



The Middle East Initiative

Pray.
Learn.
Engage.

How Can I not Sing?

By Jean Zaru

Text

Psalm 25:1

Luke 1: 46-43

Luke 3: 3-17

Mark 1:15

Reflection



It is a joy to wake up to the sound of birds singing on my olive tree in the courtyard. They call other birds to share with them their food, inviting the whole community of birds to celebrate together. Their joy is infectious and I bask in the sweet notes celebrating the bounty of the harvest. These birds, and their unceasing optimism, remind me Mary, mother of Jesus.

Hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees are live in refugee camps: some since the *Nakba* (an Arabic word meaning “catastrophe”) in 1948 and others since the *Naksa* (“setback”) of 1967. Many have been refugees more than once. A status that should be temporary in its nature has become permanent as generations remain exiled in their homeland, separated from their lands by cement walls and barbed wire. Mary understands their strife from her exile in Egypt with Joseph and Jesus. She, too, fled her homeland to protect her family. She, too, experienced the disorientation and trauma of exile.

Mary, our lady of Palestine, looks at the realities of life daily lived under empire: the rich oppress the poor; the powerful lord their authority over the weaker ones; seen and unseen walls of exclusion are erected; homes are stolen or demolished; lands are confiscated; water rights are violated; freedom of movement is restricted; access to holy sites is forbidden. Violations of rights become routine as years roll into decades, and decades into generations.

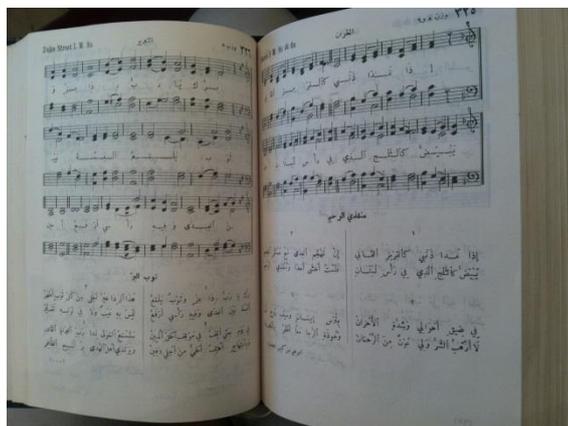
Standing in the shadow of empire, Mary sees and bears witness; she sings to God, the savior. She sings her full-throated confidence in God’s deliverance for the captives, release for those living under lawless oppression. God will, Mary sings, turn the world upside down, bring down

mountains, and raise valleys. God will bring down empire and raise a new human community of all God's people. God will restore balance, equality, and well-being to humankind.

And yet, after 48 years of occupation and denial of all basic rights, can I continue to witness and sing joyfully, as Mary does?

“46 My soul magnifies the Lord, 47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, 48 for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed; 49 for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. 50 And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. 51 He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; 52 he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; 53 he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty. 54 He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, 55 as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever.” 56 And Mary remained with her about three months and returned to her home.
- Luke 1: 46-56 Magnificat

In Luke's account, the unwed Mary seeks support from another woman: Elizabeth. The two women rejoice in God's liberating action of new life; they are filled with the Holy Spirit which will later work through their sons. Indeed, John is commissioned by the Holy Spirit to set the stage for Jesus's ministry, a bridge to the living water of the Messiah. In his own ministry, John resuscitates a long-past hope for the coming of the Messiah. He calls for an upturning of societal norms as he instructs people to share their abundance, to be fair in their dealings, and to uphold justice in their daily lives. Ultimately, John asks us to repent from the evils and vanities of society. John's call is just as valid and hard-hitting today, a time that is marked by continued greed, aggression, and ignorance. We have plenty to repent from: militarism, fanaticism, disregard for pluralism, and a lack of attention to refugees and other vulnerable children of God. John calls the crowd to prepare themselves for one who will baptize them in the Holy Spirit. As he does so he renews the prospect of hope for a kingdom of where justice is abundant and well-being is assured.



Mary enunciates God's salvation and well-being to the humiliated and downtrodden, the same audience to whom John ministers years later. The future that God promises of well-being for all without exception is not to be awaited passively. It is born in us today, from our flesh and blood, from our commitments and struggles for justice. It is a justice which we must intentionally seek out, for otherwise it will remain hidden under a heavy blanket of oppression and greed. It becomes the hope for those who do not have hope, a movement which affirms life and rejects tyranny. This hope abounds in Mary's humble but hopeful song, inspired by the glory of God.

Yes, friends, how then I can keep from singing?

The experiences of unity in human relations are more compelling than the concept and prejudices which divide. Life keeps coming on, seeking to fulfill itself, and affirming the possibility of hope. May this Christmas season be a time of renewal of our commitment and hope in Christ!

Questions

1. What can we do from our position in the shadow of empire?
2. How do we prepare the way for the Lord?

Prayer

Creator God,

You have come to us in all of our times of weakness and doubt. But you bring a promise of new life, a future of justice, an abundance of well-being. Instill in us the confidence to not only hope for justice, but to search for your vision of justice in our lives, in our communities, in our country, and in our world. Help us to challenge oppressive habits so that we may join together toward a common understanding of God's hope for us.

About the Author

*Mrs. Jean Zaru is the Presiding Clerk of Ramallah Friends Meeting (Quakers). She has written many articles and is the author of *Occupied with Non-Violence: A Palestinian Woman Speaks* (Fortress Press, 2008). She is a founding member of the Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center (Jerusalem) and served for 23 years on its board. She is a member of the Global Charter for Compassion, and is an advocate for peace and human rights, including women's rights.*