

“An Old Woman’s Song of Blessing”

November 27, 2016

The First Christmas Songs series

Join me in singing if you know this song:

It's the most wonderful time of the year

With the kids jingle belling

And everyone telling you be of good cheer

It's the most wonderful time of the year

It's the hap-happiest season of all

With those holiday greetings and gay happy meetings

When friends come to call

It's the hap-happiest season of all

How many of you have been excited for Christmas songs on the radio? I'll admit that I enjoy hearing them, and when I hear “Feliz Navidad” for the first time each year, I dance a little. The music of the season is a vital part of celebrating, and its prime time to hear hymns and spiritual songs, too. I even heard some radio personalities talking about the connections between the sacred and secular this week on the radio.

“It’s the Most Wonderful Time of the Year” is a holiday song, and it reminded me of our Scripture for today. As we live in this Advent season and prepare for Jesus’ birth and his return, we’ll look at Christmas songs, but not the ones we’re most familiar with. Luke’s Gospel is full of early songs that are a part of the story of Jesus’ coming, so we’ll hold those up against our contemporary ones.

Today we hear Elizabeth’s song to Mary. Some of you might be familiar with some of these words. In the Roman Catholic tradition, there’s a prayer that says,

Hail Mary, Full of Grace, the Lord is with thee.

Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.

Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now, and at the hour of death. Amen.

That first line that begins with “Hail Mary” comes from the announcement of the angel to Mary a few verses earlier in Luke. It’s Elizabeth who offers “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.” The last line is not from Scripture, but was added later. It’s a part of tradition of the church.

Elizabeth sings when Mary comes to visit her. It's the meeting of two moms - or moms-to-be anyway. Nothing too special - just two women meeting, right? J. Ellsworth Kalas says that it's important for us to see "that Christmas shows us that no part of life is unimportant to God, and that none of it is beyond God's interest."

It's really that big picture of God coming to us in all of our humanity. We see it in Mary and Elizabeth meeting in a home. Maybe today it would happen in a coffee shop or a bar where friends meet. It's ordinary, but it's also extraordinary because Mary goes to Elizabeth after the angel Gabriel announces to her that she is the favored one - full of grace - the Lord is with her. Mary has just received big news - scary and unexpected news - that she will bear the Christ child.

What do we do when we have news? We share it. Today we might post it or send a text or make a call. But what about Mary's kind of news? We need someone we can trust who is compassionate and wise. Mary knows Elizabeth is experiencing a miracle pregnancy, too, because the angel told her.

This meeting of moms-to-be is ordinary except that something happens. Mary greets Elizabeth, and something happens. We assume that Elizabeth has been fairly private to this point because of her miracle pregnancy. Maybe she's kept to herself, and her own pregnancy hasn't been made public yet because it was so unexpected. She wanted to make sure it would be okay. She wanted to avoid the gossip from people who couldn't believe it.

Zechariah isn't able to speak, and so maybe this conversation with Mary is one of the first that Elizabeth has with anyone except Zechariah. They've been living with their own experience of blessing, but one that was more than they could have imagined. An angel told Zechariah that he and Elizabeth will have a son who will prepare the way for the Messiah. And by the way, Zechariah can't speak throughout this pregnancy.

So I wonder if this was the first time Elizabeth felt the baby moving in her womb. I wonder if this is the moment when she realizes that she really is carrying a child in her old age after waiting so long. This is the moment when what she has believed is confirmed. So that's the first thing - the baby (John the Baptist) turns or kicks or leaps, and Elizabeth feels it. She experiences joy and reassurance.

And Luke tells us that it's not just that the baby moves, but Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit. This is Elizabeth's Pentecost moment! She speaks, and the first thing she says isn't, "Oh my gosh! I just felt the baby move!" The first

thing she says is, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you’ll bear.”

