

Elizabeth's Story
Luke 1:46-55

Friends do you have a favorite Christmas carol, or a perhaps favorite rendition of a particular Christmas carol?

I know this year Pentatonix's version of "Mary did you know" is topping the social media charts - I've seen it shared and posted all over Facebook in the past couple weeks.

Or maybe you have a favorite collection of Christmas carols – the Manheim Steamroller or the Tran Siberian Orchestra

Our family used to have a Christmas tradition when we lived in Ontario that involved a collection of Christmas Carols.

Each Christmas we would drive from Toronto up to Ottawa to visit my parents, and we would always listen to "A Very Veggie Christmas" and sing along with Bob and Larry and the rest of the Veggie Tales gang. Aimedee used to love it!

And these days, when Christmas comes around I have another CD that I listen to – given to me by a very thoughtful person a few years ago - the Twisted Sister Christmas Album.

Friends, is there any other holiday or celebration which has been the cause for more singing and song writing than Christmas? I can't think of one...

If you think about it – we will hear Christmas music played for almost an entire month before the holiday, in the stores, on the radio, on TV.

And there's no shortage of Christmas albums... right? Any singer or band who wants to can cash in on a sure money maker just needs to produce a Christmas song or a Christmas Album.

I mean when was the last time George Michael last had a regular Top 40 hit? But every Christmas we get to listen to his song "Last Christmas I gave you my heart..."

What other holiday generates this much music and song? I can't think of any...

And as we listen to all this Christmas music, I don't know about you but sometimes I'm struck by the incongruity of those who are singing this Christmas music.

You have singers and musicians whose lives and lifestyles do not indicate in any recognizable manner that they are followers of Jesus Christ, singing words of profound spiritual meaning and deep faith.

"Hail the heaven born prince of peace, Hail the Son of righteousness"

"Christ the Savior is born"

"O Come let us adore Him, Christ the Lord!"

And you wonder how can you sing those words and not be impacted by them?

Who knows? Maybe they are in some way and that is also part of the appeal of doing a Christmas album.

So friends Christmas time is a time of music and singing.

And whether you love it or hate it – can you imagine a Christmas without music, without song, without carols? Something very significant would be missing wouldn't it?

I mean we can imagine a Christmas without presents or gifts.

It would be a bit sparse perhaps, but how often do we bemoan the fact that the gift giving and present-getting obscure the celebration of the birth of Christ.

After all when we normally celebrate birthdays, the birthday boy or girl gets the presents, not us...

And those of us who live in northern countries always dream of a white Christmas, with lots of fluffy snow on the ground...

But there was no snow in Bethlehem on the night Jesus was born.

So while it might not be very a picturesque Christmas without snow – a green Christmas can't ruin the **real meaning** of the holiday, can it.

But friends - a Christmas without music, without singing... If that happened then something that is at the very heart of celebrating Jesus birth would be missing.

Because friends, as we have been saying for the past couple weeks the "why" behind the whole Christmas season is that *"God so loved the world, he sent his one and only son!" (John 3:16)*

The Word of God became human and was born Jesus Christ - so that He might come and live among us, become like us, redeem our sinful human nature and offer his life in our place as a sacrifice for our covenant unfaithfulness.

This is such an act of selfless and unconditional love that when we apprehend it something happens to us.

God's amazing love fills us with joy, and friends joy is something that can't be contained!

It bursts forth from us, taking the most direct route out of our bodies – so it flows out of our mouths in a shout or a song!

And whether or not you can carry a tune, or sing in harmony doesn't matter – that's why the bible says "make a joyful noise!"

You just have to let it out – you can't keep it in.

Don't believe me? For those of you who are hockey fans, tell me what did you do when Team Canada won the Olympic gold medal this past February?

And for those who aren't hockey fans, what did you do when you were watching the FIFA World Cup this past summer and your team scored?

You cheered, you shouted, because you were full of joy.

So friends, a Christmas without music, without singing would mean a Christmas that had no joy - and that is simply impossible!

Because the birth of Jesus Christ is the central part of the God's ultimate plan to save this world, which He is bringing about as an expression of His amazing love.

And this truth, this love - produces a joy that must be expressed.

This is evident even in the events which were leading up to the birth of Jesus Christ. What God was about to do was such a demonstration of His love that it produced joy - and that joy burst forth in song.

And so in our scripture passage today we see both Elizabeth and Mary full of joy and that joy bursts out in prophecy and song. The very first Christmas carol!

And if we were to arrange this carol according our current song writing methods you might say that Elizabeth wrote and sang the chorus and Mary wrote and sang the verse.

Now, Mary has gone to visit Elizabeth to see if what the angel has told her is true, that her relative who was barren was indeed going to have a child.

So as soon as she walks in the door and says "*hello Elizabeth*", before any further greetings can take place Elizabeth bursts out in joy and "sings" the chorus - which is really the catchy memorable part of any song...

It goes like this:

Blessed are you among women, blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?

*As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears,
the baby in my womb leaped for joy.
Blessed is she who has believed
that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!"*

Now I'm sure it's probably sound more lyrical and catchy when Elizabeth sang it Aramaic or Hebrew... but you get the picture.

