So from east to west shall my name be blest,
Could the world be about to turn?*

*Though I am small, my God, my all,
you work great things in me.
And your mercy will last from the depths of the past
to the end of the age to be.
Your very name puts the proud to shame,
and to those who would for you yearn,
You will show your might, put the strong to flight,
for the world is about to turn.*

*From the halls of power to the fortress tower,
not a stone will be left on stone.
Let the king beware for your justice tears
ev'ry tyrant from his throne.
The hungry poor shall weep no more
for the food they can never earn;
There are tables spread, ev'ry mouth be fed,*

for the world is about to turn.

*Though the nations rage from age to age,
we remember who holds us fast;
God's mercy must deliver us
from the conqueror's crushing grasp.
This saving word that our forebears heard
is the promise which holds us bound,
'Til the spear and rod can be crushed by God,
who is turning the world around.* (Quoted in *WorkingPreacher.org*, December 23, 2012)

On this Fourth Sunday of Advent -- the time when the days are short and the dark nights are long -- do not lay aside this wonderful song. For this song promises to change the world. And when you sing along, you lend your participation to that reality.

This is why Longfellow did not end his Christmas hymn with the bowing of his head in despair. He went on to write these words:

*Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
"God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;
The wrong shall fail, the right prevail,
With peace on earth, good will to men."*

Your circumstances may not look like it. There may appear to be plenty of apparent evidence to the contrary. But take heart, child of God, because *God is turning this world right side up again.*

On this Fourth Sunday of Advent, don't let Mary's song go out of your heart! Do not let the competing voices of the world and the culture silence this song in your soul. Even when words may fail you -- perhaps *most especially* when words

fail you -- do not let this song die! Stand up and stare into the abyss and proclaim to yourself and to all who will listen: "this world is about to turn!"

As we come to the Lord's table today, these symbols of bread and wine are a pledge to us that Mary's song is true. So come with faith to receive these symbols, and the promise that accompanies them. Let the grace given to you strengthen you and empower you to keep singing. Then rise up, join hands with your brothers and sisters, and watch and wait his coming.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.