

December 24, 2022 – Luke 2:1-20 (Christmas Eve)

The first Christmas that my grandmother was in a nursing home was hard. She had been in decline with Alzheimer's for several years. First living with my family. Then in an assisted living facility. Then, finally, in a skilled care nursing home. During that time her memory had slowly slipped away, as had her health in general.

So when we travelled up to New York to visit that Christmas, we knew it was going to be different. This would be our first Christmas where she wasn't in one of our homes, sitting at the dinner table. Which meant this would also be our first Christmas where we wouldn't finish eating, get up, and gather around the piano for an hour or more of singing together. We were a family of singers. A family of musicians. It was a family tradition to sing Christmas carols together. But this year, it would have to end.

Except that, it didn't. Not yet, at least. My aunt realized that. We could do one more year of caroling after dinner. It would just have to be in the common room of the nursing home, around their piano. And so we did just that. After our meal, we bundled up and drove down to the home and wheeled grandma out in her wheelchair.

She was not in good shape. She didn't know any of us. Not the slightest glimmer of recognition in her eyes. In fact, all I saw on her face was confusion and even a little fear at the commotion caused by this group of complete strangers to her. But we went ahead anyway. Got her into the common room. Pulled out the family Christmas carol songbooks, well worn by decades of singing. My cousin sat down at the piano and began to play "O Little Town of Bethlehem."

And my grandmother began to sing. We hadn't bothered to give her a songbook. We didn't think she could follow along. And yet, here she was singing all four verses... from memory. And not only did she know the words. She knew the music too. She was singing the alto part... from memory. No music in front of her at all.

And all the fear and confusion left her eyes. And a smile spread across her face. And she still had no clue who any of us were. But at that moment, I think she finally understood that she was with family. Singing together like we always had on Christmas Day.

Music has a way of transcending rational human thought. A way of imprinting itself on us. Such that even if all our memories are gone, the music is still there. Buried inside us till the day we die.

Which is why I don't think it's terribly surprising that Luke's account of Christ's birth is full of songs. The first is the song of Mary. It's known in the church as the Magnificat, from the first words of the song in Latin... "My soul magnifies the Lord. My spirit rejoices in God my savior."

It's the song of someone blown away by the power of God. Humbled to be playing any role at all – let alone such an essential part – in God's plan of salvation. And so Mary sings in gratitude to her God and, as she so often does during this time, in music she gathers up all these memories and treasures them in her heart.

It's not long, though, before we get another song of Luke's gospel. The song of Zechariah, John the Baptist's father. Who is not simply overjoyed at finally having a son. Nor at the calling his son has received. He is overjoyed that God is fulfilling his promise. His own son is living, breathing proof that God is merciful. And that God keeps his promises of mercy.

We get another song a little after Jesus' birth. The Song of Simeon. Who takes one look at Jesus as he's brought into the temple. And he knows: this is the Messiah. The Christ. The Savior.

And not just to the Jews. No, Jesus is the Savior of all mankind. He is everyone's Messiah. Everyone's Christ. Everyone's Lord and Savior. Jesus' birth is a light for revelation to the nations. And so Simeon can, as it's written in Latin, "nunc dimittis." He can now depart in peace knowing God's Word is fulfilled.

But of all Luke's songs I think the most well known was not sung by a human voice. At least, not initially. It was sung by angels. And heard by shepherds. Out in the field keeping watch over their flock at night.

Which is kinda funny. Because those shepherds were probably already singing when the angels appeared. They were keeping watch over their flock, after all, to protect them. And it was commonplace for shepherds to sing through the night both to ward off wild animals, and to keep the sheep close. The sheep listen to their shepherd's voice after all. They are drawn to it.

But the angels have a new song for the shepherds. "*Glory to God in the highest.*" Glory to God in the highest heavenly places, all the way down to the lowest earthly places. All the way down to meager shepherds in their fields. To lowly Mary and Joseph and Jesus, lying in a manger.

"And on earth peace among those with whom God is pleased." There are lots of ways of translating that phrase, actually. That's one of them. Our older members may remember the King James rendering. "And on earth peace, goodwill toward men." The NIV has yet another: "peace to those on whom God's favor rests."

They're all basically trying to say the same thing, though. Peace is not something that we find on our own. It's given to us. It is a sign of goodwill from God to man. A gift from God above.

It's like my grandmother. Confused and afraid by a disease that had taken all peace from her. We're in the same boat. A disease called sin plagues our minds too. It leaves us confused and afraid. Such that even when our heavenly Father reaches out to us, we don't recognize him. We turn away. Run from him. Run toward every sinful source of comfort and pleasure and security we can find.

In our sinfulness, we can look in the eye the Son of God himself, our Savior and our brother, as he tells us, "God loves you. He so loves you that he sent me, His Son, that whoever believes in me will not die, but have everlasting life." And yet we still respond with our own song. "Crucify him. Crucify him."

That's what sin does. We can hear God's voice. We can see God face to face. And we still don't recognize him. Not on our own. Only when God enters our hearts with a song of faith – a song of salvation – do we know who's speaking. Only when He sings to us. Like He sang to those shepherds. Like the song he put into the hearts of Mary and Zechariah and Simeon. Only when God sings to us with words of peace and mercy and comfort do we know anything but the sin in our hearts.

And even in the midst of our sinfulness. Even while the disease still plagues us day after day after day. We hear that song of salvation and suddenly we know... we're with family. We're part of God's family.

And so we start singing too. Look at the shepherds. They heard the song of the angels and what did they do? They go to Bethlehem. They see the Christ child lying in a manger. And they begin glorifying God. Praising Him for all that they had heard and seen, just as it had been told to them.

They heard the song of the angels. And they began singing it too. Glory to God in the highest. And on earth peace among those with whom God is pleased. Glory to God right here in Bethlehem. And on earth peace among us. Who have seen God's salvation. And know that after all our sinfulness, he is still pleased to call us his children.

That was their song. That is our song. Because all these Christmas carols that we sing here. They do get imprinted on us. They are there, buried inside us till the day we die. And they are crying out to be sung again.

Sung to our friends. "Come and worship, worship Christ the newborn king." Sung to our neighbors. "Come, adore on bended knee Christ the Lord, the newborn king." Sung to our families. "Christ the Savior is born." Sung to everyone. "Go tell it on the mountain that Jesus Christ is born."

Be filled with God's song of salvation this Christmas. A song that brings us peace in the midst of fear and confusion. A song that shows us God's goodwill for us even in the midst of our sinfulness. A song of our savior. Born to die for you.

And to put his song in our hearts. So that we might share it with all the world. Be filled with God's song and have a very merry and blessed Christmas. Amen.