**The Future That’s Already Present
Isaiah 35:1-10, Luke 1:46b-55
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Today’s gospel is about the power and possibility of soul and the beginning of a soul journey. Mary’s song, or what is known as the Magnificat is about turning the world of Empire upside down. It was sung more than 2,000 years ago and, as we look around, we can see how deeply the practices of Empire are bred into our DNA. Yet we are here, a part of the long lineage of followers of The Christ, each one of us also invited to rejoice in God, to let our pride scatter with the wind, to resign from our fiefdoms, and make sure no one goes away empty in body or spirit.

After the visit from the angel Gabriel, Mary was moved literally as well as emotionally by the reality of her pregnancy, to visit her cousin Elizabeth. John, while still in utero recognized that the baby Mary was carrying the long awaited Messiah and Elizabeth gave voice to that mystery. Encouraged and accepted, Mary spoke with sure and certain knowledge of the way the world should be, that is, Mary spoke as a prophet. “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.”

So first we must talk about soul. It is a translation of the Hebrew word *nephesh* in the Old Testament and through a variety of  passages from Genesis through the prophets we see that there were ancient understandings of soul as a life force within the body, as an inner center of connection with God, and as a guide for forming attachments and discerning actions.

In the New Testament, it is *psyuche* which is translated as soul or life force. We find *psyuche* referenced by the voice of God as Matthew quotes from Isaiah, “Here is my servant, whom I have chosen, my beloved, with whom my **soul** is well pleased. I will put my Spirit upon him, and he will proclaim justice to the gentiles” (Matt 12:18).  All three of the synoptic gospels quote Jesus acknowledging the soul through the Shema, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your **soul** and with all your mind and with all your strength” (Matt 23:37, Mk 12:30, Lk 10:27).

We also find *psyuche*, on Jesus’ lips when he says in Matthew 11, “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your **soul**s” (Matt 11:29). In Gethsemene, Matthew and John attest to Jesus’ soul as “deeply grieved” or “troubled” as he contemplated his death. God is/has soul, Jesus has soul, we have soul–the connecting point between the human and the divine.

This Greek concept, connotates human ‘life on earth in its external, physical aspects,” as well as “the soul as the seat and center of the inner life.”  Matthew and Mark both state there is nothing more precious than our souls (Matt 16:26b, Mark 8:37).

But then, if we look into our Presbyterian Book of Confessions, the 2nd Helvetic confession and the Westminster Catechism refer to the soul as “reasoned.” This feels like the influence of the Enlightenment and perhaps an explanation as to why we Presbyterians have not often spoken of living from the soul but rather from our minds.

Rabbi Abraham Heschal wrote this in his book about the prophets:

The word ruah means, according to the standard dictionaries, air in motion, breath, wind, vain things, Spirit, mind. What was not noticed is that one of the chief uses of the word ruah, is to denote pathos, passion or emotion–a state of the soul. When combined with another word, it denotes a particular type of pathos or emotion. It is only in extremely rare cases that the word may be rendered with thought” (The Prophets, 95).

In the early months of her pregnancy, Mary sang about a new earth from a very unique place of connection with God and passion for God. According to Luke, in a matter of weeks after the birth, Simeon prophesied that through the life of Jesus, “the inner thoughts of many [would] be revealed–and a sword will pierce” Mary’s soul too. The Reformers had many things right, but this soul life cannot simply be reasoned; some of it is not reasonable. It is full of pathos and passion, or it becomes an inner void. So, in what ways do our lives magnify God? As Meister Eckhart says, “What good is it for the Creator to give birth to his Son if I do not also give birth to him in my time and my culture?”

The Magnificat sings about significant reversals in economy and ego. It is written in the past tense as though each and every U-turn was already accomplished. So, it seems these words have been dismissed over the centuries. But Jesus also referred to his life and ministry as the kingdom of God and many of the same reversals. The seeds of that kingdom are in the world and, most days, we still dismiss it. How can this be? That was Mary’s question to Gabriel as well.

