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Luke 1:39-56
December 11, 2016

The Very First Christmas Carol

I love Christmas. True confession: I also love all those sappy Hallmark Christmas movies with their guaranteed “happy endings.”

But what I really love are Christmas carols. Each year, I can’t wait for the time when I can listen to, play, and sing Christmas carols.

When I am in the car, I frequently search out which station is playing Christmas carols. For your information the best station is 94.5 FM ... and I sing along. I even put on Christmas carols when I am working around the house.

But, wait a minute! It’s still Advent. We can’t sing Christmas carols BEFORE Jesus is born. Shouldn’t we just wait till Christmas Eve.”

Nope. You’ll never catch me saying that. Although we do sing Advent hymns in church this time of year, I almost always try and sneak in at least one Christmas carol each Sunday leading up to Christmas Eve. And then I go wild!

As a result of having listened to all those Christmas songs for the past couple weeks – my sermon will be just a bit different this morning. Just a bit.

So, what is your favorite Christmas song? Is it a classic sacred carol like *Silent Night* or *Joy to the World*? Is it a fun secular song like *Jingle Bells*? Or is it a new song that you hadn't even heard a few years ago?

And, let me ask you, what is it about that particular song that makes it your favorite?

Is it its simple message about the birth of our Savior, its uplifting tune, maybe the memories that you have made while singing or listening to a particular song?

Before Mary even knew that her baby would sleep in a manger, before she traveled to Bethlehem or pondered what the shepherds said about angels on the hills, she sang a song of praise to God for what was happening in her life.

I suppose we could call it the *The Very First Christmas Carol*. Hey, that might make a good sermon title. Oh...

Thankfully, Luke was kind enough to write it down for us in his gospel. And it forms the basis of our text this morning.

It all begins with Mary.

Last week we learned that the town where she lived, was a dusty obscure village in the north, named Nazareth. She was probably dirt poor, uneducated.

We know she was engaged to Joseph, a carpenter, whose family had come from the south, from Bethlehem, the city of David.

Beyond that, all we know of Joseph was that he was a faithful, courageous, loyal husband and father who protected his little family, and took them out of harm's way when Herod the King, in his rage, sought to destroy the all infants of Bethlehem.

But Luke reports not a word Joseph spoke, or even what he thought about anything that was happening.

We do know that one day Mary receives a visitor, a messenger, the angel Gabriel. He tells her not to be afraid.

And then tells her that she will soon (probably really, really soon) be pregnant. That she has been chosen, favored, to play an important role in history.

Upon hearing the news, the text says "she was greatly troubled". I bet she was!

It is not every day an angel tells a young woman that she will soon be an expectant mother, and that the child she will carry is to be called, "the Son of the Most High."

Destined to sit on the throne of David forever. A king. A savior for the whole world.

And it is here that we pick up this morning's scripture lesson.

I am guessing that once she got over the shock and figured out that she really was pregnant, she decided to leave town and visit her much older cousin Elizabeth.

Why, you ask?

Perhaps it was the awkwardness of her situation. After all, for having a child out of wedlock, she could be stoned for adultery.

At the very least, she could be rejected by Joseph, her parents, her village.

She could spend the rest of her days in poverty, struggling to keep herself and her child fed, outside the safety of a marriage and community.

Today we accept an out-of-wedlock pregnancy much more casually, but this would have been a big deal in biblical times.

Maybe Mary wanted to get away from all the stares and judgement.

Or it could just be that Mary was doing what most women might do in her situation. They seek out another woman to talk to.

Mary hears from the angel that her cousin, Elizabeth, who was seemingly too old to have children, is now six months pregnant.

Her child, when born, will be called John and grow up to be known as John the Baptist.

So, Mary makes this very long trip south to the hill country of Judea to visit her friend and her kinswoman. The text says she stays there three months.

We aren't told the details of their conversations. They must have talked about a lot of things. I mean, three months is a long time.

Now, had it been a man who had something important to talk about with a male friend, the whole thing would probably have been over in a couple of hours.

Men, you see, are seldom able to talk intimately with other men. Perhaps we are too competitive.

Perhaps to talk deeply is to share more about ourselves and our weaknesses than men are comfortable revealing.

For whatever reasons, it is women who can spend endless hours, days and weeks nestled comfortably in each other's souls.

When Mary arrives, she greets Elizabeth. We don't know exactly what that greeting was, but perhaps it went something like:

*(CATHY) Ding dong merrily on high, In heav'n the bells are ringing:
Ding dong! verily the sky Is riv'n with angel singing. Gloria, Hosanna in
excelsis!*

Or, perhaps the greeting was a little less scintillating, reflecting on the nice, evening setting there in the countryside:

(JOY) O holy night the stars are brightly shining.

But whatever the greeting, we do know that it had quite an effect on Elizabeth, and especially on her unborn child, John.

Luke tells us that when Elizabeth hears Mary's greeting, the child leaps in her womb.

Of course, we don't know what the child is listening to to aid in his leaping, but perhaps he is moving himself to the beat of something like:

(LINDA) Jingle bell, jingle bell, jingle bell rock. Jingle bells swing and jingle bells ring. Snowin' and blowin' up bushels of fun. Now the jingle hop has begun.

