

12.27.09

And So This Is Christmas

Luke 1:39-55

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Going Christmas caroling on Saturday, December 19 to Epoch of Brewster and Anne Perkin's home was so meaningful to our family and I think to everyone who went. We had the most men we've ever had, some folks who can actually sing, and even three instruments – a guitar, trombone, and parlor pipes – mini bagpipes. At Epoch we sang to patients who have Alzheimer's who remember so little yet they can remember the words to the carols they learned as children. We walked into a common room where a woman was playing carols on a piano for residents and I asked, "*Do you mind some reinforcements?*" as our group of almost 20 came into the room. You could feel the energy change in the room as we sang and people joined in. Everyone we saw from BBC greatly appreciated our visit. Our final stop was Ann Perkin's home. Ann is just a couple months shy of turning 100 and she loves hearing all the Christmas songs. Everyone year we go to her house, someone will ask, "Do you have a favorite? Do you have any requests?" And every year Ann says, "I love them all."

Singing is so associated with Christmas – whether it is Christians going caroling or the Who's down in Whoville or driving in your car singing those deep, soul stirring songs like *Dominic the Italian Christmas Donkey* or *I Want a Hippopotamus for Christmas*. ☺ Even in the Gospel of Luke there is singing associated with the birth of Jesus. Today's gospel lesson includes a song of Mary about what God has done and what God will do after she learns she will give birth to the Messiah.

"In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, <sup>40</sup> where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. <sup>41</sup> When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit <sup>42</sup> and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. <sup>43</sup> And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? <sup>44</sup> For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. <sup>45</sup> And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

<sup>46</sup> And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord,

<sup>47</sup> and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

<sup>48</sup> for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

<sup>49</sup> for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

50 His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

51 He has shown strength with his arm;

he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;

53 he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

54 He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,

55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors,

to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

One of the toughest labels to have attached to you as a person is that you have lots of potential. It is hard to live up that label. It is sad to hear, “*Well he never lived up to his potential.*” I sometimes feel that way for Christmas Day. There is such a build up, so much preparation, and then suddenly after a whirlwind of cleaning, cooking, eating, cleaning, presents, conversation, and traveling, it is over. Yet there is a sense only 48 hours after Christmas Day that we are still in its midst, even if the rest of the world is rushing headlong toward New Year’s Eve with Christmas and its music tossed aside like an unwanted sweater from Uncle Ralph or a bunch of crumpled wrapping paper. Yet there is a song that doesn’t get as much air time as *Rockin’ Around the Christmas Tree* that longs to be heard this time of year and that is the song of Mary, the mother of Jesus.

The setting of today’s Gospel lesson involves a woman traveling for an exciting and stressful meeting at her relative’s house – kind of like some of us getting ready to be with our relatives on Christmas. I wonder how Mary was feeling as she set out with haste to see her older relative Elizabeth who, according to the angel Gabriel, was also pregnant with a son. Was Mary stressed out by Gabriel’s message to her that she would bear not just a son but *the* Son of God? How could she explain that news to anyone? Was Mary seeking the shelter and support of her older relative or was she overjoyed at what God had promised to bring to life in and through her? Was she ecstatically happy that Elizabeth after decades of infertility was going to be blessed with a son?

Perhaps like some of us this week, Mary was experiencing both peaks of joy and valleys of concern as she entered the home of Zechariah and Elizabeth. Elizabeth’s greeting confirms Mary’s joy and dispels her fear. Through remarkable circumstances both women are pregnant with sons who will be of great importance. One is old and her son will close an age.

The other is young and her son will usher in a new age. Even the unborn John knows the difference and leaps in his mother’s womb when Mary enters. This prenatal

activity witnesses to the will of God for John and Jesus. For those in Luke's audience who knew the scriptures of Israel, the movement of the child in the womb recalls other times when prenatal behavior foreshadowed what was to come. Jacob and Esau fought so fiercely in Rebekah's womb that she lamented about her coming motherhood, *"If it is to be this way why do I live?"* (You can also read about the birth struggles of Perez and Zerah in Genesis 38:27-30).

In Luke 1:15 the angel Gabriel had said to Zechariah about his yet to be born son, *"even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit."* Elizabeth interprets the movement of her unborn child and is filled with the Holy Spirit and she prophesies. Luke has given no indication that Elizabeth knew of the angel's visit to Mary. Her knowledge of Mary's pregnancy is given to her by the Spirit. She declares the blessedness of Mary and the baby that will be born to her. What a confirmation and affirmation these words must have been to Mary.

The angel had promised Zechariah that he would have joy and now joy has come to Elizabeth at the visit of Mary. John has already begun to fulfill his calling as the one who would declare the Lord's coming and prepare the way for him.

Later when Jesus was a man he rejoiced that the Lord of heaven and earth who had hidden things from the wise had revealed them to infants (Luke 10:21).

