

Sermon 12-15/16-2018
Preparing for Jesus through Music – Rev. Markus Wegenast
Luke 1:46f; 68f; 2:13f

⁴⁶ *And Mary said,
“My soul magnifies the Lord,
⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,*

*Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy:
⁶⁸ “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.
⁶⁹ He has raised up a mighty savior for us*

²¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest heaven, & on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

1)

How is the season of Advent going for you? Two weeks ago, when Advent started we talked about strategies to slow down in this rushed time of the year. I said that you should consider yourself blessed when you have moments of boredom – do you remember this?

Normally we consider being bored something negative but in it lies a gift of creative opportunity, an opportunity to connect with God – we’d do well if we embrace or create such moments. Have you had some? Have you had a chance to say the Jesus prayer in times when your December got out of control hectic?

As a congregation we’ve been busy as we so often are in December. This afternoon will be a busy one too. Drive Through Nativity is one of our biggest events – it is such an honor to be in ministry with each other and with our community tonight.

If you are in it – make sure to find a moment when you can pause – even if it’s just very briefly to soak in what’s happening (...). If you drive through make sure to expect for God to meet you in it.

Maybe the music can be a helpful tool and reminder for you.

Music. That’s really the keyword for my message to you today. Music belongs to this season like cookies and carols. Did you know that there is a good possibility that music was present during the first original Christmas when Jesus was born?

Today’s sermon title is “Preparing for Jesus through Music” - he uses not one, not two, not three, but four songs to tell us the story of Christ’s birth:

- 1) **Luke 1:46-55 - Magnificat (Mary)**
- 2) **Luke 1:68-79 - Benedictus (Zechariah)**
- 3) **Luke 2:29-32 - Nunc Dimittis (Simeon)**

These are the three traditionally identified songs that have found their ways into Christian (mainly Catholic) liturgy. And then there is of course the song of the angels in the Christmas story when they appear to the shepherds in the field:

- 4) **Luke 2: 13f – Angels’ song**

Luke loves to bring music into his story.

But...you can be critical about this, and there's nothing wrong with being critical. You could point out that none of those four songs I just mentioned say that they are musical in nature. They aren't called songs in the Bible. In fact, it doesn't even say anything about them being sung.

Each of those four pieces start with the introductory words: "she, he, they "said" not "sang!"

Now what, should I change my sermon title and rather call it "preparing for Jesus through texts!" Where's the fun in that?

Here is the thing: These four texts in Luke's Christmas story are beautifully poetic in nature. When you check out the Greek NT all these song texts are centered which is a publisher's way of pointing out that something is poetic in nature. Of course, that is just a publisher choice and not done by Luke himself, but what this indicates is that the church early on saw these four writings as something special – as something that maybe was rendered through music. And that would be right in line with many of the Old Testament ways where people sang scripture (Song of Moses, the song of Miriam, Deborah and Barak sing a whole chapter worth of words (judges 5), David's psalms...).

I can't prove to you that these four pieces were songs, but I can ask you to imagine it. Imagine how powerful it must have sounded when Mary, Zechariah, Simeon and the Angels sang their words. (And imagine how odd it would have sounded for the angels' multitude to just say the words "Glory to God in the highest heaven...")

2)

Let's take a look at three of those four songs. I'd like to start with Mary's song.

2.1) Mary's song

*My soul magnifies the Lord,
47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior – Luke 1:46f*

I wonder what it sounded like when young Mary said it. I wonder even more what it sounded like if she sang it. Imagine a young teenage girl singing these words – what melody did she use? Was it given to her by the Holy Spirit? What a beautiful thought of this girl lifting up her voice when she just found out the most fascinating news someone ever heard: she'd give birth to the son of God!

Again you may have some critical thoughts also. You may be skeptical that this is indeed a teenage Israelite country girl that is putting together such an elaborate song. *"Isn't this the hand of Luke the gospel writer who puts these words into Mary's mouth rather than her actually singing this?"* – you may wonder.

There is nothing wrong with having critical thoughts. Can I just give you a word of advice? Don't get lost in your criticism of the Bible. It is one thing to question and wonder – that's a good human trade. But don't get stuck in your wondering and questioning – move on to how you hear God. God is not a God who likes his children to get stuck in question, God is a God who leads and frees!

Imagine Mary singing: “My soul magnifies the Lord...”

You may run into another problem. You may wonder:

How does young Mary do that? How can she magnify the Lord when she had all the right to see him as a troublemaker in her life?! She just learned that she is pregnant, and no one will believe her when she says she is pregnant by the Holy Spirit.

