

Psalm 126  
Luke 1:39-56

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Irene Pak Lee  
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## **“I’m Here”**

One of my favorite podcasts is hosted by Dr. Kate Bowler, a writer and professor at Duke Divinity School. Her podcast is called, “Everything Happens.” Recently, I listened to probably one of my favorite episodes so far where she had a conversation with Bryan Stevenson, the founder and executive director of the Equal Justice Initiative, a human rights organization in Montgomery, Alabama. He is an attorney, who as part of his calling, represents those who have been unjustly or unfairly prosecuted, exonerating innocent death row prisoners and more. I would commend this entire podcast to you, but this particular interview was very moving and powerful.

One of the stories he shared was about a man who had been convicted and sentenced to death in Monroeville, Alabama. The man had continued to insist on his innocence and as Stevenson got involved in the case and did research and talked to folks, it became evident to him that he was indeed innocent. He believed him. It turns out that he was with 30 other people at a party raising money for his church who all could testify to this and knew he was innocent while the crime happened miles away at the same time. As this proof and light was shed on the case, Stevenson was surprised at the push back even harder to maintain this man’s guilt and to put him to death.

And so the story goes that the community came together to the court and on the first day the court was packed with black folks and white folks who had worked with the man. After the first day of court, the prosecutors were so upset that there were so many people there that the next day they set up a metal detector and a German Shepherd dog and tried to prevent community members from coming in. Stevenson himself was told he couldn’t come in until he told them that he had to be in there as one of the attorneys on the case.

Finally, after a lot of back and forth and figuring out what to do, they had to select a certain number of folks who could come into the court with limited seating and one of those who was selected that day was an older black woman named Ms. Williams. Stevenson said she stood out to him right away, the way she carried herself proudly and head held high. She walked through the metal detector but then visibly stiffened and was afraid when she saw the dog. He said he could see her hesitate for a while but eventually she turned and left. After that day in court, she had waited outside and came up to Stevenson and apologized over and over and over saying she was

meant to be in there. She wept saying she was so sorry, she was meant to be there but as she walked in and saw the dog, all she could remember was 1968 in Selma and the dogs that were part of the violence that happened that day. He kept telling her it was okay.

Well, apparently the next day in court, Ms. Williams got there and pleaded with the leaders selecting folks to go in to let her try again. Later, her niece told Stevenson that Ms. Williams had been up praying most of the night for God to give her courage and strength and kept repeating the phrase out loud, "I ain't scared of no dog, I ain't scared of no dog." So as she walked into court that day, she marched herself in there, walked through the metal detector, past the dog, went to a seat and remained standing and said out loud "Mr. Stevenson, I'm here." Stevenson turned and acknowledged her, smiled and said, "I'm glad, Ms. Williams" and went back to prepping. And she said it again, "I don't know if you heard me, Mr. Stevenson, I'm here." And he turned again to acknowledge her presence. Then the judge walked in and everyone stood up and as everyone sat back down, he could feel eyes from several people on someone behind him, so he turned around and Ms. Williams was still standing and said one more time "I'm. Here."

And Stevenson shares that in that moment what he realized was that she was not just saying I'm physically present but what she was actually saying was "I may be old, I may be poor, I may be black, but I have a vision of justice that compels me to stand against injustice." And he continued that he has come to believe that the two most important words we can articulate when we are trying to minister, to serve, to be a friend, when we encounter something hard and difficult, that the most challenging and right thing to say in that moment is "I'm here." He said, "It's that expression of presence in places that are difficult and challenging that are much more powerful than a lot of the other words we can say" and that we may not always have the answers, skills or knowledge, but the courage of witness and co-suffering is a beautiful thing to be near.

She doesn't use those exact words, but in our scripture lesson today, Elizabeth essentially tells Mary, in the same way Ms. Williams declared her presence and willingness to be there at court...I'm here.

After Mary's courageous declaration back to the angel Gabriel upon hearing that she will bear the son of the Most High (no pressure, Mary), after her "here I am," "Yes," and "let it be," Mary, perhaps being wise beyond her years does not go into isolation but turns to community. She goes "with haste" to the one person who might understand her predicament, her fears, her awe and her bewilderment, and goes to her cousin Elizabeth's home.