Luke goes on to tell us that Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit and she exclaims with a loud cry:

“Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.”

And then wonders why the mother of her Lord would come to her. I mean, come on, that is a pretty big honor!

Elizabeth's speech here is pretty phenomenal. She recognizes the coming of the Lord in Mary's unborn child.

I wonder is this something we should actually all be able to relate to, but most often don't?

I mean, in the midst of the everyday, when we look closely, shouldn't we all be able to find the presence of the holy? Which in turn should produce ... joy:

(CHOIR) Joy to the world! The Lord has come Let earth receive her King! Let every heart prepare Him room. And heaven and nature sing. And heaven and nature sing. And heaven, and heaven and nature sing.

Elizabeth further explains:

"As soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy."

As I said, I don't know what the soundtrack for a child in a womb leaping for joy is exactly, but, then again, maybe it's something like:

(MARY) Deck the halls with boughs of holly, Fa la la la la, la la la la. Tis the season to be jolly, Fa la la la la, la la la la.

Don we now our gay apparel, Fa la la, la la la, la la la. Troll the ancient Yule tide carol, Fa la la la la, la la la la.

Then Elizabeth goes on to extend her blessing to Mary further, praising her for believing what was spoken to her by the Lord.

Which, of course, was the narrative of Mary bearing a son and calling him Jesus.

In other words, the angel Gabriel came to Mary that night, promising her that she would bear the one who would be God's salvation for all creation.

(CHOIR) It came upon the midnight clear, that glorious song of old. From angels bending near the earth, to touch their harps of gold: Peace on the earth, goodwill to men from heavens all gracious King! The world in solemn stillness lay to hear the angels sing.

After hearing this blessing from her older cousin, Mary herself is moved to song -- in what is often now referred to as the *Magnificat*.

"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."

(CHERYL) Silent night, Holy night, all is calm, all is bright. Round you' virgin, mother and child...

She continues:

"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,"

*(DAVE) We three kings of Orient are bearing gifts we traverse afar.
Field and fountain, moor and mountain, Following yonder star.*

Mary sings on:

"and lifted up the lowly."

*(JOE) Said the little lamb to the shepherd boy, do you hear what I
hear? Ringing through the sky, shepherd boy, do you hear what I hear?*

*A song, a song, high above the trees with a voice as big as the sea.
With a voice as big as the sea.*

And then Mary's singing of the Magnificat concludes:

"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."

*(CHOIR) O come, O come, Emmanuel and ransom captive Israel
that mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear. Rejoice!
Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.*

When we listen to the words of Mary's song, I'll bet that these are words aren't only her words, but were words inspired by God.

These are words from which maybe even Jesus got his image of the world and of the will of God.

How it is that he identified with the poor, and had such a difficult time with the mighty?

Where he came upon the notion that God demanded compassion, gentleness, humility?

That the meek would inherit the earth, the merciful obtain mercy, the pure in heart see God, and the peacemakers be called God's children?

Maybe, just maybe, he first got it at the knee of his mother.

And maybe, just maybe, these were some of the things Mary and Elizabeth talked about during those three months.

The Magnificat, Mary's song, is radical and revolutionary. The humble and the hungry are lifted up but the wealthy are sent away empty.

William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury, warned his missionaries to India never to read *The Magnificat* in public.

Christians were already suspect in that country and they were cautioned against reading verses so inflammatory.

It's dangerous to talk about the greed of the wealthy and powerful and the oppression of the least and lowest.

It is also really quite a revolutionary moment— having a humble, poor woman singing one of the most amazing carols to the Lord God.

One would expect this kind of song from the high and the mighty, the grand, the splendiferous (don't you just love that word!).

Maybe the Mormon Tabernacle Choir accompanied by the New York Philharmonic , or something set to the strains of Handel's Messiah.

You would expect this kind of anthem to be accompanied by thunder and lightning, cymbal crashes and rolling drums, a cloud of smoke and a pillar of fire ... at the very least - a burning bush!

But the fact is, it is placed on the lips of one so common, so ordinary, so earthy.

In Mary's song, the *Magnificat*, she sings praise to the God who has done great things.

She tells of her God who has "looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant."

The Greek word for "lowliness" is not talking about humility, it's talking about poverty.

Mary, as we said, was poor ... dirt poor. She was poor and pregnant and unmarried, she was a mess. But still she sings.

Why? Because this lowly one, this young woman, God raised up, Mary, favored by God, will bring the Messiah to birth. And so, she sings.

So the question this morning is: If Mary can sing, in all her poverty and lowliness, why can't we?

Why can't the praise of God flow out of our mouths and off of our lips? If Mary can sing praise for the Lord God, so can we!

And if there are any big changes going on with you right now, if something is underway for which you cannot see the outcome today, and your stomach is rolling with your own version of morning sickness, then you might try following Mary's lead.

Who knows? Maybe the Holy Spirit has come upon you.

Maybe that thing that looks for all the world like a black cloud is the overshadowing of the Most High.

While it certainly would be nice to have some details about how it will all turn out, that is not really necessary, is it?

You know how God has acted in the past. You have heard the news from Nazareth. Can we expect anything less today?

So sing, my friends. Sing! And then watch what God will do.

Amen.