Mary may have been scared to death because in her society being found pregnant while being engaged and the fiancé not being the father could result in capital punishment. She had all the reasons to be scared, frustrated, and upset. But instead, she sings! She sings to God as her savior. Isn't that fascinating? Can you relate to that?

I think Mary models to us what countless of Christians have done throughout the ages. Sometimes, in the midst of sharpest distress and trouble, our soul moves us into the opposite direction.

Instead of focusing on the bad and the scary, we focus on the goodness of God and it changes our whole demeanor and attitude.

Have you experienced that? Do you think you can make this your experience? Can you give it a try? Can you magnify the Lord when you're in trouble? Can you find your voice of praise – whether it is sung or not – when all the reason in your life suggests you should complain and be scared?

It may open a completely new door in your life...

Thank you Mary, thank you Luke, for teaching us something powerful thru Mary's song...

2.2) Zechariah's song

Zechariah also teaches us something powerful.

**“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a mighty
savior for us - Luke 1:68f**

Recall his situation: He was the father of John the Baptist who had a hard time believing that his old wife would still have a baby. This results in the angel taking Zachariah's voice away from him. For nine months he cannot talk until JB is born. And one of the first things he does once he gets his voice back is to sing a song.

I'm pretty sure it wasn't pretty! I mean, it can't be. Those unused vocal cords did not deliver a Broadway quality song. But the power was not in the delivery, the power was in the words:

⁶⁸ "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.
⁶⁹ He has raised up a mighty savior for us

For 9 months Zachariah had time to reflect on what it means that God would use his son John to prepare the way for Jesus. This time of waiting, meditating and reflecting in silence ushers into a song of praising God for his salvation.

So let me just ask you: Do you think keeping silence may produce powerful words of praise in your life? Think about those rare moments in your life when you are bored – I know for many of us it doesn't happen all that often, but when it does – and for some of us it *does* happen – can those moments give birth to your own personal song of praise? Try it!

2.3) The angels' song

Silence and boredom were the opposite from our last song that we contemplate today: The song of the angels to the shepherds. I say it was opposite because we are told that there was a "multitude" of angels. Even if they sang softly, it would have been loud and I assume beautiful, with trained vocal cords!

No wonder the angels' initial message is: "don't be afraid"! Before they explode into song:

*"Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" – Luke 2:13f*

Again, we could ask: Is this song really historic? Was there really a choir of angels singing to shepherds? And if so: who told and taught those multitudes of angels what to sing?

Good questions (there's an entire Sunday School play about it!) - but as before: Let's not get stuck in our good questions but rather ask something that moves us forward: "What does the song mean?"

This Bible passage has been translated in many different ways. You may be familiar with the rendering of the KJV that has been used in so many popular avenues, where the angles sing:

"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men."

The translation version we have on the screen here and which you find in your pew Bible is the more literal and better translation:

*"Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"*

And if this is true then we have to ask: What does that actually mean?

What does it mean that there shall be peace on earth for only those whom God favors? Does that mean that God does not favor all people? Does that mean that God's peace depends upon a certain human behavior? Does God's peace only rest on earth if people in this earth act in a way that makes them favorable to God? Isn't God's peace a gift that is given without human attempts to earn it?

Now I've really asked lots of questions and I want to be careful not get lost or stuck in them. All of this goes right along with the theme of salvation that was brought up in the previous songs of Zachariah and Mary already.

Is the salvation given by God in Christ free or does it have to be earned? The Bible tells us that God's salvation through Christ is **not** earned – it cannot possibly be earned because there is nothing a human being could offer to God that would be precious enough to earn Salvation.

However, Christians of every trade believe that God's salvation is not cheap but needs to be received. Every gift is free, right? But if it's not received and opened, it is hard to enjoy it.

"Glory to God in the highest heaven,...

You know – I don't think it's bad that God leaves us hanging a bit here. It is somewhat provocative to hear that peace is for people of God's favor and this is a good provocation. It makes us wonder something very practical:

"Well, am I a person on whom God's favor rests?"

It's the perfect question to ask. God probably loves it when we ask it. Some of us may ask it with fear and trembling and God can encounter us **in** that trembling. But God also invites us to hear the angels' introduction, which was: "Do not be afraid."

When we're not afraid we are best prepared to magnify the Lord and sing of his salvation, even if our vocal cords are far from delivering a beautiful sound.

Let us go into this final stretch of Advent, ready for new experiences in our faith journey. May you find your own song of praise in the attitudes of your heart and the actions of your life. May your words become a beautiful way for you to prepare for Jesus and for your neighbor.

Amen.