Elizabeth blesses Mary, and she blesses Jesus while he’s still in the womb. She shows courage in crying out - taking on the role of a prophet - just as John will cry out some years later when he prepares the way for Jesus and when he sees Jesus, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” She cries out to Mary inspired by the Holy Spirit with her own blessing for Mary, but also with God’s blessing on Mary.

This isn’t an ordinary meeting because Luke tells us that this meeting of two women is the first time that someone claims Jesus is Lord. In a world where women had no power or clout, a woman is the one to name and claim Jesus first. It’s important because right away we know that what God is doing is different. It’s not by the book.

God is not playing by the rules of the world. God is not moving through the political or social sphere in any way that’s expected or anticipated. God is doing things God’s way, and that means that we’ll be surprised because an old woman who carries a child who will be a prophet and prepare the way for the Messiah offers a blessing to a young woman who carries the Christ child. It really is amazing!

Perhaps Elizabeth needed the reassurance that God hadn’t abandoned her or Zechariah. God hadn’t gone back on the promise of a Messiah. After waiting for hundreds of years, God’s promise will be fulfilled, and Elizabeth’s son will prepare the way. She helps prepare the way by encouraging and blessing Mary.

We use the word “blessed” sometimes, but it can be problematic for us. We use it casually most of the time. “God bless you” when some sneezes. But Elizabeth uses “blessed” to describe herself and to describe Mary.

But I wonder if Mary felt blessed in that moment. Perhaps she felt burdened, too, for all that she would face. Pregnant and without a husband, and yet willing to say “yes” to God. And if we consider what Mary would face as Jesus grew up - going to Egypt as a refugee right after Jesus’ birth, raising this son whose wisdom was from God, watching him with joy as he helped and healed, but grieving in a way that we can’t fathom as he went the cross, “blessed” is not that first word that would come my mind.

So we have to understand “blessed” as Elizabeth says it. Many times for us, “blessed” means some kind of material wealth or good luck or an easy life. But Mary is blessed because she will be used by God for God’s purposes and to build God’s Kingdom. Both Elizabeth and Mary find deep joy in God’s call on their

lives, but they trust in God's presence with them in all that they face - even the stares and whispers of those around them – and we can be sure that there were stares and whispers and gossip.

As William Barclay says, “God does not choose a person for ease and comfort and selfish joy but for a task that will take all that head and heart and hand can bring to it.” So for you and me to ask for God's blessing means to be open and willing to follow God's call.

Elizabeth says that Mary is blessed because she believes what God said and believes that the words of the angel would come true! We have to believe that God can and will bless us - not give us an easy life or overwhelm us with stuff or let us win the Power Ball, but rather use us for God's good purposes when we say “yes” and open our hearts to God's leading.

We need support from others who believe and help us to believe, and there have been times when I've needed support to help me to believe. These two women show us a spiritual friendship that is powerful and vital. They show us encouragement and faith. They need each other to move forward in faith and trust.

When we're facing things too wonderful to imagine or things too difficult to stand, we need others with us on the journey. Elizabeth and Mary needed each other, and we do, too. How could we follow God's call without encouragement, help, and support of one another in the Body of Christ?

Consider today those who speak with wisdom, offer encouragement and perspective, and even convict you when you need it – not someone who will tell us what we want to hear, but speak truth in love. The mother of Jesus needed that in her life, and so do we! If you don't have those people, perhaps that's something to pray for and seek out. And just as we need them, who needs you to be that person who offers wisdom, encouragement, and conviction? Someone needs you to encourage them.

Kalas says, “Christmas comes at the intersection of the sublimely holy and the utterly common.” It's really what Christmas is all about - that thin place where heaven and earth meet - God coming to be with us. So I pray that we'd be attentive to where God is moving and how God is working even in those everyday conversations and events to remind us that we're blessed - not for our own selfish gain or glory, but to the glory of the One who comes to redeem the world.

May we be blessed like Elizabeth means it!

Thanks be to God. AMEN.