

OPENING:

Growing up in my family, we had a tradition where whenever we got home from a long car ride, oftentimes around the holidays this time of year, at the moment that we would pull into our driveway or into our grandparents' drive-way, we would start to sing.

We would sing the Doxology: "Praise God from whom All blessing Flow" to the tune of the old 100th.

That makes us sound pretty holy, but by the time we were teenagers, my siblings and I started to mock this tradition, and so we would sing the song when we pulled into the Cracker Barrell on a random Wednesday, or when the odometer on the minivan would reach some round number, or when a kind police officer would let our parents off with a warning from a speeding ticket,

Like perhaps traditions in your family, this one had morphed from something special and sweet, to something eye-rolling and begrudging.

SONGS:

I tell that story because our original instinct in singing the Doxology was, of course, correct—giving thanks and praise to God for passing through a difficult journey. And we should always be asking ourselves: "what songs are we singing and why?" During this time of year, in the month of December, the question about which songs we should sing and why reaches a fever pitch, seemingly higher every year,.

If you are unaware, the argument this year has centered on classic holiday numbers such as "Santa Baby" and "Baby, It's Cold Outside" which are receiving renewed waves of attention for their lyrics, now in the context of the #METOO movement.

In addition, sticklers on the subject argue, from a Christian perspective, that *any* secular song dilutes the holiday, in that their commercial message distracts from the 'reason for the season.'

Then even more stringent sticklers add that, from a Christian perspective, we should not be even be singing Christmas songs at this moment, because we are still in Advent.

MARY DID YOU KNOW

Those arguments, that burn like a raging Yule Log on social media and elsewhere, converge for us today over one particular “Christmas” song—the beautiful, popular and problematic “Mary, Did You Know?”—the lyrics which have their origin in our Gospel reading.

One website calls “Mary Did You Know?” “the most Biblically illiterate song of all time”¹ because Luke’s account makes it stunning clear that Mary did indeed know. That’s the whole point, her acceptance of God’s plan, her acknowledgement of the Incarnation. This makes Mary the first disciple, the first carrier and then proclaimer of the Gospel.

The song “Mary, Did You Know?” meanwhile, to some, kind of makes her sound clueless, or at least naïve.

MAGNIFICAT:

Fortunately, we are gifted with another song today, Mary’s song, the *Magnificat*, a song that runs circles around the rest.

It is “one of the most famous songs in Christianity, whispered in monasteries, chanted in cathedrals, recited in small retreats, at remote churches, by evening, and set to music with trumpets and kettledrums by Johann Sebastian Bach.”²

It’s a song that is playing chess while all the other songs are playing checkers.

Mary’s response, to this great and challenging and momentous gift in her life, was to sing. To be sure, in the next chapter of Luke, we get the line that Mary “kept all these things and pondered them in their heart”³ and that has contributed to much of how we sometimes understand Mary—Mary “meek and mild.”

Like “Mary, Did you know?”, I don’t think that gives Mary enough credit.

Rather than to reflect or contemplate, Mary first reaction is to sing, loud and proud, and not just any song. With echoes from other songs of Scripture, the Magnificat reveals Mary’s deep understanding of God’s plan for salvation and how it enabled her to respond to God’s sudden presence in her life.

¹ <http://thefederalist.com/2016/12/21/mary-know-biblically-illiterate-christmas-tune/>

² NT Wright. *Luke for Everyone*. 14.

³ Luke 2.19,51.

Given its Old Testament roots, the Magnificat is what the kids call a “remix” where Mary artfully samples her faith tradition, alongside this new revelation, and her lived experience.

And it turns the world upside down with the immortal lines:

*(God) has cast down the mighty from their thrones, **

and has lifted up the lowly.

*He has filled the hungry with good things, **

and the rich he has sent away empty.⁴

GIFT:

What a gift that song is to us on this day.

In the midst of these difficult times, when the days are the shortest and the darkness creeps in, when political instability at home and tensions around the world persist, today we get this early gift. In these final moments of the Advent Season, we get a gift that serves as a teaser for the gifts that we will celebrate tomorrow and the next day.

Today’s Gospel story is an early present, a pregnant pause that foreshadows and ordains all the wonders and mysteries that the Incarnation and the Christmas season will hold.

And at that time, we realize that the gift is the giver.

This magnificent song of Mary, thus “(is the) gospel before the Gospel.”⁵ This story of beginnings is Good News indeed.

BAPTISM:

We share in that story, in that beginning of the Good News, especially today as we celebrate three other gifts into our community, the Baptisms of Hadley, Emerson, and Andrew.

Like Mary and Elizabeth’s story, these baptisms remind us about what the beginning of a life of faith means, about what it means to be clothed as Christ’s own, and to act as Children of God.

Their baptism into a life of Faith is a gift of God’s grace, it is because of God’s love that we can Baptize this child. We know little about child’s identity, but the

⁴ Luke 1.51-52

⁵ N.T. Wright. *Luke for Everyone*. 14.

cornerstone of our faith is that God loves them, and as parents we love them ferociously, modeling God's love as best as we can.

As the community of faith, we share in that love, as we are reminded of our own Baptisms, of our responsibility to share God's love, the gift of God's grace, and our promises to maintain the Baptismal covenant.

To describe Baptism, the ancient church used phrases such as, "(Jesus) is by nature what we are by grace... we are the children of God by adoption. Baptism is the sign of that adoption, of that grace."⁶

But Baptism/ Advent are truths so profound that it is hard to put words into words, even as a song.

CONCLUSION:

Mary's song is close to perfect, the perfect gift for these troubled times.

The song that my siblings and I sang with our family was not perfect, far from it, but it acknowledged joy and thanksgiving for arriving home.

Advent is a Season is about COMING HOME, in a number of different ways.

In the most obvious sense, it's about home coming as we are welcoming or being welcomed by family members home for the holidays.

Certainly, that was what was happening to Mary and Elizabeth in our story, welcoming one another after a long distance into a familial embrace.

In our Baptismal Liturgy, we will hear that sense of homecoming echoed in the last words the Congregation speaks, we say: "We receive you into the household of God."⁷ In other words, you have come home, "WELCOME!"

In another sense, Advent is about us understanding God coming home to us, 2000 years ago in the mystery of Incarnation in that place, but also every year and in every place as God reminds us that God is Emmanuel "God be with us." That is a song worthy of being sung this year, and every year. **AMEN**

⁶ Catherine González. "Preaching the Advent Lectionary" *Journal for Preachers* (Advent 2003). 7

⁷ BCP, pg. 308.