



Message by Rev. Michael Burke
Advent 2, December 10, 2023
Isaiah 40:1-11; Luke 1:39-56



**What do Sting, (from the 1980s band the Police);
the war in Gaza, and *the Magnificat* have in common?**

Let's find out.

Let us begin with Gaza.

In the early morning hours of October 7th, the party was still in full swing at the Supernova Music Festival in Kibbutz Re'im, just 3 miles from the Gaza border. It was billed as a festival of unity and love, drawing young people not just from Israel, but from all over the world. Nobody noticed the tiny black dots in the sky moving toward them from the direction of Gaza in the West, paragliders armed with automatic weapons. When the air raid sirens were triggered, so many thought it was just part of the music. Even the first bursts of gunfire, arriving on the back of motorbikes, blended with the electronic drumbeats.

Then, the horrific happened.

Fifty-eight days later, (so, less than a week ago), a woman who gave her name only as Fawziya sat in a makeshift tent at a United Nations shelter in Gaza.¹ She had eighteen family members with her, counting all the children. The day before, taking advantage of a seven day cease fire to return to her own, only to find, and her neighbors' homes, a pile of rubble. Covered in dust that clung to her, she had no words to say...

To date, over 1200 Israelis have died in Israel, and over 17,000 killed in Gaza.² If you are like me, you've seen the horrific footage in the media. There are layers upon layers of history of violence and brutality to shift through as we work our way back into the history of the past in that region. Although from our safety here in the USA, it might feel good to "take a stand" and forcefully defend one side or the other, that is of little comfort for the grieving mother in either Israel or Gaza.

There are no winners in the seemingly endless cycle of violence. The Israeli Defense Forces tell of how they have the right to self-defense, and that civilians are not targeted, but are unavoidable collateral damage, as the terrorist networks and tunnels of Hamas must be completely uprooted and destroyed if peace is ever to come.

And yet with every destroyed home, and devastated family, the seeds are sown in the hearts of thousands of new recruits, as children grow up knowing no other way but violence, retribution, and destruction. Overwhelming force sometimes brings peace for a time, but violence in one generation seeds violence in the next. The cycle goes on and on and on, consuming and destroying everything in its path.

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Not far from the site of rumbling military equipment, buried under centuries of drifting sand, are the remains of the burned city of Sepphoris in Galilee.³ The Roman-Jewish historian Josephus reported that In the year 4 BCE, (2027 years ago), there was a local insurgency by bandit freedom fighters under the leadership of Judas bar Ezekias.⁴ Their rebel forces broke into the empire's armory and stole all the weapons they found there, distributing them throughout the countryside. Syrian legions under the direction of Rome crushed the city and burned it to the ground, tearing stone from stone, and murdering and enslaving the people there.⁵

¹ <https://www.anera.org/blog/voices-from-gaza-a-collective-journal/>. Accessed December 9, 2023.

² See: <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/how-many-palestinians-have-died-gaza-war-how-will-counting-continue-2023-12-06/>

³ See: <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-of-advent-3/commentary-on-luke-139-45-46-55-4>, accessed December 9, 2023.

⁴ See: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sepphoris>, accessed December 9, 2023.

⁵ (Josephus, Ant. 17.271-87; War 2.56-69). For contemporary scholarship, see: John Dominic Crossan, *God and Empire: Jesus Against Rome, Then and Now* (publication place: HarperOne, 2009),109.

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Archeologist and historians believe that the city of Sepphoris was the likely birthplace of Mary, the mother of Jesus.⁶ It was to a small village by the name of Nazareth, that a weary Mary and Jesus returned to raise the boy Jesus.

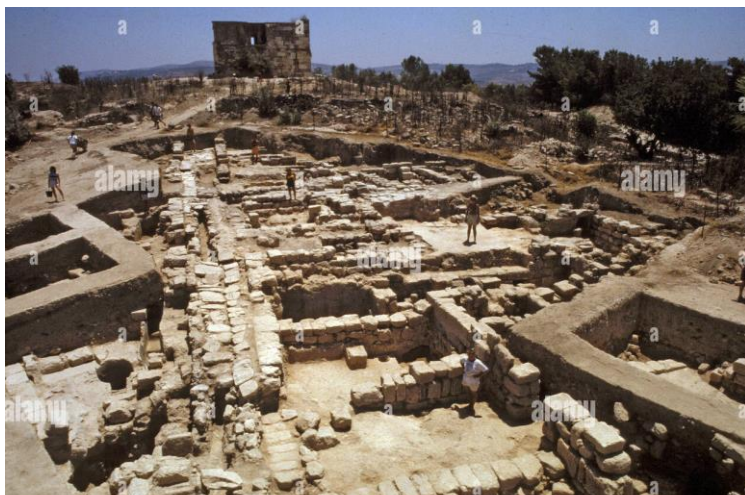
I'm going to pause to let that sink in for a moment.

