

## ADVENT LOVE

Luke 1:39-55

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How do you make an old story seem new and fresh? How do you hear God's word through words you've heard dozens, if not hundreds, of times?

That is our challenge with biblical stories which have become so familiar to us. This story. A young woman, engaged to be married. A young man, focused on his future. An angel with unlikely news.

If you were hearing this story for the very first time, you would be shocked, you would be surprised, you would be scratching your head wondering, "What does this mean?" "What is God up to in the lives of these people?"

As in every story, as in the stories of our lives, the details matter. Here are the details in Luke's story. Mary is a poor young girl who finds herself pregnant before she's married, and facing likely public scorn and possible death. Her cousin is old and shamed, best known for being the disappointing wife of the local priest. The idea that these two women play a dramatic role in the story of the birth of Jesus, that these two women end up influencing world history is, in a word, unthinkable.

Why them? I think of this question every year at Christmas time. Why Mary? Did God ask five or six women before one of them finally said "Yes"? It is no accident, though, that the mother of Jesus is poor, an unexpected surprising choice. Jesus doesn't come to earth as the child of a government official or a synagogue leader; he isn't the son of a Roman military hero.

Several years ago, a pop song asked the very astute biblical and theological question, "What if God was one of us?" And that is the point, isn't it, of the Christmas story? It's called the Incarnation - God in human form. The Christ child is called Emmanuel, which means "God is with us." This story is about bridging the gap between heaven and earth. God can seem so distant, so removed; it can be hard to feel God's presence. But this time of year, we do more often. We feel

God in the music we hear and sing, in the magic of twinkling lights against a dark night sky, even when we receive a card from dear friends and marvel at what those relationships mean in our lives. In the midst of the busy-ness and stress of Christmas, we can also feel a sense of wonder, and in those moments, God seems closer to us.

For God so loves the world that God chooses to enter this world as one of us, a real, flesh-and-blood human being, to eliminate our alienation, to comfort us in our loneliness, to reduce our anxiety. For if you know that someone really knows what your life is like, you discover a sense of community, you experience communion.

People find great solace in support groups. People who are grieving go to grief support groups, and it doesn't take away their sadness but it makes it easier to bear. Knowing that other people have similar emotions makes people feel less isolated, more a part of the human family again. Twelve-step groups like AA are common ground for people who are trying to break habits and develop healthier ones. Caregivers support groups, groups for people with cancer, Al-anon groups - you sit around a table and hear another person's story and say to yourself, "Oh, I thought I was the only one who felt that way, who thinks that way, who struggles that way. Oh, I'm not the only one."

Jesus comes to earth as a real human being, to experience every human emotion, to let us know that we are not alone. Call it incarnation, call it empathy, call it love.

Mary and Elizabeth: these two women look at each other - one of them too old to be a mother, and one of them too young; both babies stir in their mother's wombs. The mothers smile, they laugh, and they say to themselves, "Only God could do something like this."

And then Mary sings this song, that we call the Magnificat. Much of it is taken from the song that Hannah, the mother of Samuel, sings in the Hebrew Scriptures. This song tells us that this baby is not just a blessing for Mary, not a private gift, but a blessing and a gift for the whole world. A blessing for those who most need it, a blessing that will turn the world upside down.

This song tells us what God's wish is for the world. "When will you learn," God is saying, "that rich people aren't more important than poor people?" "When will you learn," God says through Mary, "that you'll never find joy in your riches when there are hungry people all around you?" "When my will is done, those who act as if they're better than others will be humbled, the last will be first, those who are full of themselves will be emptied, the hungry will be filled with good things." It's a song that gives us the agenda of Jesus' life. For he comes to free us from a life of grasping after power and money and things. He comes to say to us, "You are enough, just as you are, just as God created you to be." Is there any more loving message than that one?

The words we say and the songs we sing are important. They shape who we are and they help us form our own agendas, our own identities, our own stories. Mary's song shapes the baby Jesus and helps make him who he is. Every time we hear it and remember it, it changes us into people who are more like him, more attuned to God's wishes for the world, more in tune with what God wants for our lives.

Those men, women and children who were enslaved in our country lost so much. They lost family ties, they lost freedom, they lost agency over their own bodies. Slave owners tried to make themselves feel powerful and important by stripping away layers of humanity and dignity. But they couldn't control everything. Some of those who were enslaved maintained their sense of self by singing, whenever and wherever they could. Some of their songs had hidden meaning, some of their songs told the stories of liberation from the Bible, especially the story of Moses leading his people out of Egypt. Through song, those who were enslaved maintained their identity and as much purpose and meaning as they possibly could.

During the Holocaust, when the Nazis silenced thousands of Jews, Communists, gays, Christian ministers, and others they found objectionable, when they forced prisoners to play happy music as a form of psychological torture, still music survived. There were songs of resistance that spread through Jewish ghettos, there were concentration camp songs full of anger, parody and

resistance. Singing these tunes was a way to maintain morale, a way to remind these prisoners that they had an inner life that was God-given and worth preserving.

The songs we sing are important. Songs provided motivation and unity during the Civil Rights movement. Songs can be powerful. In Bible Study this fall we've been reading the book of Acts. We read that one night when Paul and Silas were jailed, they start singing hymns of the church. After a while, the earth starts to shake and their own chains are shaken loose. It is as if their song has the power to physically liberate them from prison.

East Germany was a difficult place to live during the time of the Berlin Wall. Goods were scarce and lines for them were long, there weren't enough good schools for all its children, and the Stasi - the Secret Police - were controlling and corrupt. People began to feel desperate for change. In Leipzig, a group of people formed a resistance movement. Every Monday night they would gather by candlelight around St. Nikolai church, the church where Bach composed so many of his cantatas, and they would sing. In two months time, their numbers grew from a little more than a thousand to more than three hundred thousand - over half the citizens of the city, singing songs of hope and protest and justice. In a few months' time, the wall was down. Later, one of the pastors leading the resistance asked a former Stasi (secret police) commander why they hadn't crushed this protest movement as they had so many others. His answer: they had no contingency plan for song and prayer.

It's time for us to sing. It's time for us to sing for the homeless, sing for the refugee, sing for the victim of gun violence. It's time for us to sing against materialism, against greed, against terror. It's time for us to sing Mary's song so that it will shape us and the next generations. It's time for us to sing God's love song so that those who are grieving will be comforted, those who are sick will experience healing, those who are confused will find the right path. It's time for the world to turn.

*Inspiration for this sermon drawn from "What Time Is It? Preaching Advent in the Year of Luke", David J. Lose, Journal for Preachers, Advent 2015*