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“Listening to the Music”
A sermon by Joseph S. Harvard

Third Sunday of Advent
December 20, 2009
Micah 5:2–5a; Luke 1:39–55

Gracious God, once again in this Advent season, we come and listen to familiar words in an old story. We pray that we will listen with attentive ears, and that you will open our hearts to hear the Good News of the Gospel. Hearing that Good News, enable us to respond with faith, hope, and love. All this we are bold to ask in the Name of the One who came to live among us, Christ our Lord. Amen.

Reading letters from friends far and near is a welcomed and enjoyable ritual this time of the year. How I look forward to catching up with distant family that I don't see very often and friends with whom I'm seldom in contact. There is, I admit, the occasional epistle that veers off to the stratosphere of braggadocio. You know what I mean. They go something like this:

Dear Loved Ones,

It's been a wonderful year for us in every way. Our youngest grandchild graduated magna cum laude from kindergarten. Her teenage brother rode his bicycle across Australia with Lance Armstrong, leaving Lance in the dust, of course. And you remember our daughter, who looked so adorable in pigtails. One day this past year, she received the Nobel Prize for Physics, won the Pillsbury Bake-Off, and gave birth to triplets. As for ourselves, we are still blessed with great teeth, flat abdomens, and wrinkle-free complexions.

We very much enjoyed our private audience with the Pope in the spring.

It's hard to connect with letters like this. If we're honest about things, this year has been a rough year for many of us personally and also for us as a society. We are engaged in war on two fronts: unemployment is affecting hundreds of thousands of lives, and death and illness have visited those near and dear to us. The list goes on and on.

I was reminded of a song popular in the 1980s sung by Anne Murray: "A Little Good News."

I rolled out this morning
Kids had the mornin' news show on
Bryant Gumbel was talkin' 'bout the fighting in Lebanon
Some senator was squawkin' 'bout the bad economy
It's gonna get worse you see, we need a change in policy

There's a local paper rolled up in a rubber band
One more sad story's one more than I can stand
Just once how I'd like to see the headline say
"Not much to print today, can't find nothin' bad to say", because

Nobody robbed a liquor store on the lower part of town
Nobody OD'd, nobody burned a single buildin' down
Nobody fired a shot in anger, nobody had to die in vain
We sure could use a little good news today

I'll come home this evenin'
I'll bet that the news will be the same
Somebody takes a hostage, somebody steals a plane
How I wanna hear the anchor man talk about a county fair
And how we cleaned up the air, how everybody learned to care
Whoa, tell me

Nobody was assassinated in the whole Third World today
And everybody loves everybody in the good old USA
We sure could use a little good news today.¹

We could use a little good news today. And I'm here to tell you that the good news comes to us from an unexpected place—not the newspaper or the television. It comes in a birth narrative, and I am convinced we hear it best in the music of Christmas. I must admit that, like you, I get irritated with the sound of carols blaring on loudspeakers in stores in October or November, all being done to ramp up the “Christmas spirit” so we'll go out and do more shopping.

I must admit also that during this Advent season, I have been deeply moved by listening to the music. The songs that we have sung in the services by the choir and congregation have been music to my ears. Singing around the tree last Sunday night with all the children leading us was also a special treat.

The greatest Christmas carol in history was not written by Irving Berlin or sung by Nat King Cole. The greatest Christmas song is not “Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer,” or “White Christmas,” or even “Silent Night”.

The greatest carol was composed 2,000 years ago by a pregnant teenage girl who was visiting her cousin Elizabeth. After Elizabeth pronounced a blessing, Mary poured out a song.

The Good News comes from an unlikely source—Mary was not a celebrity. She was a frightened teenager, a young woman. Don't miss the fear in her voice when the Angel Gabriel announces to her the good news that she will bear a son. “How can this be?” she asked. How can it be that God chooses in this way to come and dwell among us? Blessed are you, Mary, because despite your fear and trembling, you are willing to trust in God and follow God's lead. Blessed are you too, each one of you, who are willing to put your lives, your gifts, your resources in the service of God because that is what made Mary blessed.

¹ Murray, Anne. (1983). *A Little Good News*. On *Little Good News* [CD] New York, N.Y.: Capitol. (1990)

At this point, Mary breaks into song ahead of time, like those carols in October and November. There is no child yet: there is only the *promise* of a child. She begins with words of praise and gratitude. She trusts the goodness of the God who has created her. And then she goes on to note that God will bring down those who are on their thrones. Everyone knew who the ruler was. It was Herod, Herod the Great, who was a great political survivor. He has skills and could maneuver. He was so great that the Roman Senate, decades earlier, had named Herod “King of the Jews.”

Mary, meek and mild, said:

*He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones...
[He has] sent the rich away empty. (Lk 1:51b–52, 53b)*

This is the good news? Nobody prints her song on Hallmark cards. Nobody turns on the radio to hear Bing Crosby sing, “He sent the rich away empty.” But she said it often enough that it got remembered, got known, got written down, got put in the story of the Good News.

Jesus must have heard Mary’s song. Remember what he says in Luke’s gospel: “Blessed are you who are poor... who are hungry... who weep now... but woe to you who are rich... who are full now... who are laughing now...” (Lk 6:20–25).

Where did he get that? From his mother? Did he learn from her that God has no intention of tolerating the injustice and greed of this world on a permanent basis? That it’s unacceptable to God that a billion people go to bed hungry every night? Did she teach him that it angers God when people are selfish or violent, when rich people watch poor people go hungry and do nothing, when the powerful push around the weak because they can get away with it?

God comes among us to tell us that God will set things right. But God will not use the tactics of Herod, or the tactics of this world. God so loved the world that he showed that love aright. God comes to us, keeps pushing us out of our narrow, restricted, confused world, inviting us into a world that God intends. He asked us

to give expression to God's active love, saving love, God's transforming love, which we have come to know in Jesus Christ.

I have a friend who grew up in the church. She knows all the liturgy of the church; she was in the church from the time she was a small child. She knows all the Christmas carols by heart. She had not been active in the church for a long time. Life has dealt her some very difficult blows.

"Christmas is hard for me," she says. "There is an excitement in the air that I don't feel. I feel out of step. My Christmas seems blue.

"Last year, I forced myself to return to church at Christmas. I had an amazing religious experience. I have sung 'It came upon a midnight clear' a thousand times. Last year when we sang these words, they penetrated to the very core of my heart:

*And ye, beneath life's crushing load,
Whose forms are bending low,
Who toil along the climbing way
With painful steps and slow,
Look now! for glad and golden hours
Come swiftly on the wing:
O rest beside the weary road,
And hear the angels sing.²*

It dawned on me that I was not alone."

Sing it again, Mary. Sing it ahead of time. Sing it all the time. Sing to us of your God, a God who comes to set things right, a God who even had power over death. Not even death can separate us from your love made known in Jesus Christ.

² Edmund Hamilton Sears, "It Came Upon the Midnight Clear," *The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990), 38.

Sing it again, Mary. Sing it loud. Sing it ahead of time. Sing it till all the world hears, until all of us are transformed so that we can shout "Glory to God in the highest! And on earth, peace, goodwill." Sing it all the time! Amen.