Mary, as in "Mary, meek and mild," was a war survivor, a young woman with the memory of her destroyed home city having been decimated approximately twenty-four months earlier, who was then visited, in words and imagery of scripture, by an angel, who said to her,

"Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesu. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³ He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

Mary asked some questions of the angel, and
"³⁸ Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."⁷ I hear that as nothing less than the declaration of a strong, fierce woman, more warrior of peace than Christmas card "meek and mild."

And in that moment, this young Hebrew woman of Palestine reached for, found her voice. And not just any voice. Her song echoed what is called the "song of Hannah," the song of another young childless woman from five hundred years earlier in Jewish history, when outside kingdoms and empires had ravished the villages of Israel, and hope was nowhere to be found.⁸



The ancient ruin of Sepphoris.

Almy stock photo



⁶ Eric Meyers, ed. (1999). *Galilee, Confluence of Cultures*. Winona Lake, Indiana pp. 396–7: Eisenbrauns.

⁷ Luke 1: 38

⁸ The story is detailed in 1 Samuel, chapter 1, verses 2 to 20. Read More: <https://www.grunge.com/597416/the-truth-about-hannah-and-her-son-in-the-bible/>

It spoke of the *character* of God, who is in all things and above all things:
 God “breaks the bow of the mighty.”
 “God raises up the poor from the dust;
 God lifts the needy from the ash heap,
 to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor.” (from 1 Samuel)



Mary sang:

*God has shown strength with God's arm;
 God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their
 hearts.
 God has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
 and lifted up the lowly;
 God has filled the hungry with good things,
 and sent the rich away empty.
 God has helped God's servant Israel,
 in remembrance of God's mercy,
 according to the promise God made to our ancestors,
 to the descendants of Abraham through Hagar and Sarah
 and Keturah forever.*

Luke 1:46-56, RGT, (Revised Gafney Translation)⁹

If there is any answer at all to the cycle of violence in this world, it must be in following a different way. Violence begets violence both inter-personally and systemically down through the centuries and ages.¹⁰ As it was in yesterday, so it is today.

Mary's song, which we call the “Magnificat,” inverts the usual power dynamics of this world. It declares not just that there IS a God; not just that God is supreme, not just who God *is*, but also who God *is for*, but that God has a bias for those whom the powerful forces of the world care little for. As the Gospels and the stories of Jesus will later reveal: God has come for the broken, the lost, the lonely, and the weary.

And God has come *to* this child of trauma, the one broken by violence.

⁹ Rev. Dr. Wil Gafney, in <https://www.wilgafney.com/2013/12/22/the-magnificat-as-kedushat-hashem-sanctifying-gods-name/> Accessed 12-09-23

¹⁰ For interpersonal violence, see: Widom C. S. (1989). The cycle of violence. *Science*, 244, 160-166.

The child that Mary now carries, is the one who will proclaim to the world a new way of being human. **Jesus will reveal that the Way of God is the Way of Love**, and will herald the in-breaking reign of God in the world. Jesus comes into the world through Mary, and through Jesus, life will triumph over death, forgiveness over judgement, and redemption over sin.

Through Jesus, the deeper reality of God is revealed, life eternal, more powerful and transformative than the ways of death. The pearl of great price, the mustard seed of faith. The broken body of God in the breaking of the bread. Jesus showed forth the face of God in human skin, and that, as his disciple John wrote "God is Love."

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Jesus showed forth the face of God in human skin, and that, as his disciple John wrote "God is Love."

What did I leave out? Oh yes. You may remember the 1980s group The Police, and former leader Sting's subsequent solo career.

In the first few Winter months of 1985, Sting was sitting in a studio near the beach in Barbados with fellow musician Eddy Grant. They were engrossed in a conversation with a group of surfers about the concept of "the seventh wave."¹¹ ¹²

In an interview with a U.K. news magazine, Sting said: "In popular myth, if you count the waves on a sea shore, the seventh wave is supposed to be the strongest, the most profound. And I felt that at present the world is undergoing a wave of evil, if you like. The world's never been as polluted. We've never had as many missiles pointing across the borders, or as many armies in waiting. We seem to be in the grip of this growing sense of doom. And the song is uncharacteristically hopeful, saying that behind this wave there's a much more profound one. It's love, beyond selfishness. And I think if there isn't this wave, then we are finished. So it's singing about something and hoping that by singing about it you'll create it. The alternative, thinking that in five years time the world will end, isn't that helpful. [That] might sell records, but it doesn't help the people listening."¹³

Since you have heard portions of Hannah's song, and the Song of Mary, here is a bit of Sting's song: will leave you with the words to the song:

All the bloodshed, all the anger
All the weapons, all the greed
All the armies, all the missiles
All the symbols of our fear

¹¹ See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Love_Is_the_Seventh_Wave

¹² The U.K. monthly news magazine (now defunct) *The Independent On Sunday*, 11/94

¹³ Sting, in a *New Music Express* interview, 6/85).

