

Texts: Micah 5:2-5a, Psalm 80:1-7; Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-55

We light four candles this morning. Four candles on the day before the winter solstice, the longest night of the year. Tomorrow, the earth will begin to tilt in another direction and the northern hemisphere will once again tilt toward the sun. But today, it's dark. And not just dark from the lack of light. Dark with violence and hatred. Dark with fighting in many places. Dark with ignorance. Dark with poverty. Dark with fear.

How to face the darkness? Two ways: first, we light candles. Here's the thing about candles. A candle's light is not diminished when it's shared with another candle. A candle's light is multiplied. Light overcomes darkness.

And second: we sing. Just like Mary did in this morning's Gospel. We call her song the "Magnificat," which is Latin for "magnify." And for centuries, Christians have sung this song, Mary's song, in the liturgy of evening prayer. As the sun goes down, as one day ends and another begins, Mary's song has faced the darkness and magnified the light of God.

There are times when singing is an act of joy. There are times when singing is an act of friendship, of fellowship. But this morning, our singing is an act of resistance.

The slaves in the American South knew this. They sang "Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt's land, tell old Pharaoh to let my people go."

And the leaders of the civil rights movement knew it, too. They sang "Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe we shall overcome one day."

Woody Guthrie knew it, when he wrote, "This land is your land, this land is my land...this land was made for you and me."

Bob Dylan knew it, when he wrote, “How many roads must a man walk down, before you call him a man?...The answer, my friend, is blowin’ in the wind.”

The protesters in East Germany in 1989 knew it, too. Did you know that for several months preceding the fall of the Berlin wall, the citizens of Leipzig gathered on Monday evenings by candlelight around St. Nikolai church – that’s the church where Bach composed many of his cantatas. They gathered by candlelight – to sing. And in the course of a couple of months the numbers grew from a little more than a thousand people to more than three hundred thousand, over half the citizens of the city, singing songs of hope and protest and justice. Their songs shook the powers of their nation and changed the world.

Mary and Elizabeth knew it, too. Think about it – here are two women, one too old to bear a child, one so young she was not yet married, who were called to bear children of promise through whom God would change the world. Even though they faced long odds, they did not retreat, or apologize, or despair, they *sang*. They sang blessing and they sang faith. They sang of their confidence in God’s promise to overturn the powers that be, to reverse the fortunes of an unjust world, and to lift up all those who had been oppressed. When your back is to the wall, and everything looks dark, one of the most powerful things you can do is sing.

We light candles, and we sing. And there is one more thing that we are going to do this morning. In just a few minutes, little Cooper and her mom Valerie are going to receive God’s promise in the water of baptism, and Cooper’s dad Kent is going to re-commit to the promises that were made in his own baptism. We are going to douse them all with water, with the water of life, the water of new creation. God is doing a new thing right here this morning, just like God did with Mary and Elizabeth. Just like God did with the slaves and

the civil rights leaders and the people of East Germany. We will light candles for you – baptismal candles, candles that will remind you that the light of Christ shines in your eyes and burns in your heart. And every year after this, on December 20 – the day before the longest night of the year, I hope you will get out those candles and light them, and tell your daughter the story of her and her mom’s baptism, and remember the day that God made this promise to you: you are God’s beloved child and God will never let you go.

But first, I am going to teach you to sing Mary’s song. Open up your hymnal to #723. The title is the Cantic of the Turning. This song was written in 1988 by a Catholic songwriter named Rory Cooney. The tune is an Irish fiddle tune, maybe you will recognize it. The “turning” of the title has a two-fold meaning – it’s about revolution and it’s about repentance. Mary sings her song of blessing and faith and resistance and we do, too. On this day, the darkest day of the year, as the earth is about to turn, let’s light candles and sing while we await the new world’s dawn.