And so the story goes that Mary, upon entering the house and speaking Elizabeth's name, her voice produces a leap in Elizabeth's womb ... and these leaps together produce a response not of judgment or shame, but of blessing and joy. Elizabeth moves toward Mary and says "I'm here!" Mary finds acceptance, blessing, and affirmation of who she is and who she will become. Elizabeth filled with the Spirit believes her and blesses her. She stands witness with her. Her physical willingness to meet her with compassion and grace and love where she could have cast shame, is what I believe, moves Mary from a place of angst to a place of hope and song.

And the Magnificat, as Mary's song will be known, is one of the most revolutionary and prophetic songs in our scripture that is sung by a person who by all social markers was one living under oppression. Because even as her soul magnifies the Lord and rejoices in her God and Savior, she does not stop there, but continues by proclaiming and singing about God's liberating, healing, and upside-down kingdom that the babe in her womb will live out with his own life. The proud scattered, the powerful brought down from their thrones, the hungry filled. In fact, I've shared before and will share every time that her song continues to be so revolutionary that there are some countries such as India, Guatemala and Argentina that have banned the Magnificat from being recited in liturgy or in public. This song disrupts systems of power.

This, Mary sings with prophetic conviction. This beautiful and bold declaration and song, yes, comes within Mary and with her voice-but I also believe it comes because someone was willing to be in the background standing and saying "No matter what happens, I believe you, and I am here." After receiving the care, affirmation, and blessing she needed, she sings the song that she's always known within her heart and that grows within her womb. She not only sings the song for herself but she sings it for the world.

And friends, what is about to unfold in these Advent days, as we retell the story of Christ's birth, as you hear in her song, what happens is truly a revolution, not fought with weapons of war, but with love, forgiveness, mercy, and healing. It is a revolution, not brought by force and powerful men, but by two pregnant women and the birth of a baby in a manger. Church, we need the incarnation of Love in our midst. We need it so bad. We need the prince of peace to arrive in our world, in our country, in our justice system, in our factions and divisions, and into our hearts. In this season of Advent, we would do well to join her song, claiming our own place in how the world might change. If you're not sure how to start your song, if you're still finding that voice, you can start by standing witness and saying "I'm here."

I'm here. I believe you. And if you do have the words, friends, sing it. Sing it for the world. Because this song, this vision of the Magnificat is a world worth singing about

and it aches for your unique perspective and vision that God has given you. Yes, you. Sing it, share it, even if it ends up costing us before it fulfills us. Theologian Debie Thomas writes, “The thing is, Mary’s song forever dismantles the self-protective walls we erect between our personal piety and God’s insistence on systemic justice. We can’t choose the first only and call it Christianity. To love the helpless infant who comes to us on Christmas Day is to love the one who grows up to raise valleys and level mountains, to liberate the oppressed and dethrone the arrogant. Imagine Jesus in his cradle, the Magnificat a lullaby Mary pours into his ears each night until his heart burns for justice as fiercely as hers does. This is the One we call God. To love this God is to yearn for a reordered world with the same passion and urgency Mary voices in her justice song.”

And Padraig O Tuama is quoted saying “In a world that is so interested in being comforted by the damp blanket of bad stories, we need stories of belonging that move us toward each other, not away from each other.”

And so friends, today, on this fourth Sunday of Advent-with the candle of love burning bright, I want to challenge you to think about two things.

1. For whom or for what will you stand witness for today? Who will you bless, affirm, and move toward just-as-you-are? Just being and trusting who you are? For whom or for what will you say, “I’m here.”
2. What is your vision of justice that will compel you to stand and sing like Mary? What does your Magnificat sound like this year? What stories of divine favor do you have to tell, what glorious reversals do you see heading our way?

Because again, in the midst of despair, in the midst of sorrow and pain and division, in the darkness of the womb, in a world groaning with labor pains, we can still sing the vision and the hope and the love that both Mary and Elizabeth sing and proclaim, even if it will cost us before it fulfills us. For unto us a child will be born. A son is given. And the government will be on his shoulders and he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

I’m here. Let’s sing together.

Amen.