

All You Can Do Is Sing!¹
Luke 2:21-40
First Presbyterian Church
December 19, 2021

Gospel Reading

¹After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb. ²²When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord ²³(as it is written in the law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord”), ²⁴and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.”

²⁵Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. ²⁶It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. ²⁷Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, ²⁸Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, ²⁹“Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; ³⁰for my eyes have seen your salvation, ³¹which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, ³²a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.” ³³And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. ³⁴Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed ³⁵so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.” ³⁶There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, ³⁷then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. ³⁸At that moment she came and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. ³⁹When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. ⁴⁰The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

Sermon²

Sometimes, all you can do is sing. On November 9, 1989, the Berlin Wall came down. In the thirty plus years since, historians have studied this largely unforeseen event – analyzing what happened leading up to, during, and after. Yet one of the factors routinely ignored was the weeks of peaceful protests by the citizens of Leipzig that preceded the fall. Gathering on Monday evenings by candlelight around St. Nikolai church – which is the church where Bach composed many of his cantatas Gathered around the church, the people would sing... they would sing.

For over two months their numbers grew from a little more than a thousand people

¹ The initial idea for this service came from David Lose’s “Singing As An Act of Resistance” found at <https://www.davidlose.net/2015/12/advent-4-c-singing-as-an-act-of-resistance/>

² Resources used in this sermon include “The Penguin Book of Carols,” edited by Ian Bradley, (Penguin Books, 1999), “Then Sings My Soul – 150 of the World’s Greatest Hymn Stories,” (Thomas Nelson,2011), and The Presbyterian Hymnal Companion, LindaJo H. McKim, (W/JKP,1993).

to more than three hundred thousand, over half the citizens of the city, singing songs of hope, protest, and justice, until their song shook the powers of their nation and changed the course of history. Sometime after the fall, a journalist asked one of the commanders of the East German secret police why they hadn't crushed these protests like they had so many others. He replied, "We had no contingency plans for song." Sometimes, all you can do is sing.

Simeon knew that. Anna did as well. But we often forget that in our world of images and videos and incessant talk... we forget the power of singing to express what is deep within us – and to give us what we most need.

According to Luke, it was now forty days after Jesus' birth. After eight days, Jesus had been circumcised and named in accordance with Jewish law. Now, thirty-two days later, his parents are again performing their duty as faithful Jews by returning to the Temple to offer a sacrifice and to consecrate their child to the Lord. We can imagine Mary and Joseph being in a reverent, even solemn mood that day, the way many young parents in our congregations are when their first child is to be baptized. And for this very reason we can imagine them being startled, even frightened, when Simeon, old beyond years and beaming with ecstatic revelation, came up to them, took the child, and began to sing.

Only he didn't sing of angels and mangers, but of letting go... of departing... truth be told, he sang of dying. Why would Simeon offer this very odd Christmas carol to the holy family? Because in the infant Jesus, he had seen a sign and token that the Lord had kept the promises made to the Israelites of old. And having seen that, he was able to accept his own death with courage.

Anna sang next... but not of death... she sang with praise and thanksgiving. She, too, received the Christ child as a sign that God keeps God's promises... and all she can do is respond with thanksgiving. Which is a reminder to us not only of the power of song, but that we are called to sing all kinds of songs.

Well, Heather, Kiki, Carol Anne, and I planned this service because we understand the power of song... and that sometimes all we can do is sing. When our heart is broken by grief... when our faith is shaky... when we fear for ourselves or our loved ones... when sometimes the world seems to be going to hell in a handbasket... when the powers aligned against justice and peace seem too strong to defeat... sometimes all we can do is sing. And that is what we are going to do this morning. We're going to sing some of our favorite Christmas carols. And as we do, we will pay particular attention to their history and meaning and what they may still mean to us.

"The one who sings prays twice," St. Augustine may have said... and I think it's true. Music goes to a place in us that mere words cannot touch. Sometimes all we can do is sing!

