"A Baby Changes Everything"

Luke 1:39-56

Julie R. Harley – First United Church of Oak Park – December 20, 2009

A baby changes everything.

When the angel told Mary, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you, and you will conceive," she knew that meant: "Give up all illusions of control right now."

When the angel said, "Nothing will be impossible with God," Mary translated that to mean, "Your whole life is going to change in an instant."

Those of us who have had a baby enter our lives (by the traditional, non-miraculous route) know that **a baby really does change everything**.

Once you have a baby, you go from being sexy to being seriously sleep-deprived.

Once you have a baby, you stop posting your favorite rock band's touring calendar on the refrigerator, and you put up a potty training chart complete with stars and stickers.

Once you have a baby, you don't pick up the phone to book a trip to a Caribbean island. You're booking a weekend at an indoor waterpark, hoping for free pizza coupons.

Babies may look innocent and harmless, but they are utterly subversive. Their primary goal is the nonviolent overthrow of your life. Just because they come in a cute little package, don't be fooled. **A baby changes everything**.

Some people know this, and they seek to shield themselves from the full impact of infant insurrection. These people are called "grandparents."

Pastor Mark Buck and his wife Jane are expecting their first grandchild in a few months, so he walks around offering to hold babies during Sunday coffee hour. He claims this is part of being a grandparent-in-training. But Mark is quick to say that as soon as they have a diaper to be changed, he hands them back to their parents.

We've heard this one before. It's the script that every grandparent learns: "I'm here to spoil them and play with them and give them gifts, and then I'm ready to send them back home."

I noticed Mark is not training to be a grandparent by discussing curfew and dating rules with my 16-year-old. I notice he hasn't offered to comparison shop for car insurance or college tuition with my 18-year-old. Grandparents want all the joy, without the responsibility.

Maybe it's like that with Christmas too. We want Christmas to be about cookies and gifts and warm fuzzies and drinking eggnog by the fireplace. The season of Advent is certainly a celebration of hope, peace, love and joy.

But the birth of this baby Jesus also changes everything.

If you ask people to name their favorite Christmas carol, many will say, "O Holy Night" or "Joy to the World" or "Silent Night." These have been classics for two or three hundred years, and they only get better as time goes by.

In fact, the greatest Christmas carol in history was not sung by Bing Crosby or Celine Dion. It was composed two thousand years ago by a pregnant, unmarried teenager in the hill country of Judea. After receiving a blessing from her cousin Elizabeth, she was inspired to sing the words we just read from Luke 1 and sang together as a hymn.

We call it "Mary's Song," or in Latin, "The Magnificat" from the first line, "**My soul magnifies** the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." (Luke 1:46)

Trust me, this is one of the most dangerous songs you will ever sing.

The FBI may be creating files on all of us right now, because **Mary's song is subversive**. Listen to what it says:

- God upends the thrones of people with power and favors the humble and lowly.
- God sends rich people away with nothing, and gives food to the hungry.

- God scatters those who are proud, but cares deeply for people who are vulnerable.

It's no wonder that as soon as Herod heard tell of this young mother, he started gathering his stooges together to wipe out Jesus and his family. It's no wonder that this Roman king who ruled over the Jews was willing to carry out genocide to get rid of this subversive young woman. He knew what would happen if others started singing her song. The people he had been keeping under control would rise up against him.

It's no wonder that the government of Guatemala banned the singing of this song in the 1980s. It was too dangerous. Rich politicians were worried that if the peasants started singing this stuff they might organize a riot. That would ruin all their plans.

Isn't it strange that **a song about a baby who has not even been born** would pose such a huge threat to powerful people? Isn't it strange that a pregnant teenager could start a revolution?

We may not want to think about the subversive message of Mary's song, but it's too late to stop what she started.

Luke tells us God changes the world through the birth of a child. And God gives Mary the courage to sing about what that child will do.

God does not change the world by military force or by armed revolution.

Mary's only weapon was a song. She started a joyful revolution.

Our faith is based on the belief that even the most humble, simple soul can carry the Son of God. In the Christian tradition, Mary has been called *theotokos*, which means God-bearer. Her song has been sung countless times in churches of every nation.

Our joyful revolution is rooted in the faith that every person has the potential to be a God-bearer. All of us can carry the light of Christ into the world.

And that Christ-light comes streaming out of the cracks in our creaky, crazy, all-too-human bodies **when we sing.** It is the most powerful force in the world. It is the only antidote to evil. When we sing, miracles can happen.

It was the winter of 1914, and the British forces were camped out in trenches across the battle lines from German troops. Suddenly a sentry signaled for silence, as he heard a sound coming from the enemy side. The Germans were singing something that

sounded like a hymn. It was Dec. 24 -- Christmas Eve. The Englishmen looked at one another, and they began singing in response, "God Rest Ye, Merry Gentlemen."

After a pause, they heard the strains of "*Stille Nacht*" floating across No Man's Land, between the trenches. The Brits began singing the words in English, "Silent Night, Holy Night, All is Calm, All is Bright." The two languages blended together – different words, singing same tune. For a moment, the battlefield felt almost holy.

Then the sentry cried, "Someone's coming toward us!" They aimed their rifles. It was a German soldier holding a white flag in one hand and a small Christmas tree shining with candles in the other. Slowly, the British troops crawled out of their trenches and moved toward this German who a few moments ago had been their enemy.

