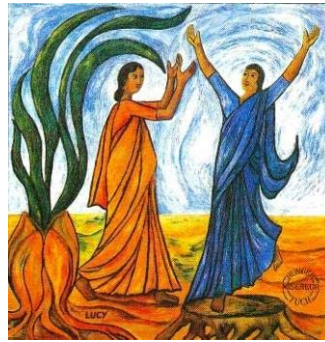


**Mary & Elizabeth – sermon on painting & text**  
**Luke 1: 46-55**



Sisters & brothers, what kept me going all summer was meditating the wall hanging that has inspired a lot of Peace Church Bible study and preaching over the last few weeks. Wherever I was, in the waiting room of the intensive care unit in Murnau hospital, or on the train journey Munich- Murnau / Murnau-Munich, in the holiday apartment which we had rented for some time, or at Nico's bed with him watching television, not needing my entertaining him but my mere presence... I had a copy of this painting along. Produced by an Indian painter it had inspired me often in the past 20 years. Now I had taken it as an anchor in order not to drown in the upheavals and uncertainties of my and my family's lives. When there was nothing else to do and the wound in my soul threatened to eat me up and let me go crazy, I forced myself to focus on the painting with the biblical women.

I preached on Miriam, on Shiphrah and Puah, and on Ruth.

I hesitated to work on Mary's and Elizabeth's story, wondering what to do with it outside the season of Advent, but then decided to stick to the initial idea and make my spiritual journey through the whole of the painting and all its stories.

I took the artist's advice and meditated the picture first. I saw – and you can see here on the front page of your bulletin - two women: Mary and Elizabeth.

Elizabeth who is pregnant dances towards Mary, who then sings her famous song, reveals the reason for her son's coming and shares with her friend the image of a God who is on the side of the poor, the powerless and oppressed and will make all things new...

Elizabeth wears orange, and Mary wears blue. Both women's dresses are saris, Indian clothes, since Lucy D'Souza is Indian and wants to interlace her paintings of Biblical stories with the every day lives of women in her home country.

Elizabeth's dress connects her with the ground on which she dances and with the root of the plant that grows next to her. The colour of Mary's dress (as well as the movement of her feet) is lifting her up into the sky – helping her reach heaven with her outstretched hands full of future and hope.

Do you remember? In her day God needed Mary to help him do what he wanted to do: save humankind and bring salvation. Nothing in Mary's life would ever be the same again after she had said her famous Yes to God.

Mary expressed the movement that had taken place in her young life by rising up and setting off. After the angel had left, she got ready and went on a journey to meet somebody else who'd understand her and support her.

Mary went to see Elizabeth.

She needed a companion.

We know, as Mary did, that her elder relative had experienced, as Mary had, a miraculous conception, and was now expecting a child.

It was the right thing to have come to Elizabeth's home. Elizabeth welcomed Mary and assured her that she'd done well in coming. She blessed Mary, and expressed her great joy not only of seeing her, but also of sensing her bearing this special child who would change the whole world.

In the picture here - which of course is much nicer in colour print - we can see the two women meeting, rejoicing and dancing.

Mary reveals her son's message of the kingdom of God. Sings of a God who hears the cries of those persecuted and oppressed, and who is always on the side of life and freedom. She sings of a God who comes to the frightened and the poor, to the sick and the hungry, and makes them all free.

"He 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..." (Luke 1:39f).

With the assurance of Elizabeth Mary felt liberated. With this show of solidarity from another person Mary's doubts disappeared. Her fear and misgivings, her feelings of weakness and inadequacy had gone.

Suddenly she could see what it actually meant to be chosen and called by God, and empowered and filled by the Holy Spirit! Such empowerment could reverse the usual human order, and this she had to sing in a song.

Mary was no politician; no revolutionary. But all of a sudden she became an articulate radical, an astonishing prophet, singing about a world in which the last have come first and the first last. Her song put it all in the past tense, as if the hungry had already been fed, the rich already moved and changed... What faith, what conviction, what courage must she have had!

We have no idea whether Mary and Elizabeth were all alone when Mary sang her song or whether people were standing close by listening and getting touched by what Mary shared with them.

I love to assume that there was an audience that got inspired and carried the news out into the Galilean countryside making hearts burn and hopes rise against an empire that was oppressing the Jewish people with a harshness that we can hardly imagine today.

