

Something Worth Singing Aloud – Brian Hartley

Luke 1:46-55

This is the season of children’s Christmas programs. Across the continent, churches are pulling out all the stops. Choir directors are working extra hours, ministers are drinking extra coffee, and children are requiring extra attention. Sanctuaries are being transformed into stage sets, scripts are being committed to memory, and directors are dragging out the annual paraphernalia stored in closets for this lone time of year. For some, it is a blessed season, while for others, well, let’s just say, it requires extra time and patience.

A long time ago, I was a senior pastor of a congregation for whom all of the above was front and center. We went all out. We brought in live animals and constructed zip lines for the angels. We even rented a fog machine to create extra ambience. The work required went beyond the pale. Fortunately, we had on our staff a Greenville College alum who loved to put on this kind of production. She saw to it that the church was decorated, the children were prepped, and parents were involved. It was a sight to behold. We even put down several layers of plastic sheeting over the sanctuary carpet, in order to spread bales of hay and protect our investment against the invasion of barnyard animals and any possible associated collateral damage.

But you know, there is only so much you can do to ensure that things will go as planned. Equipment can break, kids can break down, and chaos can ensue. You simply can’t hermetically seal that perfect rehearsal. The unforeseen will always occur—just as it did for us in Toronto on that year forever embedded in my memory. The animals got a bit unruly that time. The donkey decided to bray out of key. Another animal decided to defecate on the way to the manger. An angel came zooming a bit too fast down the guy wire and slammed into the three wise men. And there stood our chair of the Board of Trustees, Dave Lanier, front and center, the largest of the shepherds, desperately trying to hold onto a ewe lamb who really didn’t want to be in the production at all, and, out of desperation, decided to take an unusually long time emptying her bladder on poor Dave with a hot stream of concentrated urine, as the somewhat discombobulated angels tried their best to sing, “Glory to God in the highest!” All while babies cried, the donkey brayed, and senior citizens clutched at their throats in the back pews as the fog machine belched forth its contents.

Such scenes remind us that, despite our best planning and intentions, this season that we associate with peace and goodwill has a way of crashing into us with its harsh reality. Perhaps this year, more than most, the saccharine sweet films of the Family Channel seem far removed from us, tantalizing us with a nostalgia that borders on idolatry. Our carefully-constructed, highly-commercialized, and overly-domesticated version of Christmas is subject to the challenges of family dysfunction, the ravages of sickness and death, and the general despair and ennui after a bruising season of electioneering. Into such a context comes this rather strange canticle from Luke’s gospel, sung by a Galilean peasant girl.

Luke’s rendering of the events that lead up to the birth of Jesus comes to us in the form of a musical. Characters strut on and off stage to render their parts and, occasionally, as with Mary here, they burst into song. Zechariah, Simeon, and company dare to belt out anthems of praise in the midst of hard times and harsh realities. The heel of Rome grinds into Jewish necks and the vast populace of the ancient

world struggles simply to survive. Infant mortality rates are incredibly high and most people eke out an existence that verges on subsistence, at best. Hunger gnaws at one's belly and death stalks the streets.

A few folks, the King Herods, the Roman prefects, the Jewish high priest, live lives above the fray, with food to spare and immersed in royal largesse. But they are the exceptions to the rule. Most live and die without being recorded at all—their names forever lost to the dustbin of history. But Luke's narrative suggests that, just below the surface, something is bubbling. God is at work—oftentimes in out-of-the-way places; unanticipated and unseen, God breaks through the everyday, the ordinary, and the mundane.

In this beautiful song of the virgin Mary we hear echoed the major themes of the coming revolution and, if we look close enough, we find ourselves on the cutting edge of the gospel. When British troops stacked their arms and retired from the field of battle in Yorktown, Virginia, in the latter 18th century, they marched off to the tune, "The World Turned Upside-Down." A bunch of rag-tag colonials had sent the greatest empire on earth packing. The American Revolution marked the beginning of an era in which social instability reigned. A short decade later, the guillotine appeared in Paris and ushered in an age of bloodshed and terror. People then, as now, ran scared in the face of change and bristled at the word, "revolution." What we tend to forget is that this season ushers in, not just a new church year, but a revolution—a revolution in the very values that our world holds dear. The Good News of Christmas is this very upsetting of the world's values. Look a bit more closely with me at the revolution inherent in Mary's words.

