

We Sing Stories of Hope

Luke 1:46-55; 67-80

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As many of you know, every week I write a Friday email called “Facets of Faith” that goes out to whomever signs up to receive it. The content of it varies. Sometimes, I share some thoughts about upcoming events at the church or happenings in the world. Most often, though, I try to offer some fuel for your spiritual journey - reflections on the liturgical season, a passage of scripture, a poem, a spiritual practice and so on. Every once in a while, I will get a response or two from someone who found that week’s email especially moving or helpful. But, out of all of the weekly emails I have written, which are somewhere in the range of 325, the one that got by far the most responses from you all was when I wrote about singing Christmas carols in Advent!

It is one of the great controversies in the Christian church today. Those of us nurtured in the liturgical traditions of the Church were taught that you don’t sing Christmas carols in Advent. After all, most Christmas carols are about Jesus’ birth, but Jesus hasn’t been born yet during the weeks of Advent. However, based on the responses I got to that particular “Facets of Faith”, it’s clear that a lot of people in our congregation want to sing Christmas carols in Advent because it’s the only time of year that we sing them! What is a pastor or church musician to do? This year, we compromised a bit. We sang carols the week of the chancel choir’s special music Sunday and will also have a carol sing next weekend. No sermon, all carols!

Of course, there are reasons we love to sing Christmas carols. Some carols are just fun to sing - like “Angels We Have Heard On High” with all its “Glorias”. Others have particularly meaningful messages like “O Little Town of Bethlehem”. But I think the main reason that people love to sing Christmas carols is that they are so steeped into our memories of Christmases past. We remember singing “Silent Night” by candlelight on Christmas Eve or “Joy to the World” before Christmas dinner, caroling for neighbors or in care facilities, listening to Christmas songs while baking cookies. Christmas carols are inextricably woven into our holiday traditions at church and at home.

The first known reference to a song to be sung on Christmas is from 129 A.D. when a Roman Bishop proclaimed that the song “Angel’s Hymn” should be sung on Christmas Eve. However, the practice of writing carols didn’t really gain momentum until the middle ages when songs were in Latin so not accessible for most people to sing. In the 13th century, Saint Francis of Assisi believed that carols should be translated into the people’s language, which led to their widespread popularity. The words to many of the carols we know, and love today were written in Medieval Europe but not put to music until much later. The oldest carol with music and words put together is “O Come All Ye Faithful” in the late 18th century. Meanwhile, the practice of Christmas caroling probably grew out of the pre-Christian tradition of wassailing - visiting neighbors, singing, and dancing during the cold, dark nights of winter.

So, our love of carol-singing goes centuries back, yet we often forget that the first songs sung in anticipation of Jesus’ birth are found in scripture. Today’s scripture readings include Mary’s song, often called The Magnificat, which conveys her hope for what God will do through the son she is carrying, and Zechariah’s song - the words he sang after his son, John’s, birth when

he was finally able to speak again. Both songs have insights for us into how we find joy in a weary world.

But first, to understand the power of these two songs of hope, it's important to remember their context. Mary and Zechariah were both living in Judah at the height of the Roman Empire. Like all Jews, they had inherited the stories of their people - stories full of hope and despair, injustice, oppression, and the promises of God. These are the descendants of Abraham to whom God had promised land that would be their own. They walked in the wilderness for forty years after escaping the misery of slavery in Egypt in order to find this promised land. When at last they arrived in the land of Canaan, they established their homes, built their temple, and thrived until they were defeated by empire after empire - the Babylonians, the Assyrians, the Persians, and then the Romans. What carried them through all of this trauma was the belief they had, grounded in the prophecies of Isaiah and others, that God would someday send a savior, a Messiah, who would free them from the oppression of the Empire and return their land back to them.

Imagine how overwhelming it is for Zechariah to learn that his son was born to prepare the way for that Messiah! Imagine how shocking it is for Mary to be told that her son would be that Messiah! And so each sings a song of hope in the midst of weariness.

In her song, Mary looks to what she knows about God from the past to anticipate what God is about to do in the future. Rev. Cecilia D. Armstrong writes, "Mary sings of a new world order based on past experiences with God. Her joy is found in remembering what the world has the potential to be based on the presence of God in all things. God has shown strength. God has scattered the proud. God has brought down the powerful. God has lifted the lowly. God has filled the hungry. God has helped those who have served God according to the promise made to Abraham. God has already done things that should allow a weary world to rejoice. Mary proclaims this in her song of hope and in the story of justice, joy, and a righteous peace."

Zechariah sings a song of hope for the future - hope for both Israel and for his son, John. His is a song of praise because God is sending a savior to redeem them, save them from their enemies, and lead them on the path of peace. John, eventually known as John the Baptist, this tiny baby just born to Zechariah and Elizabeth, has arrived to announce that Jesus is coming and to help the people prepare for him! His son, John, will be the prophet of the Most High!

It is often said that pastors preach the sermon they need to hear. I know that is true of me! I wonder if the same could be said about Mary and Zechariah's songs. Do their words reflect their deepest worries, their deepest needs? You can certainly make a case for that. Mary, newly pregnant with the coming Messiah, finds assurance and comfort and hope in God's long track record of caring for the people of Israel and seeking justice for them. Maybe focusing so much on what God has already done lessens her anxiety about her own future, the future of her son, and the future of her people. Zechariah, on the other hand, needs to know that this son of his, whom he has waited for so long, is going to make him proud. He is going to live a life that matters and carry forward Zechariah's legacy.

These songs they sing weave together the past, the present, and the future with the thread of hope, justice, and joy. Can you remember a time in your own life, the life of your family, or the life of a country when you might have sung a similar sort of song - either literally or

figuratively? What are your stories of hope or liberation that you look back on to give you confidence that God is at work for good in our world and make you, despite all the weariness you may feel, want to rejoice?

Of course, these songs not only express the personal experiences of their singers but also their hope for justice for their whole nation. In her reflection on Mary and Zechariah's words, Rev. Armstrong compares them to the song known as the Black National Anthem, "Lift Every Voice and Sing". Written by James Weldon Johnson when he was a school principal in Florida, the song captures the confidence that comes from surviving a horrific past as well as the yearning for justice in the future which characterized the lives of many African Americans during the Jim Crow years. And again, it is a song of rejoicing. "Lift every voice and sing, till earth and heaven ring, ring with the harmonies of liberty; let our rejoicing rise high as the listening skies, let it resound loud as the rolling sea. Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us; sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us; facing the rising sun of our new day begun, let us march on til victory is won."

The hopes of oppressed peoples are at the heart of all three of these songs. So, who are the people in our country and our world who might sing such a song today? Where might they find reasons to rejoice as we do when we sing the carols of this season? How can we who, because of the stories of our faith, are intrinsically people of hope share that hope with them?

As we enter these last couple of days before Christmas, may we remember all the hopes of Mary and Joseph and the people of Israel as they waited for this Messiah. May we not forget just how life-changing, earth-shattering, joy-invoking, and barrier-breaking the birth of this baby in a manger really was! And may we open our hearts to how God may be working in just such a way today. And when that most holy of nights finally comes, I promise we will sing the Christmas carols we all love with joy and abandonment!

May it be so. Amen.