Magnificat comes from the Latin meaning magnify. “My soul magnifies the Lord.” If our souls are our guides, then it directs body, actions, and thinking, toward that which enlarges the world and amplifies love. It means that all the souls in the world is an unimaginable force for good that is already embedded throughout the earth if we can overcome the comforts of Empire that invite us into a weariness that has no will seek the new creation already among us and a lethargy that is a denial of the life-force of the soul itself.

I think we must challenge our own expectation that Christianity is a cozy habitat for the soul between this world and the next and that the rest of it is about living a well-reasoned, productive life. After pandemic, in the midst of climate change, and witnessing the war in Ukraine, many souls have been awakened and crying out as Mary’s did. The seeds of reversal about which Mary sang and which Jesus also planted have taken root and again young voices, messengers among us, are singing out:

Greta Thunberg started spending her Fridays outside the Swedish Parliament asking for more action on climate change when she was fifteen years old. Some say this was Mary’s age. At 16 Greta addressed the World Economic Forum in Davos with these words:

We must change almost everything in our current societies.
The bigger your carbon footprint–the bigger your moral duty.
The bigger your platform–the bigger your responsibility.
Adults keep saying: 'We owe it to the young people to given them hope.'
But I don't want your hope.
I don't want you to be hopeful.
I want you to panic.
I want you to feel the fear I feel every day.
And then I want you to act.
I want you to act as you would in a crisis.
I want you to act as if our house is on fire.
Because it is.

“His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.”

David Hogg, survivor of the shooting at Marjorie Douglass Stoneman High School, has become one of several representative voices for the “school shooting generation,” saying, “This is our one and only chance to stand up because if we don’t do it now, when?”

David says: “be truthful about what you care about and speak from the heart.” “Power doesn’t rely on you having it, but realizing that . . . , no matter who you are or where you come from, the power is within you to change the world.”

“He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.”

On dosomething.org, you can find a list of young activists in the LGBTQ+ world, including Middle Schooler Ella Briggs, who was the Kid Governor of Connecticut in 2019. She has kept her cabinet together to work on a guide to help students start gay-straight alliances and continues to work on raising awareness on LGBTQ+ youth who are homeless. (God has come to the aid of his children, in remembrance of his mercy.)

The early Church became obsessed with Mary’s virginity in order to keep the sanctity of Jesus at a time when being born of woman was a part of the doctrine of original sin. As she was known by then, as the Queen of Heaven, the Protestant Reformers down-played Mary, leaving her a small (but coveted) role each year in the Christmas pageant. For centuries, the church has given Mary a pat on the head and said what a pretty song, little lady, but no more.

“I know the power a young girl carries in her heart.” These are the words of Malala Yousafzai, who is on a mission to speak for the female children who have no voice. At age 24, she has been an activist for 13 years. The United Nations Foundation quotes Malala as saying, “I truly believe the only way we can create global peace is through not only educating our minds, but our hearts and our souls.”

A part of Advent then, is the invitation to more fully integrate our lives with Jesus’ mission using our soul’s guidance and passion for God. We are on a soul journey; it is important to do soul care and listen for the soul’s leadership. The soul, having been tutored in scripture and the love of God, knows the voice of God’s present-day prophets and sends us goosebumps, or a tingle down the spine, or tears to our eyes when we hear them because that is God’s future alive in the present. I leave you with the words of Amanda Gorman, excerpted from “The Hill We Climb”:

But one thing is certain,
If we merge mercy with might,
and might with right,
then love becomes our legacy,
and change our children's birthright.
So let us leave behind a country
better than the one we were left with.
. . .

We will rise from the gold-limbed hills of the west.
We will rise from the windswept northeast,
where our forefathers first realized revolution.
We will rise from the lake-rimmed cities of the midwestern states.
We will rise from the sunbaked south.
We will rebuild, reconcile and recover.
And every known nook of our nation and
every corner called our country,
our people diverse and beautiful will emerge,
battered and beautiful.
When day comes we step out of the shade,
aflame and unafraid,
the new dawn blooms as we free it.
For there is always light,
if only we're brave enough to see it.
If only we're brave enough to be it.

Amen.