During my early years in ministry, Gordon MacDonald's book, Restoring Your Spiritual Passion, caught my attention. MacDonald suggests that there are four spirits that can drain and destroy our passion for God. The very first one he lists is that of competition. It begins, he suggests, from the moment a parent begins comparing his child to the neighbor's, and when passed on through the home and the school it becomes a drive for power—a desire to succeed at any cost. In our day, we hear it spoken rather crassly in the halls of business and of government. In Jesus' time, it meant Pharisees vying with Sadducees, Herod slaughtering anyone who remotely appeared as a challenge to the throne, and Roman generals contending for the Empire. In whatever form or in whatever personalities it appears, it carries with it what Martin Luther called *cor incurvatum in se*, "the heart turned inward upon itself." The desire for power is the desire to be in control, period.

Mary's character in today's story serves as the best model for contrast to this selfish lust for power. Just a few verses previous, she had received an angelic visitor who had informed her that she was pregnant. If she had been consumed with a competitive spirit and a desire for power, her immediate response probably would have been to see such tidings as a world-class inconvenience. But, instead, she demonstrates great humility, proclaiming, *I am the handmaid of the Lord*. Her terminology here is the same used by the apostle Paul, only in a feminine form. For, just as Paul proclaims himself *a slave of Jesus Christ*, so does Mary describe herself twice in this chapter as the Lord's *handmaid*.

Hans-Helmut Esser suggests that there is "a fundamental difference between the classical Greek view and the Biblical view" with regard to the idea of humility. The Greek world was built upon a human-centered universe in which lowliness was looked upon as something shameful—something to be avoided and overcome by exercising one's actions and thoughts. But in the New Testament, with its inherent God-centered perspective, humility is portrayed as one of the key ingredients that allowed God to bring human beings into a right relationship with God's self. This idea of humility and service still

stands in direct opposition to the values of the world. Henri Nouwen states our dilemma succinctly: “It is difficult for us to comprehend that we are liberated by someone who became powerless, that we are being strengthened by someone who became weak, that we find new hope in someone who divested himself of all distinctions, and that we find a leader in someone who became a servant.” Yet this is exactly the message of the season—that our God *has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly*. The powerful have given way to the powerless in this “world turned upside-down.” While Herod and Caesar Augustus flexed their military muscle and demonstrated their political prowess, Jehovah God took center stage and began the revolution with a baby born into poverty.

But power often is exerted in our world by those who have concerned themselves primarily with and invested their lives in the accumulation of wealth. Jacques Ellul says in his classic book, Money and Power, that, “Mammon’s work is the exact opposite of God’s work. Given this opposition, we understand why Jesus demands a choice between Mammon and God. He is not speaking of just any other power, just any other god; he is speaking of the one who goes directly against God’s action, the one who makes ‘nongrace’ reign in the world.”

No one goes to the heart of the matter perhaps more decisively than does Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his book, The Cost of Discipleship. “Earthly goods are given to be used, not to be collected. In the wilderness God gave Israel the manna every day, and they had no need to worry about food and drink. Indeed, if they kept any of the manna over until the next day, it went bad. In the same way, the disciple must receive his portion from God every day. If he stores it up as a permanent possession, he spoils not only the gift, but himself as well, for he sets his heart on his accumulated wealth, and makes it a barrier between himself and God. Where our treasure is, there is our trust, our security, our consolation and our God.”

The gospel call of this season not only is quite different from that being touted over the airwaves, it oftentimes stands in direct opposition to the blatant consumerism which so frames our understanding. C. S. Lewis suggests that, “things are given as presents which no mortal ever bought for himself—gaudy and useless gadgets, ‘novelties’ because no one was ever fool enough to make their like before. Have we really no better use for materials and for human skill than to spend them on all this rubbish?” The gospel writer says that the true message of the season is that God, *has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty*. The revolution has not only upset the powerful, but has destroyed our elevation of the “rich and famous,” as well.