It was surely not safe to sing the words Mary sang. The powerful do not want to be thrown off their thrones, nor would any of them rejoice by the thought of being sent away empty...

And I asked myself whether Mary sang her song alone, or whether others joined in and followed her example..., whether in the end there was a mighty choir of men and women singing the song of freedom & justice, and by doing so reduce the Roman oppressors to silence...?!

We know enough of the history of the New Testament times that we can say that the Roman regime was not stopped then - neither by Mary and her song, nor by Jesus who was not the fighter some had expected to come and overthrow the

present order of their time with fighting or in battle. But maybe some of the oppressors held on for a moment to think...when they saw the courage of the peasant population and heard the passion in their songs, who knows...?

And then – then a film came to my mind...

If you ask the kids' club children what my favourite film is, most of them will know: it is Casablanca. (produced in 1942).

Rick is a bitter, cynical American expatriate in Casablanca. He owns and runs "Rick's Café Américain", an upscale nightclub and gambling den that attracts a mixed lot of Vichy French and Nazi officials, refugees and thieves.

A small criminal, arrives in Rick's club with "letters of transit" obtained through the murder of two German couriers. The papers allow the bearer to travel freely around German-controlled Europe and to neutral Portugal, and from there to America. The letters are almost priceless to any of the continual stream of refugees who end up stranded in Casablanca. The man plans to make his fortune by selling them to the highest bidder, who is due to arrive at the club later that night. However, before the exchange can take place, he is arrested by the local police. He had entrusted the letters to Rick and dies in police custody without revealing the location of the letters.

At this point, the reason for Rick's bitterness re-enters his life. His ex-lover, Ilsa Lund arrives with her husband, Victor Laszlo, a fugitive Czech Resistance leader long sought by the Nazis. The couple need the letters to leave Casablanca for America to continue his work. German Major Strasser arrives to ensure that Laszlo does not succeed.

When Laszlo speaks with Signor Ferrari a major figure in the criminal underworld and Rick's business rival, Ferrari shares his suspicion that Rick has the letters. Laszlo meets with Rick privately, but Rick refuses to part with the documents, telling Laszlo to ask his wife for the reason. They are interrupted when a group of Nazi officers led by Strasser begins to sing "Die Wacht am Rhein", a German patriotic song. In response, Laszlo orders the house band to play "La Marseillaise", the French national anthem. The band looks to Rick for permission, and he nods his head. Laszlo starts singing, alone at first, and then long-suppressed patriotic fervor grips a young and beautiful mandolin player. The woman stands up and sings with all might against the unwanted regime and for the better of the world. Eventually everyone joins in, drowning out the Germans who then have Rick's club closed down...

I am not going to tell you the whole story of the film. It ends surprisingly, and with the beginning of a beautiful friendship of two very different men...

If you asked kids' club children once more, whether they not only knew my favourite film but also my favourite scene in the film, some of them would surely be able to say that it is exactly that part when the woman with the mandolin stands up against the Nazis and sings her song of resistance. She sings with all might, with love and passion, and she plays her instrument as if she could stop the war with her playing. She sings and plays with the hope of those who have nothing to lose but will not let go before they have tried everything to make a difference. And I love it when the surprised German soldiers in the film give up

their singing because they cannot withstand the passion and power with which those whom they have oppressed sing!

Mary and her song reminded me of the mandolin player from Casablanca... Mary reminds me of all people who made a difference in their lives or for the lives of others by singing their songs... living their lives... speaking their prayers... preaching their sermons... dreaming their dreams... sharing their visions...

Mary is the typical image of people of faith who give their lives to something greater than privacy – and to join instead the struggle for justice and peace. This sense of devotion, of total availability, of hope against all hope, of faith which makes possible the impossible – all this liberates people!

It can give us a feeling of freedom from whatever oppresses us in our lives. And then each of us can sing his or her song of freedom and of a God who makes all things new. We all can sing Mary's song in our own land, our own time, and our own life! And by doing so we are working towards a future full of goodness and justice.

Mary's song has become historic and an inspiration to people who sang similar songs over the centuries. Whoever we are, in Mary we are called to live and sing. Not necessarily sing well but to give expression to what we are called to: to bear hope in the midst of struggle and peace in the presence of pain.  
Amen.