



FIRST CONGREGATIONAL  
CHURCH UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST  
— Stockbridge, Massachusetts —

# *The Soundtrack of our Lives*

## **December 23, 2018**

*\*\*Note—this sermon was set to music playing underneath—each time the music evoking what was being spoken.\*\**

**Text: Luke 1: 46-55**

And Mary said, ‘My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. 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. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.’



**Sermon:**

Robert Browning was married to Elizabeth Barrett Browning. In his own right, he was a gifted poet and playwright. He was a man for whom the spoken word was his tool and his craft, although he knew the limitations of the spoken word. Through his poetry he revealed this profound truth—*“The one who hears music feels his solitude peopled at once.”* The one who hears music finds their solitude and their loneliness dissipating and fading, while their connections are growing and strengthening. The one who hears music, whether it’s a song like this: “O come, O come Emmanuel,” hears an ancient song, written in medieval times and yet it’s a song that found new life in the mid 1800’s by a pastor who was convinced that our worship needed a more ancient, solemn and sturdy soundtrack. Now, I don’t think we could imagine the Advent journey without this song. It is a song that calls us to our ancient sacred past and yet it also beckons us to consider those on whose shoulders we now stand.

Or consider a song like this one: the Lord's Prayer set to music. It has an even more ancient text with new words and this beloved contemporary tune that helps encounter that ancient text in the very moments of our contemporary living. Its bold, new interpretation carries us into the truth that we are called in each generation to make our faith our own. This song points to the future of our ever-unfolding faith. Browning expressed this truth through his words. He said that music takes the solitude of our own living, our own times and place, and unique circumstance and peoples it; it joins us to the eternal body of Christ of yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Music's gift is that it wends our way into our hearts in ways that are not easily shaken or forgotten. Music becomes our soundtrack of living amidst times like these that often feel so much bigger—in times that often feel like they surpass us.

Contemporary poet Khalil Gibran went so far as to call music the very *language of the spirit*—the Holy Spirit was what Gibran was talking about—that which uplifts us, inspires us, and allows us to live into the calling that God presents to each and every one of us here in our own times, but the spirit does something more too. In John's Gospel, Jesus speaks a great deal about the spirit, and he says that one of the primary purposes of the spirit is that it will bring the story of our faith from its ancient past into our very current heartbeat. It will be the spirit, Jesus says, that in difficult times he knows we will face—will bring us out of resignation and into determination. It will bring us out of fear and into faith.

That is exactly what the spirit did for little Mary. For when that angel came—the one we know as Gabriel—the one who suddenly appeared to her in the midst of her everyday living and gave her something unbelievable. He told her that she was going to bear a child, and not just any child, but God's son. It was news that rightly would have stopped any of us in our tracks, frozen in fear, focused on that unbelievable moment—and probably paralyzed by the implications it had for our future. But you see, Mary wasn't alone in that meeting with Gabriel; she had her faith with her; she had the stories of her faith with her, so when that angel was there in front of her, she reached back to the most ancient stories of her faith for an answer that might suffice in that moment. On that day from her lips came a phrase that she had heard uttered throughout the sweep of her faith's history.

It was the same phrase proclaimed by Abraham when God called him to leave home and family for a land he had never seen; it was the same phrase that Jacob somehow stammered when God told him, "Do not fear for I am sending you to Egypt where I will make of you a great nation. It was the same thing Moses managed to stutter when God's voice came out of that burning bush. In each case, they were presented with the improbable, the impossible; in each case, they would be a new beginning for God's people and in each case, they simply said, "Here I am." So when Mary was confronted by the angel, she reached back into her faith for words that were not her own, but they were words that met her in her time and became her own. She said to that angel, "Here I am." She had learned that her forbears needed to say that, and so she needed to, and

it was enough for the moment. But then the angel left, and suddenly Mary was all alone. Can you imagine being in solitude, left to contemplate this impossible, unnerving that had suddenly been thrust in her life in the midst of her own difficult times.