Next, Luke suggests, God has not only upset our ideas concerning power and wealth, but he has remembered *those who fear him*, and *scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts*. This message challenges our solipsistic nature, our propensity to measure everything by how it fulfills the “self.” The images held up in our ads are beautiful, independent, self-sufficient people—people oftentimes who are self-absorbed. Proud and arrogant, they strut across the stage of life leaving us to wonder why they can be so self-confident and self-assured. We envy them; we long to be like them; we wonder why we aren’t. But here, the proud and mighty are portrayed as God’s enemies—they look down on others, because they do not look up to God. Luke’s portrayal of the Pharisee and Publican in chapter 18 is instructive here. The gospel writer chooses to follow this parable with the bringing of the children to Jesus. The message is clear: humility and child-like faith are what are needed for the “kingdom seekers.”

Throughout all of this song, Mary recedes and God comes to dominate. God is portrayed as the great actor—caring for his children, doing great things, the holy and merciful One. The final portrait with which we are left is of a faithful God—a God who has remembered his people and remembered his promise. This is no ordinary God, some piece of stone or wood which can be manipulated as people please. This is Jehovah God who, through the Incarnation of His Son, has broken decisively into the affairs of men and women. And with his coming, the promised revolution has begun.

During the American Civil War, in which brother fought against brother, ministers on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line boldly defended their cause. Rev. Benjamin Morgan Palmer, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in New Orleans, preached on slavery as an institution ordained by God: “We defend the cause of God and religion...since the abolition spirit is undeniably atheistic,” he claimed. Meanwhile, the Rev. Henry Ward Beecher, perhaps the North’s greatest preacher, stationed at the Plymouth Congregational Church in Brooklyn, claimed that God’s chosen were being called to suffer for their principles: “I thank them (the Confederacy) that they took another flag to do the devil’s work, and left our flag to do the work of God,” he said. Both ministers and both sides felt strongly that God was on their side—either to defend or to oppose a full twelve generations of slavery.

It is very easy for us to have a similar attitude. We can easily look around us and point our fingers at those who have forgotten the so-called “meaning of Christmas” and to stand, rather Pharisaically, our ground. But the word of God should strike us equally hard and bring us up short. Perhaps we, as much as the so-called secular society, are to blame for the sanitization of Christmas. Perhaps we have forgotten the revolutionary and radical nature of the gospel message and have likewise forgotten that we are called to be “revolutionaries.” We like parts of the gospel message—you know, the part such as where we get to claim our inheritance—but we conveniently choose to forget other, not so attractive parts. Just perhaps, along with the Christmas carols and the Christmas gifts, we have chosen to clean up and sentimentalize the Christmas story. We like our shepherds rosy-cheeked, thank you. We want Mary dressed in clean cotton and the wise men in silky satins that flow gently in the wind. Above all, we wish to avoid some stinky old stable. A nice room at the Ramada or Holiday Inn will suit us just fine. Likewise, we prefer the “Peace on Earth” bit, but don’t talk to us about power, wealth, and arrogance. That’s all in the Old Testament, remember? Or perhaps after some two thousand years we’ve simply grown tired of thinking of ourselves as revolutionaries; we’d prefer to be a part of the Establishment. Don’t get me wrong, we academics are not immune to the same sort of thinking. A nice comfortable retirement and pension would suit us just fine. Tea and crumpets for me, served promptly at four, plus the added assurance that I am firmly ensconced in “the Lord’s work.”

The problem is that this is not the gospel message. That message is one of obedience and servanthood—a message so hot that it hurts us inside and gets a lot of people mad at us. It is a message so strong that we cannot always be content to preach a nice little homily about the shepherds and the angels, about the warmth of Christmas at grandma’s house, about all the nice presents under the tree. But that’s just exactly the way He is, you know. You can’t put Him in a box, you can’t sanitize His message. As soon as you try, He keeps finding some way to get out.

Perhaps in the end the truth of the season goes too deep to be captured in any quaint little message or to be delivered in a hermetically-sealed box, surmounted with a beautiful bow. This is the message of the revolution and, feeling it, Mary had no choice but to break out into song. It is a song that invites us into a new worldview and away from an old one. And, like any good song, it focuses us, body and soul,

towards the truth. The good news today is that Mary's song can become our song—if we are willing to embrace and to be embraced by it. The actors are inviting us up onto the stage to join in the closing number. Dare we join in?