

Elizabeth was pregnant with John the Baptizer when Mary came to stay with her and her husband, Zechariah. When she saw Mary, Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and she cried out, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.” Mary responded with the song of praise and thanksgiving that we call the Magnificat: “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior...”

The first few chapters of Luke’s Gospel about the nativity and early childhood of Jesus are filled with songs. Not only here, where Mary sings, but in the story that follows this one, where Elizabeth’s husband Zechariah sings after his son, John, is born. After Jesus is born, a multitude of the heavenly host sing the opening words of our Gloria to bring “good news of great joy” to the shepherds. A short time later, when Mary and Joseph present Jesus to the temple, we hear Simeon sing his song of farewell after seeing God’s salvation prepared for all the world to see in the Christ child.

Monks, priests and some lay people know these songs from praying the Daily Office. They pray or chant not only the Magnificat (the Song of Mary), but also the Benedictus Dominus Deus (the Song of Zechariah) and the Nunc Dimittis (the Song of Simeon)—all songs from the first two chapters of Luke. In the settings of Morning and Evening Prayer, the songs function as canticles of praise at times of the week when few people are in church and still fewer are reciting them at home. Many church-people are unfamiliar with these songs.

But the songs in Luke’s Gospel are far from uncommon. Our scripture is filled with singing from Genesis to Revelation, because the ancients understood music to be a marvelous method of expression *to* and *about* God. Singing can convey joy or lament, praise or unity, often in combinations of feelings and thoughts. Singing can also be a prophetic act, even an act of resistance.

Slaves in America knew this aspect of spiritual song. From the 17th century midway through the 19th century, black men and women kidnapped from Africa and the Caribbean sang spirituals that praised God, gave voice to

suffering and promised hope, all while protesting the people and the conditions that treated them so horribly.

In the '60s, civil rights leaders also understood the prophetic power of song, making the hymn "We Shall Overcome" into a prominent anthem. People who felt its prophetic power have sung this hymn in North Korea, in Beirut, in Tiananmen Square and in South Africa's Soweto Township. Two years ago, composer Omar Thomas released an album called "We Will Know: An LGBT Civil Rights Piece in Four Movements" that was inspired by "We Shall Overcome."

That single hymn also inspired several anti-communist movements in Eastern Europe. In 1989, protesters in East Germany embraced the prophetic power of song. For months before the fall of the Berlin wall, people in the city of Leipzig gathered by candlelight on Monday evenings around St. Nikolai church—the church where Bach composed so many of his cantatas. They gathered and they sang.

And as they sang, their numbers began to grow. A thousand people and then five thousand and finally more than three hundred thousand—more than half the citizens of the city—singing songs about hope and protest and justice, until their singing shook the powers of empire and brought the wall down to rubble. After the fall, one of the pastors leading the resistance reportedly asked a former commander of the Stasi, the secret police, why they hadn't crushed this protest movement as they had so many others. His answer: they had no contingency plan for song and prayer.

Singing can still be a powerful act of prophecy. Prophecy in the scriptural sense, that is, which is not at all like fortune-telling or forecasting the future. Prophecy in the scriptural sense is naming what is actually happening in the world and reminding people how God intends for the world to be. Prophetic singing is resistance against the darkness.

That's what both Mary and Hannah are doing. In fact, Mary's song was probably based on Hannah's earlier song; the song that set the scene for a major prophetic theme of the Book of Samuel; the willingness of YHWH to intrude, intervene and invert. Hannah, the mother of Samuel, and Mary are

both "handmaids" of God who bore sons through divine intervention who were uniquely dedicated to God.

So, too, was our matron saint, Elizabeth, the namesake of this church. She is the first to recognize that Mary is carrying Christ within her. She and Mary are pregnant under strange circumstances: Elizabeth is well beyond child-bearing age and Mary is just at the cusp. Both have been told by angels that they would bring children into the world through whom God would work great changes. Neither of them is living at the center of Roman power, but are instead middle-class Jews living in the Judean hill country.

Remarkably, in the face of these strange and seemingly powerless circumstances, one pregnant woman recognizes the astounding reality of the presence of Christ and names this blessing out loud. And the other pregnant woman sings a prophecy.

Because she is the matron saint of this house, Elizabeth has more than a little influence on the expression of spirituality and the movement of grace here. She may not sing quite as eloquently as Mary, but with our consent, St Elizabeth can nourish particular gifts of grace, not the least of which is the ability to recognize the presence of Christ in others. She can nurture within each of us the ability to see and celebrate the holy gifts that God has planted within people who may not even realize that Christ is waiting to be born in them.

What we have to do is come to this church and worship and pray and, yes, sing to the best of our ability, and then to go back out into the world. This place is where we are steeped in God's grace—learning, praying and waiting—while God brings something forth from within us.

Let me tell you a story. A few years ago, my family and I were in Provence with friends. One day, we went to the Parfumerie Fragonard, a perfume - making house in the town of Grasse where they make and sell their products. What Fragonard also offers, somewhat uniquely, is the rare opportunity to go behind the scenes to see how they make their fragrances. They will show you the working stills, the distillation trays and vats that they use. They allow you touch and smell some of the raw materials that make up some of Fragonard's

evocative compositions: flowers like honeysuckle, jasmine and sweet-peas. Aromatic herbs like basil, thyme and rosemary.

Outside the perfumery, the air is ever-so-lightly tinged with fantastic aromas; some of it wafts in on the wind off the French Riviera and some of it is natural to the lavender fields of Provence. But some of that delightful aroma is what clings to the people who visit or work at the perfumery.

The church, when we are at our best, has a similar effect. When we sit together in worship, something glorious clings to us—something beautiful that we transmit out into the world, whether we realize it or not. We pray and sing together and are filled with the love of God; permeated with the sweetness of God's presence. Then we go out into the world, carrying the fragrance of Christ with us so that everyone we encounter experiences a little hint of God's presence: Love in the place of fear. Self-giving in place of self-centeredness. Kindness in place of resentment. And we, too, become increasingly adept at recognizing traces of God's presence in others.

The medieval mystic, Meister Eckhart, once wrote: "We are all meant to be mothers of God. What good is it to me if this eternal birth of the Divine Son takes place unceasingly but does not take place within myself? And what good is it to me if Mary is full of grace if I am not also full of grace? What good is it to me for the Creator to give birth to his Son if I do not also give birth to Him in my time and my culture. This then," Eckhart concluded, "this then is the fullness of time: when the Son of God is begotten in us."

Come to this table and let yourself be filled with the presence of the Risen Christ. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another, remembering that the Son of God is begotten in us. Watch for the indwelling Christ in everyone you meet. If the Spirit within you should happen to leap, you may have noticed the Christ within another unlikely mother of God. Make your blessing out loud. They may have a prophecy they have been waiting to sing.