

“THE THINGS OF CHRISTMAS: III – CHRISTMAS CAROLS”

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Elkton United Methodist Church
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Third Sunday of Advent

Luke 1:46-55

I was ordained in May of 1986, and two months later, in July, I officiated my first wedding. And I'll never forget it. It was held outdoors in the backyard of a home in suburban Washington DC, and it was a hundred million degrees that day. The sun was blazing hot, and we were positioned in such a way that I was staring directly into it. All the guys were there in their tuxedos, and I looked at the groom bathed in sweat, thinking, “Isn't this romantic?” No, really, it was the first time I understood how much I would come to not be so fond of outdoor weddings.

There are so many variables, so many things that can go wrong – the weather, of course, bugs, traffic, noises – well, you get the idea. And one thing I know after doing hundreds and hundreds of weddings over a thirty-year span of ministry is that everybody wants everything to go according to plan. Thanks be to God, most times it does, but oh sometimes – I could tell you stories!

Like the time someone spilled red Kool aid on the train of one of my brides' dresses (I'm not kidding). We fixed that up by sopping it up and then with some

well-placed baby powder (which unfortunately left a trail down the aisle). Then there have been the multiple times when the wedding ring was lost or dropped, and one time when one of the unity candle candles fell out of its holder, and onto the carpet and was still lit! That was fun!

Well, you get the idea. Sometimes things in a wedding go wrong, plans go awry – but none of those things remotely compare to what went wrong with the impending wedding in this morning’s Gospel lesson. We all know the story well. Young Mary was engaged to be married to Joseph, a carpenter and everything was well on its way to a happy wedding. Arrangements had been set between Mary’s parents and Joseph, and I’m sure she and her family were excitedly laying out the plans for the wedding. It was all wonderful and giddy and exciting – every young girl’s dream.

And then, Gabriel came a’callin! Gabriel, an angel of God, came to tell Mary that she had found favor with God, and that, through her, God would send His Son into the world. As you might imagine, Mary was perplexed, asking questions of Gabriel, but eventually she said “Yes.” And then Gabriel gave her a gift. He told her that her cousin Elizabeth was also experiencing something quite amazing. She was pregnant, at an age well past her childbearing years.

So Mary went to see her. There's nothing like having family to be with when you're going through uncertain times, and for Mary, especially, there was nothing like having a family member going through something pretty similar as her at the same time. So she traveled to see her cousin Elizabeth.

It is a lovely encounter. As Mary greets her cousin, the scripture says that the baby in Elizabeth's womb "leaped for joy." That, for Elizabeth and Mary especially, was a confirmation of the special call on Mary's life. Mary's "yes" to Gabriel became a loud and resounding "yes" after sensing this sign from God through her cousin.

Suddenly, the quiet young girl was anything but shy and retiring. Suddenly, she knew, despite the fact that her world had been turned upside down, and she had no idea what she'd be facing – despite all of that – she was filled with joy and determination to carry out this special calling from God.

And so she began to sing her, what I'm calling, her Christmas carol, but which has actually come to be known over the ages as "The Magnificat." She turns to what she knows – scripture – and sings the words of Hannah from the Hebrew Scriptures – "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked upon 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.”

Mary poured out her adoration and praise of God, and her awe over what he was calling her to do. She knew she was blessed and pours out her praise.

But then, did you notice what happens in the middle of her song? The focus changes from what God was doing for her and with her, to what God was doing to the world – and if read carefully, it is pretty revolutionary. The trouble is that when we read The Magnificat, we tend to think of the first few verses and how pretty they are, but we forgot the power of the last verses – and boy, how powerful they are.

Many commentators actually call them revolutionary, because look what they say. God turns things upside down – he puts down the proud, and lifts up the lowly; he feeds the poor, and sends the rich away without anything – in other words, he establishes justice and righteousness and sets things right.

Now, if you're poor or humble or lowly, that's good news, but if you're not, well, not so much. And you have to remember that, in Mary's day, times were hard.

The poor, humble and lowly were really suffering, while the rich got richer every day. Rulers were oppressive, making money hand over fist at the expense of everyone else. They were taxing the people to death, mostly to line their own pockets and wield more and more power.

