

“MY SPIRIT REJOICES”

a sermon on Isaiah 35:1-10, James 5:7-10, and Luke 1:46-55

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For over *thirty* years now, I have had the honor and privilege of standing in pulpits and reflecting on the good news of the incarnation.

In some of those years, I have struggled to find a new “angle” on the event, some different way of *explaining* the great mystery of the Word made flesh. Those have not, by and large, been very *memorable* sermons, because in the final analysis, the Word made flesh remains a *mystery* – something to be simply *believed*, more than understood, or as it is stated in the popular *Santa Clause* movies, “seeing isn’t believing, believing is seeing.”

That is why the “Christmas story” is far better told in Christmas pageants, where the elements of the story are read, and acted out, or in great musical works like Handel’s *Messiah*, or choral cantatas. Services of “Lessons and Carols” are another example – as will occur this afternoon back in Oxford, and on Christmas Eve here in Sumner, where the *entire* history of revelation and salvation is celebrated, beginning in the Garden of Eden.

And so in fact, in my later years in the pastorate, I often didn’t preach a sermon *at all* on this third Sunday in Advent – when our focus is Mary’s *joy* when she learned of what God was doing in her, and through her in the world – opting instead for a service of readings, or enactments, or musical reflections.

At the end of the day, the Christmas *drama* has such a simple, powerful, and profound message that it is understandable to everyone from preschool children on, and it is *meaningful* to people no matter what their circumstances or “settings” in life happen to be.

The Christmas story is compelling, in the first place, because it deals with themes that are close to every human heart. It is a story of *life* and *love* triumphing over adversity, hatred, and rejection . . . over every cold, hard human *reality*.

It is a love story – of a man and a woman who are *tested* by their life circumstances, and love wins. It is the story of a mother and her child, born under stressful circumstances, *triumphing* over the odds, and of a husband not “taking the

easy way out.” In the first place, the Christmas story is *compelling* because it contains those elements, and we therefore have great compassion and admiration for its “heroes.”

It is the Gospel writer Luke to whom we owe our thanks for most of our cherished scenes of the Christmas drama. Mark is entirely silent about Jesus’ birth – he arrives on the scene in Mark’s account as a grown man of thirty ready to begin his ministry. Matthew gives us the story of the wise men, who appear *sometime* after Jesus’ birth, but no details of the birth itself. He simply notes, in passing, that Jesus “was born in Bethlehem in Judea.”

John, of course, gives us the great *theological* narrative in his prologue – “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word *was* God . . . and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us . . .”

But it is *only* Luke who tells the stories of Mary and Elizabeth’s pregnancies, the journey to Bethlehem, the angels and the shepherds, and of course who gives us those wonderful songs – two of which we will be singing before our service concludes this morning: the song of Mary (the *Magnificat*), and the song of Zechariah (the *Benedictus*).

Luke was as much a *sociologist* as a theologian in his observations about first Century Palestine, and the events that both led up to and surrounded Jesus’ birth. In his classic telling of the Christmas story, with its themes of a long and arduous journey to Bethlehem, a humble birth in a stable, “because there was no room for them in the inn,” the visit of the angels to simple shepherds, and their excitement over the news, the central message seems to be that in this life, and in this world, *things aren’t always what they appear to be*.

Rest assured that when the “leaders of the land” arrived in Bethlehem for the enrollment ordered by Rome, *they* spent no nights in stables. They were around front, in the inn *itself*, enjoying good food and drink, a warm fire, and the company of friends and family. It was probably very much of a “reunion” atmosphere . . . with long separated distant relatives catching up on each other’s lives and families.

Caesar Augustus – in *Rome* – reigned over Israel in those days. No one questioned Caesar’s authority. They didn’t necessarily *like* it. But they knew it to be true. He was their *king*. No one up front in the inn on those nights would have believed that the child who was about to be born out back in the stable to a poor young woman (the wife of a simple carpenter) was the *real* king.

In those days, Israel's priests in Jerusalem continued their work in the temple "restoring" the people's relationships with God through offering sacrifices on the holy altar. They would never have *dreamed* angels were about to proclaim that real and lasting restoration was coming through that same infant . . . out back in the stable.

On the nights leading up to the Christmas Eve drama, the shepherds were simply "tending their flocks." It was hard, dirty work, with few rewards. Shepherds weren't exactly "high" in the social order in Palestine in those days. They were laborers. And because of the nature of their work, they were often ritually "unclean," not able to even *enter* the temple.

No one in the inn or the temple, or for that matter even the shepherds *themselves*, would have *ever* guessed that they – and not the ones who *called* themselves prophets, were about to receive the *real* message to proclaim — the life-giving message that the long-awaited savior had arrived.