So what inspired this joyful outburst? Elizabeth didn't have any details about Mary yet.

Elizabeth doesn't know anything about an angel visiting Mary, telling Mary she would give birth to the Messiah – there wasn't any Facebook or Twitter, not even email or a phone.

But, a different kind of social media had let Elizabeth know what was going on. Another little birdie had "twittered" to Elizabeth and inspired this prophecy - The Holy Spirit.

And this chorus is heart of the first Christmas Carol because what Elizabeth says confirms to Mary that her experience with the angel was genuine.

What the angel said was true, it was going to happen.

God was finally sending the long awaited and long promised Messiah – and she would have the honor of bringing Him into the world.

What Joy!

Now the conception of a child is usually a cause for great joy, and when its not... we know that something isn't right, that something has gone wrong.

Maybe it's the circumstances into which the child will come – born into poverty, born in a place torn by war, famine, disease.

Maybe the conception of the child was not the result of the intimacy that comes when a man and a woman pledge a lifelong commitment to each other.

Maybe it was the result of a bad decision, lust or even rape... and these things happen friends because sin and evil have affected our world and twisted that which God intended to be good.

I'm sure we've all known a situation where a pregnancy was not the cause for the great joy that it's supposed to be.

But ironically - it's this fact which makes Mary even more joyful about her upcoming pregnancy. Because the angel had told Mary that her son would save people from sin, from evil.

What a cause for great joy! And so Mary bursts out and sings the verse of the first Christmas Carol.

"My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his

servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me... (Luke 1:47-48)

And she continues on with the rest of what we read this morning...

And while the chorus of a song might be the heartbeat – the verse of a song gives its context – the chorus can only live within the body of verses which make up the song.

And so Elizabeth's chorus, confirming that the Mary will give birth to the Messiah, lives with-in the body of the verse which Mary sings.

In other words friends God's action of sending his son - which is the ultimate expression of his love towards us, is defined by the content of Mary's verse.

Because friends "love" - even God's love - needs to be defined.

Love isn't really truly love until those feelings translate into actions, and by those actions we can determine if it is truly love – sacrificial agape love – or if it is just sentimentality.

And I've been making a big deal about Love as the "why" behind this season, and that's nice and all but what actions can we point to that prove it, that define what that Love is?

Well according to Mary's song God is....

A God who extends mercy from generation to generation.
(vs.50)

A God who opposes the proud and arrogant but lifts up those who are humble. (vs. 51-52)

A God who gives to those who realize they need His provision but will not cater to those who think they don't need anything. (vs. 53)

A God who remembers to help those who belong to Him. (vs 54)

A God who keeps his promises (vs. 55)

And so Mary's verse describes the actions which prove God has always been a loving God and that his decision to send his Son through her is the fulfilment of a plan which has been in the making for a long, long time.

Mary's verse lets us know that God's love is more than just warm fuzzy sentimentality, or some vague concept that we can define in whatever way suits us.

It teaches us that God's love accepts us as we are, but He loves us too much to leave us that way.

Because friends, we aren't the only ones who can see that there are times when the birth of a child is not a cause for joy... God sees it too!

In fact God sees how each of us who are born into this world are affected by sin and evil in various ways, and he has always acted loving towards us in spite of it.

Look at Mary's descriptions of God's past actions

God extends mercy: He doesn't give us what we deserve.

God opposes the proud and arrogant: If God allowed a proud person to succeed they will stay trapped in their pride. But opposing them to show them their limits will expose their folly and pride - so they may turn away from it.

God gives to the empty-handed: For those who realize they need forgiveness and mercy, God gives it.

And friends isn't this exactly how Jesus ministry continued as well?

Didn't Jesus say - it is not the healthy who need a doctor, I have come for the sick.

Didn't Jesus oppose the self-righteous Pharisees?

Didn't Jesus say to the woman who was caught in adultery - I don't condemn you (to death) but go and leave your life of sin..?

And didn't Jesus put our sinfulness to death on the cross as a demonstration that God forgives us of our sin and won't leave us sinners but promises to give us new life in the Holy Spirit instead?

And didn't the Apostle Peter on the day when the Holy Spirit was poured out on the church say that the promise of repenting and believing in Jesus and receiving the Holy Spirit "*was for you and for your children*"? (Acts 2)

The answers of course are yes!

So, from generation to generation God has shown His amazing love.

And thanks to the first Christmas carol we know exactly what God's love means and exactly what He has done to put his love into action and prove it to us, and allow us to benefit from it.

And so the celebration of this action comes around again each year to remind us, and help us encounter God's amazing love once again – because we need to be constantly reminded to live out of it.

So we can realize our need for God's forgiveness, so we can receive God's mercy and grace, and so we can be amazed at how far God would go to achieve it!

And so that in believing all this we will be filled anew with the promised Holy Spirit – who will produce His fruit in us...

And so we will experience the fruit of Joy! Joy that we can't hold in!

Joy that grows and builds inside us until we simply have to let it out and sing!

Sing for joy, Shout for joy – friends our Lord has come

How can we keep from singing?

Amen.