

December 24th, 2023

Luke 1:46-55 “We Sing Songs of Hope”

At our annual Christmas Eve service last year, I shared part of a story about the first time I went Christmas caroling. I told the story to explain how “O Come All Ye Faithful” became one of my favorite Christmas hymns. Some of you were there, but I need to share that story again to help make sense of our scripture lesson this week.

The first time I went Christmas Caroling was during Christmas break in 1985 during my sophomore year in college. A rare snowstorm blew through my hometown just a few days before Christmas. It was a big one ... the kind that only comes through every 10 years or so in that part of Oregon. A bunch of youth and young adults from the Veneta Alliance Church got together to play in the snow. We had a blast. The streets were covered in snow which was great because there was no traffic. We went to this developing neighborhood on the hilly side of town and rode sleds and inner-tubes down this particularly big hill. About four or five houses were under construction there, and they had just paved the street, so it was a perfect slope to ride down. There were these brothers, the Maillard boys, that had quad-runners, and they would tow us up the hill and we'd slide down again. It was the best snow day ever. When it got dark, someone said, “Hey, let's walk around town and see the Christmas lights!” The preacher's kid, Debbie, said, “If we're going to wander around the neighborhood in the snow we might as well go Christmas caroling!” And here I was, 19 years old, and that was the first time I ever went Christmas caroling. And it was in the snow! How awesome is that?

There was still about 6 inches of snow on the ground because nobody had plowed the streets, to still no traffic. Most of the houses we visited were folks from the church. We talked about how unusual it was to have snow in December let alone snow around Christmas. We commented about how the snow muffled sounds and how quiet it seemed. We noticed how much brighter the Christmas lights seemed in the snow. We marveled at the size of a snowman someone built in front of city hall. In

some ways it didn't seem real. We ended the day at our friend Kim's house to sing our last set of carols, and it just so happened that her mom had fresh-out-of-the-oven cookies for us. To borrow a line from *Walking in a Winter Wonderland*, it was "the perfect ending to a perfect day." I keep in touch with several of the people who went caroling that day, we all agree that it's still at the top of our "best Christmas memories" list. I was never really into singing before that Christmas. I didn't mind if someone else did, but I didn't enjoy it. Now I can't imagine Christmas without songs of joy, hope, peace, and love.

This morning, Mary read two sacred songs in our scripture lessons that are very similar in style and wording. The first is from the first Book of Samuel in the Old Testament. Not long ago, we studied the rise of the Kingdom of Israel in our Thursday night Bible Study. It all started with a song by a young woman named Hannah who was pregnant with a child that would grow up to be the prophet Samuel. Samuel would play a big part in Israel's origin story. Hannah's song was one of praise and thanksgiving. It started out, "My heart exults in the Lord." But that song was also a song of hope for Israel as this fledgling nation embarked on a new journey to become a kingdom where the feeble would be girded with strength, the hungry would be fed, and the barren would give birth. Israel started out with a few bumps. Their first King, Saul, was a trainwreck. But then David, Israel's greatest King, came to power and tried very hard to live up to the hopes listed in Hannah's song. Try as he might, however, David wasn't able to achieve Israel's aspirations. His human frailties got the best of him, and his moral failures dragged him down. The kings who followed him were corrupted by power and eventually Israel fell to the hands of its enemies and was never quite able to be the great nation that Hannah sang about.

The other song Mary read was from the Gospel of Luke in the New Testament. This is known as Mary's song or the *Magnificat*. Magnificat in Latin means, "magnifies" or "exalts" or "glorifies" which is among the first words of Mary's song. Mary had just told her cousin Elizabeth about the child she was expecting and how he would fulfill the prophet's

vision of the messiah. Elizabeth said, “Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.” In response, Mary sang, “My soul magnifies the Lord” which if you’ll notice is very similar to Hannah’s words. Like Hannah’s song, Mary’s was a song of praise, thanksgiving, and hope. Hannah’s hope was for God to send a king that would represent God’s love and justice. Mary’s hope was similar, and she too sang about God’s justice and how God would scatter the proud, lift up the lowly, and feed the hungry.

