

What is your favorite Christmas carol? Ask that of a large group of people and you'll get a large number of answers. Outside the church, you'll likely get a list of secular responses: The Christmas Song, Jingle Bells, White Christmas, and the like. Among Christians, you will, hopefully, get something a little more Biblically oriented: Silent Night, Joy to the World, Hark! The Herald Angels Sing. That sort of thing.

But ask my wife, and you will always get the same response: Go Tell It on the Mountain. Which is a little unusual for a woman who has lived her entire life as a traditional German Lutheran. It's a perfectly good Christmas carol. It's an excellent Christmas carol, actually.

But its origins are as an African-American spiritual. In fact, I did a little research and found that it was first widely publicized in the late 19th c. by the Fisk Jubilee Singers of Fisk University. A choir that, at the time, was made up entirely of freed slaves who wanted all of America to hear the unique style of music that had developed on Southern plantations.

While that's a wonderful origin story for a uniquely American Christmas carol, it is not the typical source for Lutheran hymns. Our hymns usually come from Luther or Gerhardt or Walther or borrowed from Anglican hymnals. So why does my wife love it so much? Well, because, in her words, she loves the sound of children shout-singing the chorus at the top of their lungs, just as we heard this past Sunday. "Go! Tell it on the mountain!"

But, perhaps because she's exposed me to it so much, I have grown to love it as a Christmas carol too. Because it is actually a beautifully Biblical hymn that perfectly expresses our Old Testament lesson for this Christmas morning.

Here we have Isaiah preaching about the future as if he's already there. And, if that sounds a bit familiar, it should. Because just a couple weeks ago we heard Zephaniah do the exact same thing. It's a very common theme among the Old Testament prophets. God gives them a vision of the future and they start talking about that vision as if it has already happened.

Because, for them, it has. This is a divine vision of what will happen. There's no doubt in their minds about it. So past, present, and future tend to kind of blur together at that point.

So what is this vision of the future about? Well, that also hits a common theme of the Old Testament prophets, because it's kind of talking about two things at the same time. At first glance, it's talking about the exiles returning to Jerusalem. This is, after all, a message to the people of Zion. Mt Zion, where Jerusalem was built. And it talks later about the waste places of Jerusalem breaking forth into singing. During the exile, Jerusalem was left in ruins. It was only after the exiles returned that the city was rebuilt.

But is this just talking about the return of the exiles? No, absolutely not. There's far more going on here. For example, take a look at that first verse. A verse that is so perfectly echoed in "Go Tell It on the Mountain."

"How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns.'" I want to focus on one phrase right in the middle of that verse: "who publishes salvation."

That's a perfectly good translation of the Hebrew, but it does hide an important facet of this statement. Because, in Hebrew, that actually says, "who publishes "yeshua." Now, "yeshua" can mean "salvation". But "yeshua" is also a name. My name – Joshua – comes from the Hebrew "yeshua." And there's also a Greek name that comes from the word "yeshua."

Jesus. Jesus is the Greek form of yeshua. And so this verse literally says, *"How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes [Jesus], who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns.'"*

Isaiah isn't just describing the people who praise God for returning them from exile. Isaiah is describing the people who praise God for sending Jesus to be our yeshua. Our salvation. Our savior.

Isaiah is describing Elizabeth and the unborn baby John, leaping for joy and praising God for bringing the mother of their Lord into their midst. And inspiring Mary herself to praise God in the beautiful words of the Magnificat: *"my soul rejoices in God my savior."*

Isaiah is describing the shepherds in the field, hearing the message of the angels. Rushing into Bethlehem to see this thing that happened which the Lord told them about. And then making known to everyone they saw what had been told them about this child.

Isaiah is describing the wise men, following the star to Jesus' side. Presenting him with gifts of gold, incense, and myrrh. Bowing down to worship him as king and God. And then going back to their homes to tell everyone about this miracle they had just witnessed.

Isaiah is describing Simeon and Anna. Meeting Jesus in the temple. Praising God that they had been blessed to see the salvation which God had prepared for all peoples. Pointing to Jesus as the redemption of Jerusalem, just as Isaiah describes him here.

Are you seeing a theme yet? Throughout the Christmas story, we have lots of people who encounter the infant Christ, both born and not yet born. And in every circumstance, their response is to praise God and then go and tell others about God's salvation. They are the beautiful feet of those who bring good news, who publish peace, who say to Zion and all the earth, "Your God reigns."

And he is here, born in flesh and blood. Born in this little child. They see Jesus and they go and tell it on the mountain, over the hills and everywhere, that Jesus Christ is born.

That's why I love that carol. Because praising God is all well and good. And lots of our Christmas carols do that quite well. But Go Tell It on the Mountain reminds us that the news of Christmas isn't something we should just sing to ourselves. It's not just good news that we keep for our own benefit.

The news of Christ's birth is something to be shared. Something to shout-sing, like a little child, from the mountaintops. Just like Elizabeth and John and Simeon and Anna and the shepherds and the wise men.

I don't think it's an accident that the Gospels of Matthew and Luke begin with individuals seeing the Christ child and taking that news to the ends of the earth, and then those same Gospels end with Jesus commanding his disciples to take the Gospel to the ends of the earth. It's a bookend. An echo. It is God saying to us, "You see those people at the beginning of this story? Well, it's time for you to be those same people at the end of this story."

And so, when we read these verses from Isaiah 52, we're not just reading about people thousands of years ago. We're reading about ourselves. We are the people who bring the good news of Christ's birth, death, and resurrection. We are the people who publish peace between God and man. We are the people who publish Yeshua – Jesus. We are the people who say to all the earth, "Our God reigns. For death had no hold over him."

The Lord has indeed bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations. All the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God. But they'll see this because we show it to them. Because we show them the great power and authority the Christ had over sin, death, and the devil. Because we show them the forgiveness of sins found in Jesus Christ and the salvation he gives to us.

Go Tell It on the Mountain is a call to action. Don't just sing Christmas carols for your own benefit. Don't just join in Christmas hymns for the benefit of the people sitting next to you in the pew. Take this news to a world that needs to hear it.

Tell them that down in a lonely manger the humble Christ was born. Tell them that God sent us salvation that blessed Christmas morn. Amen.