Modern art seems to forget that she was a teenage unwed girl, and she had just come face to face with an angel who told her that she was going to bear the savior of the whole world—that she was going to bear the gift of salvation to a world in desperate need, and she knew exactly the kind of cost that would exact. She knew that these things would happen in ways that at their very best would utterly confound the world and at their very worst would condemn her for her role in it. Alone—in solitude. I wonder how long it took her not just to hear the words, but the songs—and not just the songs of her forefathers, but the songs of her foremothers too. I wonder how many lonely days she spent on her own pondering the news of this angel—how many hours did she spend alone in her garden—how many days drawing water at the well? She was tending to the everyday needs of her household until the song finally came to her. I wonder how long it was that the song wafted along on the gentle breezes of Galilee—drawing her—drawing from her past—until it found its way onto her heart. Just as Browning understood—suddenly her solitude was peopled—from an ancient song of her faith that met her precisely in her moment and situation. The story tells us that it was when the spirit was dancing in her midst and when she was in the company of her kin, that this ancient song burst forth from Mary’s lips. Sometimes we know the song best as Mary’s *Magnificat* but for thousands of years it had been something else. It had been the Song of Hannah—ancient, solemn, sturdy words, but words that had met her in her own time. So here, Luke tells us, Mary sings them from her lips to give her strength and hope for the future, and to give these ancient words a new future in their telling. No doubt, these words from Hannah’s song touched her more closely and intimately, even than the beginnings of Abraham, Jacob or Moses. For Mary shared a great deal in common with Hannah, whose song she sang. Hannah too conceived a child in the most unexpected of ways; Hannah too gave up her child to the service of God. Like Mary’s child, Hannah’s child would also usher in a new beginning for the people. Hannah’s child was named Samuel—the great prophet of the Old Testament. In the midst of Hannah’s song, Mary became peopled; she found the strength to know that she could do it too—no matter how impossible it all seemed, not matter how overwhelming it had to be.

I don’t know if it was the song that came to Mary and drove her to the company of her kin, or if it was the love of kin that unleashed the song in her, but I do know, and Luke knew, and we need to know that Mary was not alone in that moment. She was peopled—no longer alone. She couldn’t just face her future; she could embrace it. Late in her pregnancy, she could journey on the back of a donkey all the way without a whisper of complaint. She could settle into that stable with the animals, pondering in her heart rather than lamenting in her mind. She could fulfill God’s calling, not in

silent resignation but in hopeful determination. It is why every Advent we turn back to the ancient stories of our past—so that we do not go into the darkness of these days, but rather like Mary, we lift a light into the night, no matter how ridiculous or small it might seem. It is why every year we keep awake; we remember Jeremiah and the shoot from Jesse’s stump. It’s why we go into the wilderness to hear the one calling, while we listen to prophecies about singing warriors bringing forth love as their weapon of salvation. It’s so that not just in these fleeting days of Christmastime, not just in this season or in this moment—but in all seasons and moments of our lives we can draw from this great and varied soundtrack of our faith from the people who have gone before and shown us the way—for the faithfulness of God, whose grace meets us not just when we sing *Silent Night* but in every single moment we draw breath. Then we can open our hearts to receive the gift of peace that we too might live in hopeful determination in a broken world that needs it—never alone, always peopled—like Mary—both with those who have come before in the stories of our faith, and with those who are right here in this room—our kin of blood and faith in our own time.

This Advent, a small group of faithful kin have been gathering up in 7<sup>th</sup> Heaven every Tuesday night to read devotions, thoughts and words from those who have gone before. Together we’ve read the most profound reflections from ancient and contemporary heroes of our faith. We have wrestled with their thoughts, contemplated their words, and we have debated their ideas. But more than that, we have brought our lives, our challenges, our needs and dreams together in that sacred space until the golden threads of music drifting over the ages of time have released us from the solitude of our time and place to be peopled. Together like Mary and Elizabeth, we have shared our joys in the movement of spirit through the worn out places in our lives, even as we have shared the places where we struggle or feel not up to the task that is before us. Each week we have lifted the stories of our faith—solemn, sturdy, ancient words—that somehow help find new life and new future in the retelling, lifting us out of resignation and kindling our hopeful determination. We started our study with these simple words that I want to leave you with today, that you might remember them before the coming of the Christ child tomorrow night. These words are from the 15<sup>th</sup> century: *“Lo, in the silent night a child to God is born and all is brought again that ere was lost forlorn. Could but thy soul O man become a silent night—God would be born in thee and set all things aright.”*

Friends, we practice our faith and remember our stories that they might become the soundtrack of our lives—that our lives might go on in endless song, above earth’s lamentation. It is a high and holy calling. Amen.



*The Rev. Brent Damrow, Pastor*