

WORSHIP

Sermon | 12.23.2018



Mary's Christmas Carol

The Reverend Pen Peery

Luke 1:46-55

Once again, I welcome you to worship here at First Presbyterian Church. For those who are guests today, know that you are especially welcome. We are really glad you are here. On the back of your bulletin you will find some information about ways you can connect with our mission, our classes, and our programs... which is really a chance for you to connect with one another. Take a special note of our services tomorrow – we have a 4:00 service that is especially suited for children. Then an 8:00 service, a 10:15 handbell concert, and an 11:00 service with communion. All three services will include candlelight.

In many ways, today is a set-up for tomorrow night. Advent is a season of preparation and anticipation...and the event is almost here.

In fact, if you are here this morning – two days before Christmas – my guess is you are either completely ready for the big day or completely in denial.

For at least a steady month we have been planning, shopping, decorating, cooking, cleaning, wrapping, partying, not sleeping...preparing to celebrate Christmas with family and friends.

And we've been preparing our hearts, too. A steady diet of devotionals. All four advent candles are lit. If you have Advent calendars at home, all but one of the days is filled. We are ready for the birth.

Our second Scripture for today is from Luke's gospel – and Luke's gospel is most famous for telling us the story that we have been preparing ourselves to hear: about swaddling clothes, and startled shepherds, glorious angels, and a manger.



But just like we spend these weeks before Christmas preparing for the main event, before Luke gets around to telling that most familiar tale about Mary and Joseph arriving in Bethlehem to give birth, Luke shares three other stories as a way of preparation.

The first is about a childless, older couple named Elizabeth and Zechariah – who would be the parents of John the Baptist. When the angel of the Lord told Zechariah that he would become the father, he couldn't and wouldn't believe it, and so was rendered unable to speak – giving him a nine-month pregnancy of his own in which to think things over.

The second story that Luke tells in preparation is about Elizabeth's relative from Nazareth, a young, girl...really... named Mary, who was betrothed to a man named Joseph. Much like Zechariah, an angel visits Mary to announce a pregnancy, which was...news. But instead of disbelieving, Mary is perplexed, and so she seeks out her relative – perhaps her Aunt? – Elizabeth for wisdom. Elizabeth's response to Mary is every bit of what we would all hope family would be: in the face of what could be an awkward and uncomfortable situation, Elizabeth opens her home and her arms to her teen-aged, frightened relative and she loves her for who she is and tells her that she thinks the news is wonderful. "Blessed are you among women," she tells Mary. And she means it.

The third story Luke tells in preparation is about Mary's reaction to all of this. New Testament scholar Beverly Gaventa says that after the shock of the angel's visit that announced this mysterious and frightening thing that was happening to her, and the grace of Elizabeth's acceptance and affirmation of her, it is time for Mary to say something. But instead of speaking, Mary sings. She sings a song we have come to call the Magnificat – which is our second reading for today. Listen with me for God's word...

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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.'

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It makes a lot of sense to me that Mary would prepare for Jesus' coming with a song.

Because beyond all the other things we have busied ourselves with doing over the past few weeks, maybe the best – and most fun – way we have prepared for Christmas is through singing.

Sure, sometimes we go over the top. K104.7 has been playing Christmas music 24 hours a day since the stroke of midnight after Halloween – with 47 different versions of Rudolph the Rednosed Reindeer – including one I heard earlier this week by Elvis.

But – in here – from the first notes of O Come, O Come, Emmanuel on the Sunday after Thanksgiving – music has been our companion and our guide on the journey toward the manger.



We packed into the Wood Fellowship Hall three weeks ago to Sing in the Season – where the choir wore their most choice sweaters, the children ate their weight in cookies, and we filled the air with music and joy.

Last Sunday during our service of Lessons and Carols, I had a smile on my face as I watched some of you who – I’ve observed, on a regular Sunday – stand silent during hymns...last week I watched you throw your heads back and as you belted out the chorus of Angels We Have Heard on High. And I want to say that you looked, and sounded, great!

200 years ago this Christmas Eve – in St. Nicholas Church in Oberdorf, Austria, a choir director named Franz Gruber and a priest named Joseph Mohr sat in the chancel of the small sanctuary during the midnight mass and led the choir and the congregation in a new song they had written. Joseph Mohr played the guitar and they both sang...

Sleep in heavenly peace, sleep in heavenly peace...

I can do a thousand other things, but for me, I’m not fully prepared for Christmas until the lights are low and the candles are lit and we join our voices singing Silent Night.

I wonder what it is for you?

O Holy Night?

Away in a Manger?

Handel’s Messiah?

The gift of a song or a piece of music is that it prepares us by taking us to that place;

it’s more than nostalgia...music brings us to a place that feels settled...and right...

a place where the other noise in our lives grows quiet and we are clear about who we are and what matters.

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When she wraps her mind around the fact that she will, indeed, carry God's son into our world, Mary opens her mouth to sing.

The song starts out normally enough –

My soul magnifies the Lord

And my spirit rejoices in God my Savior

For he has done great things for me...

