

December 23, 2018 – 4th Sunday of Advent
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
Luke 2:1-6

Luke: the Musical

It's been said that Luke's gospel starts out as a musical. You know how musicals go: people are stuck in traffic, and then they start singing. Or they're working on the constitution, arguing over the location of the capital, which they sort out with a duet. In musicals people are doing their thing and then they start to sing. Matters of life are interjected with melody.

It's been said that Luke starts out like that, like a musical, because its first three chapters are a series of scenes and songs. Like the scene that has become known as the Annunciation, when an angel appears to Mary and offers an incredible opportunity. We can imagine young Mary, going about her business, we actually don't know what she was doing at the time of the Annunciation but artists have imagined it, according to painters throughout the centuries, Mary was in her room, reading, and suddenly an angel appeared! And shared some very surprising news! She's going to have a baby!

Mary must have been startled, but she recovered quickly enough to point out a technical difficulty. "How can this be?" she asks the angel, "for I am a virgin." The angel assures Mary this no impediment. Nothing is impossible with God. The only thing needful is her acceptance. And Mary agrees. Mary consents to take on this blessing and honor, this burden and pain, all that will come with being the mother of the Messiah. And then, Mary sings. Mary sings one of Christianity's most magnificent songs: a song that's become known as the Magnificat, "My soul magnifies, glorifies, proclaims the greatness of the Lord...He has looked with favor on his lowly servant." We sang one version of the Magnificat between the readings today, before the gospel reading today, but according to Luke's chronology, the Magnificat doesn't happen before the story that was the gospel reading today, the meeting of Mary and Elizabeth. Luke places the Magnificat after that meeting. Mary goes with haste from the Annunciation to the house of her relative, to share this amazing news: in song. It may have been a solo, but the Magnificat was sung in community. In this way, today's prelude, another version of the Magnificat, one voiced by two women, a Magnificat that calls to mind Mary and Elizabeth is an especially fitting rendition.

There had in fact already been another Annunciation, to Elizabeth's family, and it, too resulted in a song—eventually. Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah were old, they had long given up on having a child. But then one day, while Zechariah was at work—unlike with Mary, Luke does tell us what Zechariah was doing when the angel appeared: Zechariah was at work, he was priest, and then the strangest thing happened: an angel appeared to him, in the sanctuary. How surprising is that? An angel appearing, in the sanctuary! The angel told Zechariah he would have a son, and Zechariah was not just startled, he was dumfounded, literally, he lost his ability to speak—for the whole of his wife's pregnancy. And then their son was born, their son John, who would prepare the way for the Messiah. When his son John was born Zechariah found his voice again, he burst into song. That song has also become a great song of Christianity; it's known as the Benedictus. "Blessed be the God of Israel, he has come to his people and set them free."

Then, of course, Luke has the scene and song that we'll hear tomorrow night, the scene and song we always hear on Christmas Eve. Again, an angel appears to a person at work, in this case several people at work, shepherds, out in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night. Suddenly an angel appears to them with an announcement, and again it is startling, off-putting, even scary. In this scene it's the angels who sing: Gloria in Excelsis Deo. "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace to God's people on earth."

And then yet another scene, just a few days after Jesus is born, when his parents bring him to the Temple. There they run into a man named Simeon, who stops what he's doing and breaks into song, now known as the Nunc Dimittis, "Lord, now dismiss your servant in peace, your word has been

fulfilled..." That song ends and Simeon then gives a blessing for the holy couple and a caution for Mary, "a sword will pierce her heart."

Scene, song; scene, song; scene, song; scene, song: that's the beginning of Luke's gospel. There is a rhythm to it, and a repeated theme: as you go about your business, as you go about your day, as you do what you do, you will be interrupted in startling, challenging, difficult ways, and the thing to do is to sing.

Maybe you know what it is, when the everyday is interrupted. Maybe you know about things taking a sudden turn. Maybe you know about swords, piercing hearts. About six months ago, after a long battle with cancer, the mother of one of our members died, the mother of Melissa Grant. Melissa said I could share this story. She was one of the singers for today's Magnificat prelude, and she's now sitting over there, with her husband Brook and daughter Fiona, but mid service Melissa moves over to that part of the church, to join the choir for the anthem. Melissa works as a choir director at a high school and also has a number of other musical gigs, including a women's choir which she directs, which rehearses a couple evenings a month here at church. She's a talented, busy lady. Her mom, who was a midwife, died last June, shortly after Melissa and Grant went through a miscarriage, of twins. They lost the twins, and then they lost her mom. A couple days after her mom's funeral I saw Melissa, she was getting ready for a choir performance, smack in the middle of fresh grief. I asked her, "How are you doing this?" and she said, "Honestly, it's helping. As I'm going through this, it has been good to be singing. It's what I should be doing."

About four months ago, after a long full life—a long life that got hard at the end, Lois Bingaman died. Lois was the mother of our music director, affectionately known as Bing. Bing and his husband Chris make music happen here at this church—and they have about twenty-five other music directing jobs in other places, too. Lois was a member here, and we had her memorial here, and some of you were able to attend it, some of you spoke at it. And there was music, too, Lois's favorite hymns, and a string quartet, and Chris sang a solo that outdid angels, and Bing played the organ and the piano and directed the strings. I asked Bing, "How are you doing this?" He said, "I have to. It's what I need to be doing."

This Sunday, as we think about the mother of our Lord, we think of other mothers, as well mothers who are no longer with us, mothers, and grandmothers, and sisters, and others, too, fathers, brothers, children, co-workers, neighbors, friends. This time of year is filled with celebration, and with sadness, as we think of those not celebrating, as we remember those absent from us. The pain of it pierces our hearts once again, turns the hilt on that sword. Blue is a fitting color for this season before Christmas, for it has its blues, can highlight and heighten loss. Grief is refreshed, tears retapped. We need to sing Christmas blues, too.

And we need to sing, like Mary, and Zechariah, and the angels, and Simeon, and Melissa, and Bing, and Chris, we have to sing, it's what we should be doing: singing as if it's our job, singing in sympathy, singing for those who can't sing, singing until they regain their voice, singing in solidarity, singing in prophecy. That's what they are, these songs at the beginning of Luke, they are prophetic. They describe what will be, at the end, how the gospel ends, the change that God is working, the turn that happens, and will happen, in Christ. The Christmas story begins with singing, and the Christian story ends with singing. Such is the vision of Revelation, at the end: all voices joined in endless song, all voices. This is why Christ was born. This is why God interrupted everyday ordinary human life. This is why God entered into our sorrows, so that at the end, we may sing. Sing through the sorrow, sing for a new tomorrow, sing, for the world is about to turn.