There’s a common perception that psychiatrists or therapists go into practice because they’re just trying to work out their own issues. Same with preachers. The late Fred Craddock used to say that most preachers are just preaching to themselves as much as anyone else. Maybe Hannah and Mary were signing words that *they* needed to hear. Both sang of hope, and we’ve benefited from those words for thousands of years now. In many ways, we’ve borrowed their hope by listening to their words and considering how they apply to life in our own contexts. I want you to consider how the act of singing was important—perhaps even necessary—for these two women. Imagine how it changed them. Imagine how it transformed their experience. Imagine how it must have prepared them for a new chapter in their lives. How does a weary world rejoice? According to our scripture lessons this morning, it’s by singing stories and songs of hope. To borrow a line from the song that we’ll be singing for our hymn of invitation today, “The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.”

I learned this past week that one of the ministries that we support as a congregation is facing some tough challenges. We’ve been one of about 10 churches who’ve hosted Safe Space Winter Shelter for the last 9 years. Before I was pastor here, we were one of a dozen churches that took place in a sheltering program that eventually led to the creation of the Torres Shelter. This says something about the character of our church. Jesus was quite clear about his mission imperative. It was straight out of scripture – he quoted from the Book of Isaiah when he

was asked to read in his hometown synagogue. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” As Christians, we are called to follow Jesus and do as he did. Jesus’ mission imperative is our mission imperative. I believe that we as a congregation get this most of the time. That’s why we participate in Safe Space. That’s why we help our sister church in Corning. That’s why we engage in these kind of ministries. Jesus said it, we believe it – and we do our imperfect best to follow Jesus’ example. Back to Safe Space. With only six days before Christmas, concerned citizens with the backing of our city council and other leaders are doing their best to shut down Safe Space’s intake center effectively leaving some 20 – 50 people per night on the streets during the coldest time of the year.

This bothers me, because for the last four weeks and for the next two weeks, I’ve got to deal with all these scriptures like the ones Mary read earlier about feeding the hungry, doing justice and lifting up the lowly. Then I’ve got to turn around tonight and preach about how the savior of our world – the Son of the Most High – the one who we’ve committed our lives to was born in a stable because there was no shelter available. And believe me, I understand the frustration of some of these folks, especially the small business owners. They are weary. They need to contend with all sorts of issues that affect their ability to do business. As the father of someone who used to work in retail loss prevention, I understand. But six days before Christmas with no solution or alternative to offer? See, I would be okay if they said, “We want to shut this operation down because we think Jesus was wrong to call on his followers to feed and shelter people.” I’d at least be able to say, “Okay. I disagree with you, but I understand where you’re coming from since you don’t follow Jesus.” But a lot of these folks say that they *do* follow Jesus. I’d like to know what they’re reading this time of year. *Surely* their churches are reading the birth story. They’ve got to be reading some of these messianic prophecies from the Old Testament about God lifting up the poor and lowly. Surely, for 10 weeks they can set aside the

three or four verses in the Bible that you *might* be able to use to make a case against helping the poor and dig into the many stories and lessons of how helping the poor is absolutely necessary to follow Jesus. And again, I get where they are coming from. There are no easy answers. And to be quite honest it makes me *weary*.

I am weary of hearing about how bad the housing situation here in Butte County is. I'm weary of hearing people argue about the issue while not even trying to find a solution let alone a compromise. I'm so over it. But here's something to think about. My weariness comes from a place of privilege. That weariness comes while I'm laying in my warm comfy bed in my warm comfy house reading the news on my iPad and pondering what I'm going to have for breakfast from the many choices I have in my kitchen. You know who's really weary? The ones who don't have any of these luxuries. The ones who don't have regular access to even the basics. My weariness pales in comparison. How then, do the desperately weary in this world rejoice? According to the authors and editors of our lectionary resource this year, it's through singing stories of hope. But what if there is very little hope to be had? Well, according to the scriptures we have read throughout Advent, there's *always* hope.

At the beginning of Advent, I said we wouldn't be offering pat answers this year because Advent is a time of reflection which always requires questions. Here are the questions I want you to consider this week –

If you were to write a song of hope, what would the lyrics be? Would they reflect a longing for something that is to come? Would they draw upon God's faithfulness in the past to make way for hope in the future? What would the tune sound like? Would it be in a major key or a minor key? Would it be a march or a waltz or a ballad? Think about times in your life when you may have felt helpless or hopeless. Was there ever a time that music played a part in lifting your spirits or rekindling your hope? Was there a particular song that was meaningful or helpful? What was that song about? And finally, think about a time when you sang something at a meaningful event like a memorial service, a protest, a

birthday, a baptismal service. How did the act of singing change you? May the one whose “law is love, and whose gospel is peace” be with you on this final Advent Service. The next time we meet, will be in celebration of the Christ child’s birth.