

December 24, 2016 Christmas Eve  
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church  
Luke 2:1-20

### **Late Singers**

I've lived on the north side of Chicago for three years now, but I was late to learn a song that many north siders know. I learned this song especially this past summer because it was played and sung so many times in a certain athletic stadium that is located here on the north side. Quite late into the fall they sang this song, and not just in a stadium, eventually they also sang this song on stages: at the curtain call of a Chicago performance of a sought after musical, and on a stage with the cast of a comedy show live from New York on a Saturday night. I am guessing that you know this song. I don't think I even need to hum it before you can name that tune. Hey Chicago, what do you say? Cubs are gonna win today. Go Cubs Go!

It sounds so hokey. Can I say that, in a pulpit on the north side? This year of all years? The bouncy tune, the simple lyrics... some can probably recite them completely from memory, including the odd historical detail... "Catch it all on the WGN..." It sounds like it's from another era. When I first heard this song I could hardly believe that people actually sang it, and how they do! All kinds of people, singing with such fervor, exuberance, joy ... I marveled at it.

But cynical as I can be, the song won me over. I was won over by the joy of it, by the goofy confidence, by the unabashed cheer. It was so hopeful: the song, and the season—though the latter kept you at the edge of your seat. So late into the season, so late into it that very last game, that very late game.

And here we are tonight, late. About the same time as that last game, as I recall. But the season has changed. It's winter. It feels like not just a different season, but a different world.

We gather, not in a stadium or on a stage, but here. We gather to hear a song. It, too, sounds like something from another era, it has the odd historical detail, but all in all is a simple story. Some can probably recite it completely from memory. "And she gave birth to her first born son..."

You can be cynical about this, tonight. You can be cynical about the story, which sounds hokey: a baby in a manger, angels talking to shepherds. In this cold, dark season, you can be cynical. You can be cynical about our city, bouncing from a baseball high to one of the highest crime rates ever. You can be cynical about the gospel world and this world.

You can also hear about that first Christmas and hear echoes of this Christmas: of politics and fear, of refugees and registrations, of hometowns and Syria, of taxes and decrees, of governors and emperors of all the world. Events other than a world series and ones with world-wide consequences leave many with an ongoing feeling of being on edge. For all kinds of people, of all kinds of persuasions, in all kinds of places, there are plenty of reasons to be cynical, to feel hopeless, to hardly believe that anyone would come together.

The man who wrote "Go Cubs Go," didn't see the Cubs win it all. Steve Goodman was a life-long fan, but his life wasn't long. When he wrote the song, back in 1984, he was only 36 years old, but he didn't even see the end of that season. He died of leukemia, late that summer.

But they're still singing his song. With what fervor they sang it this year, that endlessly encouraging, boundlessly celebratory song. They sang it at the games, and on the stages, and at the victory rally. Maybe you were there. There were more people there, they say, than live in the entire city, north side, and south side, and west side too.

Even more people are gathering today, not just in one place, in one city, but in all different places and cities, and towns, and villages, small as Bethlehem, and bigger than Chicago. They are and have been gathering on this night, around the globe, for well more than 108 years. They've been gathering, not just to hear, but to sing. To sing songs of exuberant joy, to sing songs old as of the Father's love begotten, and to sing songs by candle light; to sing songs that wonder and marvel at what God is doing in a world such as this.

That's why we are here, late tonight. Because it's not too late. Even though it's cold and dark. Even though we are on the edge of our seats and on edge with one another, it's not too late to sing. The gospel world is the one we live in. Whatever is ahead of us, whatever stage we find ourselves at next, even and especially now, it is not too late to sing.

It's not too late to sing of peace. Maybe you have said things to someone that you deeply regret. Maybe you have heard some things that really hurt. Maybe you thought that was the last things you would ever say to one another. It's not too late to say something more. It's not too late to say "I'm sorry." It's not too late to say "I forgive you." On the night of Jesus' birth, we remember how one of the last things he said before he died was, "Father forgive them." It's not too late for reconciliation. It's not too late to sing peace.

And it's not too late to sing of bliss. Sometimes when it's late, that's especially when we can sing of bliss. Sometimes when it's late we are more attuned to it: to the starry sky on the hillside, to the soft cradle of a beloved's arms. Late nights are made for this. We are made for this: to see the world, to experience one another, with exuberance, with joy. On the night of Jesus' birth we remember that God becoming human says something astounding about flesh, about the capacity of flesh to convey the divine. It's not too late to see this in the world and in those around you, even in you. It's not too late to sing bliss.

And most of all, it's not too late to sing that God is love. We are here to sing it, we who are late to the manger. That's who we are, historically speaking, we are as late to the manger as we could possibly be. Recent transplants, and justified cynics, that's who we are, but we are here to sing, because but there is no fan of humanity more long suffering than God. Late in time behold him come, late at night, and long ago, and even now. Jesus' birth is God's love song to us, and it's not too late for us to sing along.