Finally the older relative Elizabeth blesses Mary for **her faith that God's promise to her would be fulfilled.**

I know that is a lot of background to try to grasp but the point Luke is making is important and he builds it carefully: **Blessing comes from trusting that God's Word will be fulfilled.** Do you find trusting God difficult? Some of us may identify with Elizabeth and Zechariah. They are older people who devoted themselves to serving God and yet they waited and prayed and hoped for years for God to answer their prayers for a child, who never came.

**Some of us may find it hard to trust God after years of waiting, hoping, and praying and not seeing an answer or getting an answer we really didn't want.** We may find it hard to trust after years of emptiness and seeming silence from God. *"What have I received for all my service, devotion, and prayers – there are still problems with children, with health, with finances, God why haven't you done something?"* Sometimes it is like we are holding one piece of a puzzle and wondering why it doesn't seem to make sense to us. God had something special planned for Elizabeth and Zechariah in their old age which enabled them to be a blessing to the world in a way they couldn't

have imagined when they were younger. Sometimes people think life has passed them by or that they have already made their greatest contribution, but you like Elizabeth and Zechariah God may surprise you when you are older with a very significant contribution to make.

Some of us may identify with Mary. She is a young woman with hopes and goals of her own, but God gives her an opportunity to be the means of tremendous blessing to the world. But it means changing her goals and expectations and trusting God. God invites her to something unheard of and unexpected. For Mary, following God's plan will require being vulnerable to having her own heart and hopes pierced.

And so this is Christmas. It is a time when God is inviting us to make a decision about the direction of our lives. It is a time of music and singing. Mary sings a song of praise. Just as some of us like old songs at Christmas time, Mary's song is patterned after the ancient song of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2:1-10 and it is a classical statement of God's activity: God brings down the mighty and lifts up the lowly. God *"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."*

For people like myself who are rich and materially blessed, these words of Mary are a little unnerving. I don't want in anyway to diminish the shock of them for people like many of us. Yet I also believe that Mary's song is about God's way of vulnerable love which is seen in the birth and in the death of Jesus. It is not that God wants to send anyone away or banish anyone. However, those who are so proud and full of themselves, those who are drunk with power, those whose lives are so full of good material things – often don't see the need for or make room for God – and so, as Mary sings, they end up without God, they end up empty, with nothing.

Mary stays with Elizabeth for three months and then goes home, presumably after the birth of John. What a joyous time it must have been for those two women. The joy of Mary and Elizabeth is the joy of all who look forward with wonder and thankfulness to the birth of a child – even as we do at Christmas. Joy is peaked by waiting. Just ask a child in the last days before Christmas.

Joy is a recurring theme in Luke's Gospel. Joy bursts forth in the angel's visits and announcements and the births of John and Jesus. Throughout Luke we hear and see the joy of forgiveness, healing, resurrection, new beginnings, redemption, and

transformation in those who trust and make room for Jesus. The Gospel ends with the disciples returning to Jerusalem with joy and praising God in the Temple.

Our response to God's sending of Jesus into our lives to save us and to save the world, is to be one of joy. Elizabeth praises God and blesses Mary for two reasons:

She has been chosen to be the mother of the Lord Jesus.

She has believed the word of God.

We too will find blessing, as the old carol says, in inviting Jesus to "*be born in us today,*" and in believing the word of God.

John Lennon's song *Happy Christmas*, begins:

*"So this is Christmas and what have you done  
Another year over And a new one just begun  
And so this is Christmas, I hope you have fun  
The near and the dear ones, The old and the young."*

Christmas is a good time to reflect on how we have invested the last irreplaceable year of our life – what have we done with it? A new year will begin soon – what will we do with it? Like Mary and Elizabeth, **what is God longing to birth and bring to life in and through you if you will only believe?**

Have you heard a voice in the night or welling up inside you, prodding you to take a leap of faith? Has God shared with you in a dream something you have dismissed as too impractical or simply not possible?

And so this is Christmas: A time of angels and dreams and mystery.

A time of reversals and surprises.

A time to believe and to trust and to dare to say yes to the Mighty One whose name is holy.

A time to remember that God opposes the proud, the powerful, and the rich, and is on the side of the humble, lowly, and poor.

A season in which a merciful God will help us if we will only ask.

Whether we are struggling with grief, emptiness, or pain; with poverty or hunger; or with pride and the proper place of our material abundance -

God's mercy is for all who give the Lord the reverence, awe, and worship the Holy One deserves.

As Donna has shared so powerfully this morning, it is amazing what God can do when we trust and sometimes even when we don't. I know there are other folks here this morning who could also testify to how God has been opening doors and sustaining them

as well. It is a time to proclaim, whether we are experiencing joy or stress or a little of both, that God's love has come to us in Jesus and that has changed everything. And that is worth singing about.