[Chorus]

*There is a deeper wave than this
Rising in the world
There is a deeper wave than this
Listen to me, girl*

At the still point of destruction
At the center of the fury
All the angels, all the devils
All around us, can't you see?

[Chorus]

There is a deeper wave than this

Love, is the seventh wave.
I say love.

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Hannah's Song

2 Hannah prayed and said,

“My heart exults in the LORD;
my strength is exalted in my God.^a
My mouth derides my enemies,
because I rejoice in my victory.

2 “There is no Holy One like the LORD,
no one besides you;
there is no Rock like our God.

3 Talk no more so very proudly,
let not arrogance come from your mouth;
for the LORD is a God of knowledge,
and by him actions are weighed.

4 The bows of the mighty are broken,
but the feeble gird on strength.

5 Those who were full have hired themselves
out for bread,
but those who were hungry are fat with
spoil.

The barren has borne seven,

but she who has many children is forlorn.

6 The LORD kills and brings to life;
he brings down to Sheol and raises up.

7 The LORD makes poor and makes rich;
he brings low, he also exalts.

8 He raises up the poor from the dust;
he lifts the needy from the ash heap,
to make them sit with princes
and inherit a seat of honor.^c

For the pillars of the earth are the LORD's,
and on them he has set the world.

9 “He will guard the feet of his faithful ones,
but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness;
for not by might does one prevail.

10 The LORD! His adversaries shall be
shattered;
the Most High^d will thunder in heaven.
The LORD will judge the ends of the earth;
he will give strength to his king,
and exalt the power of his anointed.

The Magnificat

*God has shown strength with God's arm;
 God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
 God has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
 and lifted up the lowly;
 God has filled the hungry with good things,
 and sent the rich away empty.
 God has helped God's servant Israel,
 in remembrance of God's mercy,
 according to the promise God made to our ancestors,
 to the descendants of Abraham through Hagar and Sarah and Keturah forever.*

Luke 1:46-56, RGT, (Revised Gafney Translation)¹⁴

Pslam 113

1 Praise the LORD!

Praise, O servants of the LORD;
 praise the name of the LORD.

2 Blessed be the name of the LORD
 from this time on and forevermore.

3 From the rising of the sun to its setting
 the name of the LORD is to be praised.

4 The LORD is high above all nations,
 and his glory above the heavens.

5 Who is like the LORD our God,
 who is seated on high,

6 who looks far down
 on the heavens and the earth?

7 He raises the poor from the dust,
 and lifts the needy from the ash heap,

8 to make them sit with princes,
 with the princes of his people.

9 He gives the barren woman a home,
 making her the joyous mother of children.

¹⁴ Rev. Dr. Wil Gafney, in <https://www.wilgafney.com/2013/12/22/the-magnificat-as-kedushat-hashem-sanctifying-gods-name/> Accessed 12-09-23

Love is the Seventh Wave, by Sting

In the empire of the senses
You're the queen of all you survey
All the cities, all the nations
Everything that falls your way, I say

[Chorus]
*There is a deeper world than this
That you don't understand
There is a deeper world than this
Tugging at your hand*

Every ripple on the ocean
Every leaf on every tree
Every sand dune in the desert
Every power we never see

[Chorus]
*There is a deeper wave than this
Smiling in the world
There is a deeper wave than this
Listen to me, girl*

Feel it rising in the cities
Feel it sweeping over land
Over borders, over frontiers
Nothing will its power withstand, I say

[Chorus]
*There is no deeper wave than this
Rising in the world
There is no deeper wave than this
Listen to me, girl*

All the bloodshed, all the anger
All the weapons, all the greed
All the armies, all the missiles
All the symbols of our fear

[Chorus]
*There is a deeper wave than this
Rising in the world
There is a deeper wave than this
Listen to me, girl*

At the still point of destruction
At the center of the fury
All the angels, all the devils
All around us, can't you see?

[Chorus]
*There is a deeper wave than this
Rising in the land
There is a deeper wave than this
Nothing will withstand*

I said "Love, is the seventh wave"

Every ripple on the ocean
Every leaf on every tree
Every sand dune in the desert
Every power we never see

[Chorus]
*There is a deeper wave than this
Smiling in the world
There is a deeper wave than this
Listen to me, girl*

To go deeper: See:

https://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2002/12_december/12/mary_pack_realmmary.pdf