O Little Town of Bethlehem

“O Little Town of Bethlehem” was written by a pastor... the Rev. Philips Brooks... in Philadelphia in 1868. Though there are many differences between Rev. Brooks and me – he was an Episcopal priest...he was 6’ 6” and weighed over 300 pounds... he pastored large, prestigious churches throughout the northeast during the Civil War... and he preached at a rate of 213 words per minute. But there’s one thing that we share in common –we both were significantly impacted by our time visiting Israel. In the summer of 1865, Brooks took a year’s leave of absence from his church in Philadelphia and began a world tour. On Christmas Eve, he rode on horseback the six miles from Jerusalem to Bethlehem where he attended a Christmas Eve service at the church which was built above the supposed site of Jesus’ birthplace. He was deeply moved by the experience... and three years later, wanting to compose an original Christmas carol for his children’s Sunday School class to sing during their annual program, he wrote these beloved words. And on Christmas Day, 1868, a group of 6 Sunday school teachers and 36 children first sang, “O Little Town of Bethlehem.”

It Came Upon the Midnight Clear

“It Came Upon the Midnight Clear” may be the only commonly sung Christmas carol that doesn’t mention the birth of Christ! Hmm! Instead, the focus is on that “glorious song of old,” in which the angels announce the coming of “Peace on the earth, good will to all.” The historical context of this carol sheds light on its beautiful words. It was written by a Unitarian minister, the Rev. Edmund Hamilton Sears, amidst the social strife that plagued our nation leading up to the Civil War. The third stanza reveals the poet’s concerns about the social situation in the U.S. in the mid-19th century:

“But with the woes of sin and strife
The world has suffered long;
Beneath the angel-strain have rolled
Two thousand years of wrong;
And man, at war with man, hears not
The love-song, which they bring:
O hush the noise, ye men of strife,
And hear the angels sing!”

Then stanza 4 poignantly articulates what life is like for so many people in our world:

“And you, beneath life’s crushing load,
whose forms are bending low,
who toil along the climbing way with painful steps and slow...”

Finally, the poet looks to a promised future; a future spoken of by the prophets and sung by the angels... a future when “peace shall over all the earth its ancient splendors fling, and the whole world give back the song which now the angels sing.”

It is always fitting to sing “Hark! the herald angels sing” and “Joy to the world.” But we all know that there are moments when we realize the message of peace has not yet been fully realized on earth. It is then that we sing “It came upon the midnight clear.” It is then that we let the power of the Incarnation and the message of the gospel touch us even more deeply.

In the Bleak Midwinter

If as a child you ever thought that the birth of Jesus took place in the snow, it may be the result of our next hymn. Though there is no biblical reason to associate Christmas with this time of year, “In the Bleak Midwinter” speaks of frosty wind moaning, the earth standing hard as iron, water like a stone... where snow had fallen, snow on snow on snow. Well, clearly, we are not in Palestine, but in England where the poet, Christina Rossetti, lived. And that’s the point – that’s HER point – to make the birth of Jesus more personal and real... she imagines the Christ child being born, not thousands of miles away, but in her own neighborhood. Which means this is not a Christmas carol we should analyze for its Biblical exegesis and theological accuracy. It is poetry... it is imaginative, mystical, devotional poetry.

This is perhaps my favorite of all carols, for at least two reasons. First, I have told you before that I am an Advent Christian – that if in a “get-to-know-you” game you asked me to tell you which liturgical season best describes me, it is Advent. And so, I resonate with Christina Rossetti use of the metaphor of midwinter... to say that the Incarnate One, the one heaven could not hold, has brought light and warmth into the bleakest of sinful situations.

And second, I love this carol because of verse 4 – which calls for each of us to bring our own unique gift to the Christ child – his mother, Mary, worships him with her kiss... the shepherd brings a lamb... the wise man does his part. And what we all can give him is the most important gift of all -- our hearts.