Yet Mary sang of the God who would remember the suffering of his people and set things right. One commentator wrote that, "It is clear from Mary's words (and from the whole Bible) that God is not partial to the rich, the powerful, or the proud. How could God be partial (he asks) to the things which in our world are, more often than not, substitutes for God rather than pointers to God?" (On-line, "Meditation on The Magnificat," John Piper, 12/8/80)

Mary's message is a message that Jesus himself would carry throughout his ministry. Another writer: "When Jesus grows up and preaches, 'blessed are you now who are poor, for yours in the kingdom of God' and 'woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry' in the Sermon on the Plain later in Luke, I'm sure there were a few in the crowd that stood there, shaking their heads thinking: 'Well, that apple didn't fall far from the tree. There goes Jesus again preaching like his mother: the rich become poor and the lowly are raised up. 'Why did she have to pass on all her revolutionary ideas to poor Jesus? It's going to get him in trouble.' And indeed, it does." (On-line, "Mary's Song and Ours," Adam Copeland, 12/13/10)

Mary's song, which becomes Jesus' song, was revolutionary. It spoke of a day when everything would be turned upside down – made right – which meant that the people in power would be very unhappy. But she sang it anyway, because it was truth – God's truth.

It's a song that still has the power to make people unhappy today – because truth be told, it is threatening to the rich and powerful, those who have much – which, includes most of us – when you consider how blessed we are in comparison with many in the world.

I read the most amazing story about “The Magnificat” this week. A pastor named Nadia Bolz-Weber one day went back to visit the church in which she had grown up. It is suburban, upper-middle class, privileged and theologically and socially conservative. When she walked in and sat down, and then opened the bulletin, she was delighted to see that later in the service, they would be singing “The Magnificat.”

But listen to what happened (in her own words): “All through the service I kept thinking ‘I can't believe that this wealthy suburban evangelical church is going to sing Mary's song of the poor being fed and the rich being left hungry.’ Finally the moment came. The congregation sang a praise music setting of . . . and I can't make

this up . . . the first half of the Magnificat. They proudly sang a nice praise song based on the Magnificat about how their soul magnifies the Lord who had looked with favor on them and that generations will call them blessed because the mighty one has done great things and holy is his name. And then the song ended.” (Online, Copeland, *ibid.*)

They stopped before they got to the part that would make them squirm, that would turn everything they held sacred and important upside down. Oh friends, sometimes the Gospel does make us squirm. Sometimes it does bring into sharp focus what and who matters to God and how the ways in which we’re living in our world all too often are exactly the opposite of God’s desire for his people.

Things in Mary’s day were not the way God wanted them to be, but she sang anyway. And she sang, not out of despair, but out of hope. That with the birth of the child she would carry, all would be right with the world, everyone would have what they needed, everyone would be okay.

She sang out of hope – like slaves in our country used to do in the cotton fields. In the midst of unbelievable oppression, yet they sang hymns of a God who would set things right one day – and they believed it with every fiber of their beings.

And like the people of Germany before the fall of the Berlin Wall. I learned recently that “for several months before the wall fell, people would gather in St. Nikolai Church – the church where Bach composed so many of his cantatas – to sing, and over two months their numbers grew from a little more than a thousand people to three hundred thousand, over half the citizens of the city of Leipzig – and they sang songs of hope and protest and justice, until (as one author put it) their song shook the powers of their nation and changed the world. The author continued: Later, when someone asked one of the officers of the East German secret police why they did not crush this protest like they had so many others, the officer replied, ‘We had no contingency plan for singing.’” (On-line, “Singing as an Act of Resistance,” *In the Meantime*, David Lose, 12/14/15)

They sang, like the slaves sang, like Mary sang – with hope for a better and brighter future – a future where all would be right, where everyone would have enough, everyone would be treated equally, where all would be well, and, as the children’s book put it so beautifully, “It would be okay, it would really be okay.”

And so we continue the song as well. We continue to sing with hope, looking for that day when justice shall roll down like water, and righteousness like an everflowing stream. We continue to sing God’s revolutionary song – trusting that one day – everyone will be treated equally, everyone will have what they need,

peace will reign, and all will be well. We sing even though it's not the way it should be right now. We sing while people are still hungry, while some have no home, while the rich keep getting richer, and the system works against others. We keep singing, for we are the people of God who watched God turn everything upside down by sending the Savior as a vulnerable baby – and if God can change the world through that baby, is there anything God cannot do?

So with Mary today, we sing – with joy at God's love for us, with humility at God's call on our lives, with faith that God will always make a way, and with hope and trust, that one day, all will be made well, that indeed, there will be peace on earth and goodwill among all people. May it be so.

Amen.