The Christmas story, in other words, is about "throw away" items, and throw away *people*, being elevated to sainthood. It is a story about (in some cases) *nameless* people whose lives have affected *millions* and *millions* of hearts through the centuries, changed *countless* lives, while the deeds of, say "Quirinius, Governor of Syria," even if they were considerable, are now gone and forgotten, and certainly pale by comparison.

Who would have guessed? Who could have known? As the story continues, those questions answer themselves. There *are* people who *recognize* Jesus for who he really is, right from the start. They are people who have *listened* to the voice of God, and who are *open* to the idea that God is really at work in the world in new and surprising ways, through new and different voices: through shepherds, and simple peasants like Mary and Joseph – who did not "dismiss" the words of the angels – and Elizabeth – who correctly "interpreted" the movement of the son in her womb as a sign from God – and her husband, Zechariah, a humble temple priest, who was filled with the Holy Spirit, and prophesied about the role his son, John, would play in the sacred drama, and the old man in the temple, Simeon – who was waiting patiently for the savior's arrival, and *recognized* him at first sight at the time of Jesus' circumcision.

And now notice the *theme* of Luke's songs, which in every case are connected to Luke's overall theme of God permanently restoring right relationships.

In the *Magnificat*, Mary proclaims, “[God] has shown strength with his arm, he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, he has put down the mighty from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich empty away . . .” In Jesus, gone is the barrier between *kinds* of people – haves and have nots. The rich have *always* had plenty. Now everyone *else* does as well.

In the *Benedictus*, Zechariah praises God, for “he has visited and redeemed his people . . . that we should be saved from our enemies, and from the hand of all who hate us.” And in the *Nunc Dimittis*, Simeon speaks of Jesus as “a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to thy people Israel.” Gone are the barriers between people in different *nations, tribes, and families*. No longer is “salvation” just about God’s revelation to Israel. This is about the *whole world*.

And all because God, holy and righteous, transcendent and omnipotent, *chose* to “bridge the gap” and break the barrier between heaven and earth, the realms of “spirit” and “flesh,” in the incarnation. It was the *birth* of Christ that made the rest of the drama possible. No wonder Luke took the time to celebrate and appreciate it in song in his telling of the story.

Because of our *salvation* (beginning with the incarnation), there is *restoration*. That is also a part of Luke’s essential message, which is really the “good news” of the Christmas story. God is not just “aloft” and “aloof.” God is *real*, and *present*, and “helpful.” *Salvation* is not just something far away, ultimate, and *eventual*, it is something *available*, and even *observable*. It is *restored* relationships. It is *justice* and a sense of fair play. It is *care* and *concern* for *every* human being. Here, now, today.

It is *Almighty* God – born simply, and in humility, as a bold affirmation of God’s concern for the world. It is Mary – a simple, humble young woman, *elevated* to sainthood. It is lives changed, and friendships born, and wars ended. It is *progress* toward the goal of human community. It is relationships renewed and restored.

Luke is a *challenging* Gospel, because it *hits* us where we live. It isn’t just about Jesus coming in glory to judge heaven and earth. It is about the woman you passed by on the street the other day with a weary outstretched hand. It is about people with aids, or other “socially unacceptable” diseases, and how we treat them. It is about the kind of community we try to create, and its problems, and how we address them. It is about and how we live, how we *respond* to the needs of others as we encounter them. It is about ending every “us” and “them,” in favor of “we.”

And what Luke's account *says* to us is, "glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace." It says, *Prepare the way*. Prepare *yourself*. Jesus is coming. And when you have *witnessed* what God did for you in Jesus Christ, you in turn will be empowered to go forth and help others.

No wonder Mary's spirit rejoiced at the news. No wonder even today, two *thousand* years later, the culmination of the Christmas story makes the hair stand up on the back of our necks, and we are moved to tears when we sing "Silent Night" by candlelight.

It is Advent. And we are still *waiting* for the news of Jesus' birth. What are we to *do* in our waiting? The answer is so simple it doesn't even really need to be spoken. Treat everyone with respect – because we are *all* God's children. Tend to the poor – because our Lord was born to one "of low degree." Be content, and not filled with anxiety – because the Christ Child whose birth we will soon celebrate came to bring peace, and newness of life.

Look around you with eyes of faith in this Advent season, eyes open to things as they really are, eyes ready to *discern* the presence and work of God, and appreciate it. *Experience* that presence, allow yourself to be *surprised* by what you see, and then you will be prepared to join in the chorus of those who sing joyfully the good news: Jesus Christ is born.

To God be the glory. Amen.