

Ben Lattimer
Sunday Service, Sermon
December 24, 2023
Lift Every Voice and Sing

Sermon

Intro / Hook Story - Dragonets of Destiny

Not so long ago, if you'd been listening in at the Lattimer house, you might have heard the three brave young boys enacting a scene from one of their new favorite books. It started with a song. Our boys would start singing: "Oh the dragonets are coming! They're coming to save the day!"

It's from the first book of the *Wings of Fire* series by Tui Sutherland. Sam introduced us to it, I think. The young dragonets of destiny have been captured by the wicked Queen Scarlet, and are chained up at night alongside her other prisoners awaiting their doom.

...When one of them starts to sing - "Oh the dragonets are coming! They're coming to save the day!" One by one the other prisoners start to sing alongside them, until the whole prison is full of song. "They're coming to fight, for they know what's right! The dragonets are coming!"

Our boys would start singing, and then the one of them would take on the role of the evil Queen shouting at them to "Stop that infernal racket!"

It's not just the noise that bothered the queen. She, like most tyrants, recognized the threat in these songs. For these songs embody the strength and hope of a people that might just one day set them free...

Back to the Story

In this morning's readings, we find ourselves on the brink of that Holy Night. Over the past few weeks we've heard the promises of angels - to Zechariah and Elizabeth, and to Mary. Mary visits Elizabeth, and the two find strength in one another's company. Then we get the story of John's birth - and his naming when Zechariah is able to speak. But right here - mixed in with these stories, Luke has two of his main characters burst into song. It's like something out of a Broadway musical! First, Mary sings of a world about to turn. Then, after John is born, Zechariah sings of God's deliverance.

These two songs set the stage for the whole Gospel. They proclaim the good news, the promise of these special children. Mary's speaks to the turning - God's faithfulness towards the downtrodden. She sings of a reversal - of justice - in the past tense, in the certainty of hope declaring it already accomplished:

*[God] has brought down the powerful from their thrones
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things*

and sent the rich away empty.

These words don't necessarily reflect her reality. She is an unwed pregnant teenager, a poor native living in a land occupied by a powerful Empire. And yet she sings of God's power that will prevail...

Then Zechariah, after John is born, Zechariah holds him - he sings hope and promise into the life of this newborn child.

*[God] has raised up a mighty savior for us
...And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High,
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
to give his people knowledge of salvation
by the forgiveness of their sins.
...The dawn from on high will break upon us,
to shine upon those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace."*

These are powerful songs - songs that we sing together even now, in hope of the world made new...

Not just Dragons...

It's not just dragons. These songs of resistance work in us too. Think "We Shall Overcome" in the marches of the Civil Rights movement. "Senzenina" in apartheid South Africa. "Small Axe" among the West Indian communities of London. Even the words of Psalm 40 along the Berlin Wall... "How long... to sing this song?"

The music stirs something in us - inspires us to rise once more unto the breach... The Rev. Cecelia Armstrong writes of the Civil Rights anthem "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing", that "the lyrics insist ...we let our rejoicing 'rise high as the list'ning skies.' The [music] insists that even when our feet are weary from the death of hope that is not even born yet, we are encouraged to stand."

Big Daniel Story

Sometimes the hurt is too much - the grief is too great - and the words just won't come... Some time after Cindy's brother died, she recalled standing next to her father in church as the congregation sang the old hymn, "When Peace Like a River"... When the chorus came round, she looked over at her dad and realized he wasn't singing... Those words, "It is well with my soul..." They just wouldn't come. But there he stood - surrounded by the church family that had been a part of his life since he was very young... They sang - they sang the words for him, when he himself could not sing it for himself. They carried the song until days came when he could once again sing it for himself.

Sometimes we sing for each other - when it is all too much. We carry each other.

Singing to Help Us Believe

This evening we will sing “O Little Town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie...” Even though at this moment it is not a place where stillness reigns... And yet still we sing. It’s an act of defiant hope. Like Mary and Zechariah - we sing hope into a weary world - we light candles of *hope, peace*, love, and joy during advent - to shine in the darkness. They remind us of the vision, remind us who we are and who we hope to become - we sing of the world made new... And then we get up together, we rise up with the strength to stand once more, to continue the work for peace and justice, God’s kingdom come.

We sing these stories - these songs of hope every year. We sing what we believe, what is and what will be - and then we start to believe what we sing. There is a power in the music...

Conclusion - Lift Every Voice and Sing

So lift every voice and sing. Sing - “high as the list’ning skies” - of the light shining in the darkness.

*Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us,
Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us...*

For the world is about to turn...

Amen.