

The Indwelling Spirit

Luke 1:46-55

Rev. Benjamin Broadbent
First Congregational Church (UCC) of Colorado Springs
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I.

The best tortilla I ever had was cooked on a hot stone. I was sitting at a low table on a child's chair in a house with a dirt floor. This was Huasteca, in the rural hills near San Martin, Mexico. I was receiving the still-hot tortillas from the hand of the cook herself. She formed into countless perfect circles the masa. It was made of corn from a field just visible from the kitchen window. The tortilla tasted like sun and soil and stone. It's earthiness perfectly complimented the pintos and onions on my plate. And it balanced the fieryness of the fresh jalapeno lingering on my lips and tongue.

Whenever I read the words of the Magnificat, I think of that tortilla. Whenever I hear Mary's song, I think of that house and that tortilla maker. I was there with a group of fellow college students. We drove there from Oregon in January of 1992 to visit a Habitat for Humanity project and to see if we could be of help building houses for a month. We may have done some good, but mainly we shared fellowship with a group of families.

One day at the tortilla table, they told us a story. A few years ago, their village had challenged some large landowners. Rich men had bought up large plots of land and surrounded them with barbed wire. Then, they offered to lease the land to local residents to grow crops. Problem was that local people had been planting crops on that land for generations. So the people devised a plan. First, they challenged the landowners by refusing to lease the land. The result: It lay unused, unfarmed, fallow. Then, they organized a land seizure. They determined how much land their community would need to farm. They dismantled the barbed wire fences and began farming the land. When the landowners finally noticed what was happening, they had to make a choice: Force the people off the land, thereby revealing their exploitative schemes, or, move their fences to a more modest and less greedy position. They opted for the latter. The

people won. “Mire ese maíz?,” the tortilla maker told me, “See that corn? it used to be behind a barbed wire fence.” As I mentioned, it was the best tasting tortilla I ever had.

II.

“God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.”

Mary’s song has captured the hearts and imaginations of preachers and composers and tortilla makers for millennia. And before Mary sang it, her ancestor Hannah sang it back in 1 Samuel 2: “God raises up the poor from the dust; [and] lifts the needy from the ash heap.”

Who is this God that Hannah and Mary and their sisters sang about?
Who is this God that we keep singing about, in every age and culture?
Who is this God that inspired Francesco Durante in the 18th century?
Who is this God to whom our Chancel Choir sings today?

Mary’s song speaks of a God concerned with life on earth. More specifically, the God of whom Mary sings is a God concerned with the lowly. In other words, God has a keen interest in those who are underdogs and lowlifes. Mary’s God is a God worthy of praise: “My soul magnifies the Lord,” she sings, “and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.”

Mary’s God is a God who is active in the world. Consider the verbs she sings: God looks with favor and does great things. God shows strength, scatters, and brings down. God lifts and fills and sends away. God helps because God promised to do so.

To Mary, God is no pie in the sky. God is a tortilla in the hand.

To Mary, God is no preacher in the pulpit. God is peeps in the pews.

To Mary, God is no disembodied ethereal ghost. God is an integral and carnal indwelling spirit.

To Mary, God is pleased to make God’s home in her. In her people, in her life, and, don’t forget, even in her uterus.

III.

So, what does Mary's song sound like on Pentecost Sunday? I'm not just referring to the aesthetical pleasure of hearing our capable choir. What I'm asking is: How can the church, "gathered all together in one place," hear Mary's song afresh? And how can the church sing that old song with new strength as we say "Amen" to Mary's witness to God, who's spirit dwells within us and among us?

In response to this question, my mind goes to the Annunciation. The Annunciation is the story of the angel Gabriel visiting Mary and announcing to her that she will give birth to one called Jesus, who will be great. In most medieval artistic depictions of the Annunciation, the Spirit of God is present in the form of a dove. In other words, Mary's song is a response to her experience of God's spirit as a felt, earthly presence. God was dwelling in and on the earth, not disinterested, but engaged and participating in the life of matter.

On Pentecost, the disciples, now known as the apostles, were gathered together. They hear a great sound like a mighty wind. A rush of energy fills the house. It's as if a great bird just flew into the room. But this time, it is not a dove, but a bird of prey, perhaps a hawk or an eagle. The Holy Spirit is on the loose in that room. There's no telling what it will do next.

We are told that, in that moment, a miracle happened. The spirit gave the apostles the ability to speak in other languages. Writer Toby Jones has pointed out that miracles presented in the Bible are not only demonstrations of power. Perhaps more importantly, they are acts of protest. Such was the case on that first Pentecost. A powerful experience, yes, but more importantly, a pro-test, "pro" meaning positive and "test" being the root of the word testimony. A positive testimony or witness.

Pentecost is a protest *against* the divisiveness in the world. And Pentecost is a witness *for* the overcoming of those divisions. The great sound of beating wings gathered a cosmopolitan crowd and there, under the brooding, heaving wings of the great mother bird God, strangers were now friends, immigrants were now family, and people of different cultures found common good. God does not remain aloof.

God is an indwelling Spirit, dwelling in and among people, blessing difference, overcoming divisions, and healing divides.

IV.

I believe the indwelling Spirit of the mother bird God is hovering over the U.S. / Mexico border in these days. Rather than believe that the places of greatest suffering are the places where God is absent, I choose to believe that those places are the places God is most tenderly and ferociously present.

The more deeply we humans carve the boundaries between the rich and the poor, the more fiercely the indwelling Spirit of God beats her wings. She hovers over the Sonoran desert as her children, desperate for opportunity, die of thirst. She hovers over the not so grand Rio Grande, troubling the waters with the touch of her pinion feathers. She weeps over those who have too much to lose and those with nothing left to lose. She judges unjust laws that reduce human beings to suspects and that force keepers of the peace to become purveyors of fear. The warmth of her breast radiates care toward all of her children, regardless of legal status, national origin, languages spoken, or color of skin. She will never cease her brooding until her children are at peace.

And not only over this border. She hovers over the security fence that divides Israelis from Palestinians and, in some cases Palestinians from their own land. And not only in Israel / Palestine. She hovers over the boundaries between white and black, poor and rich, women and men, straight and gay, young and old, majority and minority. She hovers and broods and beats her wings and she will never stop.

And that is why we sing today, along with Hannah and Mary, along with St. Francis and Francesco Durante, along with Martin and César, along with the tortilla maker and the mother crossing the border:

“My soul magnifies my God, and *my* spirit rejoices in the Holy Spirit,
for she has looked with favor on the lowliness of her servant.
Surely, from now on all generations shall call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is her name. Amen.”