But then things take a turn when Mary sings about what those great things are that God has done –

For he has scattered the proud

and brought down the powerful from their thrones;

filled the hungry

and sent the rich away empty...

That's quite a song. And it's just not a Christmas carol you are going to hear too often – not even on K104.7 no matter the time of day.

If a preacher were to say what Mary sings, some folks might say that the one giving the sermon had moved from preaching to meddling. Frankly, Mary's song sounds downright revolutionary because it upends the order of things.

Let's be honest, if one of the things music does it take us a place – the place that Mary's Christmas carol takes us to is unfamiliar.

Because as those who are relatively powerful, occasionally proud, economically advantaged, and rarely hungry – Mary's music just doesn't sound like our song.

Yet since this is our Scripture, it's worth asking why these were the words that formed on Mary's lips as she prepared to bring Jesus into the world.

As she heard the news about her pregnancy, Mary couldn't help but think about why she was chosen.



A peasant. Poor. Young. Vulnerable. Weak.

Why would God choose someone like her to bear the Christ?

It would make more sense to choose someone more powerful. With access to influence. Resources. A greater chance for success. Why not take the surer bet? Why risk it on an unwed teen-ager from the backwater town of Nazareth?

Unless that was God's point.

I think that Mary was moved to song because she felt the power of being noticed.

That as she reflected upon all that had happened to her, and what was about to happen to her, she recognized, maybe for the first time, that God had taken a particular interest...not in the likely, or the mighty, or the powerful...but in the vulnerable, the marginalized, the hungry, the forgotten, the ignored.

Indeed, that God cared so much about these kinds of people, that when it came time to choose how to enter into the world, God chose one of them in Mary.

There is power in being noticed.

It's a thrill.

Can you remember the first time it happened to you?

Maybe a teacher noticed your intelligence.

Or a coach noticed your athletic ability.

Or a friend noticed your compassion.

It's a boost. It can inspire us to succeed.

And it can become something we get used to.

When we get noticed enough, it can even become something we expect.

Many of us have made a life getting noticed – and we got used to the success that getting noticed brings. And when we're not careful, we believe that success is what our life is all about. And if that happens, watch out...because



then, it's not a far stretch to believe that we don't have as much need for anything that we can't do for ourselves.

But that's not everyone's story.

There are a lot of people who aren't that lucky.

For them, getting noticed is still a surprise.

Earlier this week our Child and Family Partnership Coordinator, Heather Herring, visited the teachers and staff of one of our partner schools in West Charlotte, Westerly Hills Academy. There's a reason we have Westerly Hills as a partner school – they need help. Close to 100% of Westerly Hills students have free or reduced lunch. Their test scores are consistently lower than the state average. For many of the students, their home-life is inconsistent, which does not translate well into classroom performance. And yet, every day, dedicated teachers, and administrators and staff show up to work at what has been labeled “a failing school” – to give of themselves for the sake of the children.

This week, using money committed by our Outreach committee, Heather showed up to a faculty meeting with gifts: a check for each grade level to buy much needed supplies, and small a check for the teachers (and support staff) as a gesture of our appreciation for their hard work. I think Heather emailed a group of us on her way back to her car in the parking lot. The response was overwhelming: shock, joy, an impromptu dance party, hugs... because, you see, at Westerly Hills, unlike most of the schools where my kids and your kids go, those kinds of tangible gifts of appreciation are not the norm.

To be sure, that makes us feel good. But what struck Heather was how significant it was for those teachers and staff just to be noticed – just to be acknowledged...in the midst of a high poverty, low performing, often forgotten neighborhood...for the faithful work they do every day.

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Mary broke out into song because she was overwhelmed that God had taken notice of her. I don't think the reason she sang glowingly about the scattering the proud and bringing down the powerful and sending the rich away empty wasn't



because she was into class warfare, I think it was because she knew that pride and power and money are often obstacles that get in the way of our relationship with God – and cloud us from appreciating how truly needy we are for the grace that God offers in the child that Mary birthed into our world.

The preacher John Buchannon once wrote, “[Mary’s song] teaches a simple truth: You cannot receive a gift unless you have a place for it. You cannot learn anything if you think you know it all. You can’t enjoy beauty unless there is a place in you that yearns for it. You can’t receive love unless you know there is a place in you that is empty and needs love to fill it. You can’t be lifted up unless you know you are poor.”

Even though it may not be music we are used to hearing, perhaps Mary’s song can prepare us, even this close to Christmas, to receive the good news of Christ’s birth by helping us loosen our grip on the things that make us feel like we are in control.

Maybe Mary’s song can help scatter the mightiness in our lives and lift up those places where we really are vulnerable, and needy, and dependent on someone besides ourselves.

Maybe Mary’s song can lead us away from our desire to be noticed for the things we produce, or the things we buy – and help us discover the joy of being noticed just for who we are.

Maybe Mary’s song can lead us to the manger where we will discover an unconditional love that causes us to notice the people who – in our busy and distracted lives – we tend ignore...but who God lifts up and calls blessed.