He offered chocolate. They shared tins of Army rations. The Germans and Englishmen began shaking hands. They gathered around a fire. The soldiers showed off pictures of loved ones. Someone brought out a harmonica. Another man had a violin. Soon they organized a game of soccer. It became an all-night party.

When the light of Christmas Day dawned, the men returned to their trenches, on opposite sides. The World War I Christmas Eve Truce was over. And though no medals were awarded, every man was a hero that night.

You know what they say: A baby changes everything.

A baby gives us the courage to be subversive. Have you heard of Code Pink?

Code Pink is a grassroots peace and social justice movement organized by 100 women in 2002 that works to end the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In response to the homeland security alerts of yellow, orange and red (designed to signal terrorist threats), Code Pink is a feisty call for women and men to "wage peace" rather than war.

Code Pink believes being subversive should be fun!

They organized a Valentine's Day Kiss-In at military recruiting centers around the country. Peaceful protesters held signs saying: "Don't Enlist! Stay and Kiss! That Way Everyone Makes Out." They carry pink signs that say, "Love the troops—Hate the war."

Code Pink also sells T shirts with the message, "War Is So Over!" and baseball tees that proclaim, "Gandhi Is My Homeboy." They declared July Fourth "Independence from War Day" and have a new campaign called "War is Not Green."

They are mothers and grandmothers and girlfriends who no longer want to wait and watch as more troops are sent to fight and die in the Middle East. I'm thinking of joining myself, since my nephew Stephen – who was discharged last year after serving four years in the Army – was called up in response to the surge in Afghanistan. He'll be shipping out in January, and he doesn't want to go. Our family doesn't want him to go either.

You see, a baby changes everything. When it's your baby who is at risk, it's easy to be subversive.

Four of us from First United participated in the Army School of the Americas Vigil in Ft. Benning, GA, about a month ago. This military school was started in the 1950s to train Latin American soldiers, as a means of keeping the powerful people in power and keeping workers, students, clergy and the poor out of the way.

The School of the Americas trains soldiers to kidnap, torture, intimidate, assassinate and control citizens of many Central and South American countries – including Colombia, which is a special mission focus for our congregation.

For 19 years, thousands of people have traveled to Ft. Benning to engage in a peaceful vigil outside the gates to demand that this school be closed. We carried crosses with the names of thousands of people – men, women and children – who were killed at the hands of SOA graduates. In a solemn liturgy on Sunday morning, we recited the names and sang songs and placed the crosses at the gate of the military base. Anyone who trespassed even a few feet into the base was arrested.

A group of counter-protesters were gathered outside of the vigil area, and they held a banner that said, "Our peace is protected by military troops, not by socialist protesters."

I could only wonder if they were speaking for Herod, and if he would have called Mary a "socialist protester" for her song about lifting up the poor and feeding the hungry.

I was not there as a socialist protester. I was there as a follower of Christ and a baptized believer.

I am not here to protect the peace, if that means protecting only my **own** peace. I am not here to protect the peace, if that means turning a blind eye to the injustice and poverty and suffering endured by people in other parts of the world.

I'm here to disturb the peace, by singing Mary's song.

I'm here to teach it to our children, just as Mary taught it to her son Jesus, just as Mary's cousin Elizabeth taught it to her son John – who became John the Baptist.

Don't you suppose Mary sang this song as she rocked her baby Jesus, as she got him dressed in the morning, as she bathed him at night, as she went to the well several times a day to draw water, and as she brought him to the synagogue on the Sabbath?

Mary probably sang that song to Jesus hundreds of times.

I know this because Mary's song in Luke's gospel became the basis for the message preached by both John and Jesus.

This is God's surge. This is God's offensive strategy against evil.

God did not send 30,000 troops to overturn Herod's reign. God sent a baby, born to a young woman, who knew that God had blessed her by choosing her to bear this child.

It is in people---not things---that God wishes to live.

If God could be born in Mary, if she could become a God-bearer, so can we. In the last verse of "O Little Town of Bethlehem," we sing these words: *Cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today.*

As Protestants, we are reformed and always reforming. Injustice and oppression are the marks of sin in society that mar God's good creation. We know we will not achieve complete victory over the sins of the world until Christ comes again.

But in the meantime, let's continue to be joyful revolutionaries, to do spiritual battle with the evils of our world, to wage peace and witness for justice. I wish you a subversive Christmas this year!

We will continue to disturb the peace, with Mary's song. Her song may be our only weapon. But never doubt its power.

This year the world celebrated the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. Tearing down that monument of division took most of the world by surprise, but before the wall came down, the citizens of Leipzig held peaceful protests for several months.

They gathered on Monday evenings by candlelight around St. Nicholai Church – where Bach composed so many of his cantatas – and they sang. Over two months their numbers grew from fewer than a thousand voices to more than 300,000 – over half of the citizens of Leipzig, singing songs of hope and protest and justice, until their song shook the powers of their nation and changed the world.

Perhaps it's no accident that this revolution would begin in Bach's musical home.

Many of J.S. Bach's music manuscripts begin with the letters J.J. and at the end conclude with the letters S.D.G. The letters "J.J." stand for "Jesu Juva" (Jesus, help me). The letters S.D.G. stand for "Soli Deo Gloria" (To God alone be the glory).

Jesus, help us be joyfully subversive. And to God alone be the glory. . . for sending us a baby who changes everything. Amen.