

Sunday, December 20, 2015 – Advent 4
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
Luke 1:4-2:79

Lesson & Carol

This last Sunday of Advent we hear the stories leading up to Christmas Eve. On Christmas Eve we always hear Luke 2, the story of Mary & Joseph setting off for Bethlehem. This last Sunday before that, we hear what happens before that, we hear Luke 1. We hear the story of the priest Zechariah, who is told he will have a son. Zechariah is devout, but old, past hope of a child. Zechariah responds (eventually responds, he doubts the announcement, at first, and loses the power of speech) Zechariah responds, eventually, with a song, “Blessed be the God of Israel.” This song is known as the Benedictus. “Blessed be...” We just sang a version of it. Today we also heard the story of Mary, being told that she will have a son. Mary is young, unmarried, a marginal part of society. She responds with a song, “My Soul now magnifies the Lord.” That song is known as the Magnificat. We just sang and heard versions of it.

If we kept reading in Luke 2, if we continued past the Christmas Eve story, we would hear how after Jesus was born in Bethlehem he was presented at the Temple in Jerusalem. That is, if we continued reading Luke 2 we would hear the story of Anna and Simeon, who’ve been waiting for the redemption of Israel. They see baby Jesus, and Simeon responds in song: “Now, Lord let your servant go in peace...” That song is known as the Nunc Dimittis. “Now Dismiss...” We’ll sing a version of that today, too, just after communion, just before we are dismissed.

On this last Sunday of Advent, a Sunday of Lessons and Carols, we see that for the gospel of Luke, the narrative of God’s arrival is itself lessons and carols: Zechariah, Mary, Simeon. Story, and song, story and song, story and song. We see that, we hear that, the narrative of the gospel is this person, and that person, and that person, each given an invitation to encounter God, to greet God’s arrival, to receive it, to respond to it. The arrival of God is personal, and cause for praise. The arrival of God, the birth of Christ, is situated into individual story and sung response.

We are situated in this, too. We are situated in the gospel every time our individual stories meet God’s invitation—and we sing. When we sing, we continue the gospel. When you hold a small child, and you sing a lullaby, the gospel continues. When you hold a hand spotted with age, skin thin a paper and a mind that is also fragile, when you sing songs that may not even be heard, the gospel continues. When the president holds the attention of a nation, when our first black president speaks at a memorial for people murdered because they are black, and the president responds with song, the gospel continues.

Sometimes we can’t speak. Sometimes, like Zechariah, we lose the power of speech. When we don’t know what to say, when we can hardly find words, we have these songs: Benedictus, Magnificat, Nunc Dimittis, Amazing Grace, God encountering us, inviting us, join the song, add your voice. When you are old, when you are doubtful, when you are young, when you are vulnerable, when you are looking for redemption, continue the gospel

We continue, with yet one more version of Mary’s song. Open now your hymnals, to hymn number 236, Magnificat. It’s in Latin. In English, the words mean, “My Soul magnifies the Lord.” But we’re going to sing it in Latin, which is a little tricky, worth a little practice. So now that you are there, repeat after me: Magnificat, magnificat. Magnificat anima mea. Dominum. Magnificat, Magnificat. Magnificat anima mea! We’re going to sing it four times, the choir will start a little later the third time, so that we’ll be signing it as a round, so that they’ll be continuing the song, continuing Mary’s song, as Mary was continuing Hannah’s song... We sing.