



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

DECEMBER 20, 2015
THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Starry Stranger, Guiding Light to Peace
Micah 5:2-5a; Luke 1:39-55

Advent and Christmas are wrapped in song, and thanks be to God that they are. Our celebration, our understanding, our feeling of what is happening during this time would be severely limited without “O Come, O Come, Immanuel,” “O Little Town of Bethlehem,” “Silent Night,” and “Joy to the World.” The story of Jesus’ birth is wrapped in song, and I am grateful that it is.

Contrary to what we might think, the angels were not the head liners of this celestial concert when they sang “Glory to God in the highest.” No, the music started long before the angels pierced that Judean night with their benediction to the shepherds. Go back nine months when Mary, just beginning to glow with the inner light of motherhood, showed up on her cousin Elizabeth’s doorstep, flush and excited. Sensing the Spirit of his newly begotten cousin, the babe in Elizabeth’s womb kicked for joy and his mother blessed Mary and the child she carried. As if on cue, Mary broke into song, allowing all of the emotion she had kept bottled up to flow out in wonder-filled song: “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.” It is a song we continue to enjoy today.

Yet, even Mary was not the first act in God’s unfolding drama for hers was not an entirely new song but a revamped version of the song Hannah had sung centuries before. Her prayer for a child answered by God, kneeling in the temple with the priest listening nearby, Hannah sang, “My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in the Lord” (I Samuel 2:1). Truth be told, she too had borrowed a melody from another happy woman. It was Miriam, Moses’ older sister, who first sang, “Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously!” when God delivered his people to freedom from slavery in Egypt (Exodus 15:21). Three glorious songs, each an improvisation on the one before, praising God for what he had done for his people.

As we draw nearer to Christmas, however, it is Mary’s voice we hear carrying the melody of grace and joy. Lauren Winner, Assistant Professor of Christian Spirituality at Duke Divinity School, likens Mary’s song to jazz and

the young woman herself to a jazz singer.¹ We do not typically think of jazz when we think of Christmas. We think of Handel, Bach, Praetorius, and Bing Crosby, but I think Winner is onto something. She reminds us that jazz is all about improvisation and that the word improvisation is derived from a Latin term which means, “not foreseen.” Although the birth of the Messiah was foreseen by the prophets, clearly Mary did not foresee her pregnancy nor did Elizabeth foresee hers. They were two of the unlikeliest mothers-to-be that you could imagine; yet, there they were, standing on Elizabeth’s front porch, swaying and singing to the groove of God’s Good News.

How did they do it? How did they handle suddenly standing on the world stage, two women pregnant beyond belief—one old and past the time of child-bearing, the other young and virginal? How did they sing a song of praise and hope in such a strange land?

The answer, suggests Winner, is their ability to improvise. As far as we know, there were no guide books for elderly moms. There certainly were not any bestsellers on immaculate conception. These two women, chosen by God, had to improvise, to go with what they had. And to do that, they had to know what they were doing and where they were going.

In August 2001, jazz trumpeter Wynton Marsalis was playing a solo piece in an old jazz venue in New York City when he was interrupted by, at that time, the rather uncommon sound of a cell phone ringing. He was playing “I Don’t Stand a Ghost of a Chance with You” and was within a few notes of finishing the song when the cell phone went off. Here is how writer David Hajdu remembers the event:

Written by Victor Young, a film-score composer, for a 1930s romance, the piece can bring out the sadness in any scene, and Marsalis appeared deeply attuned to its melancholy. He performed the song in murmurs and sighs, at points nearly talking the words in notes. It was a wrenching act of creative expression. When he reached the climax, Marsalis played the final phrase, the title statement, in declarative tones, allowing each successive note to linger in the air a bit longer. “I don't stand ... a ghost ... of ... a ... chance” The room was silent until, at the most dramatic point, someone's cell phone went off, blaring a rapid singsong melody in electronic bleeps. People started giggling

¹Lauren Winner, “Living by the Word: Reflections on the Lectionary, December 20, Fourth Sunday of Advent,” *The Christian Century* (December 9, 2015): 21.

and picking up their drinks. The moment—the whole performance—unraveled. Marsalis paused for a beat, motionless, and his eyebrows arched. I scrawled on a sheet of notepaper, MAGIC, RUINED. The cell-phone offender scooted into the hall as the chatter in the room grew louder. Still frozen at the microphone, Marsalis replayed the silly cell-phone melody note for note. Then he repeated it, and began improvising variations on the tune. The audience slowly came back to him. In a few minutes he resolved the improvisation—which had changed keys once or twice and throttled down to a ballad tempo—and ended up exactly where he had left off: "with ... you" The ovation was tremendous.²

I would suggest that outside of the world of music (perhaps within it as well) the ability to improvise, to take what you are given and be creative with it, is the essence of peace. When his performance was interrupted at its climax, Marsalis was not rattled. He reached within himself to draw out everything he knew about music and used it to weave the interruption into his music. When their lives were interrupted, Mary and Elizabeth reached deep within themselves to draw out all they knew about God and used it to weave the interruption into their lives. This is peace. Peace, in the biblical sense, is wholeness, completeness. It is a sense of well-being and confidence that enables one to enjoy the world despite the fact that everything around her is in chaos. The mug that sits on my desk which I purchased years ago at the United Nations gift shop proclaims, "Peace. It does not mean to be in a place where there is no noise, trouble or hard work. It means to be in the midst of those things and still be calm in your heart." Peace is the inner security of knowing that what you do know will get you through whatever it is that you do not yet know.

Carol Boseman Taylor and her husband Chuck have recently returned to Rocky Mount where they both grew up. Earlier this year, Carol published a book of daily readings which she describes as a "life guide" rather than a book of devotions. It grew out of her own experience of prayer and listening to God. The entry for yesterday was written by her daughter Anna Taylor Freeman who heard these words from God:

² David Hajdu, "Wynton's Blues," *The Atlantic* (March 2003); available online at: <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2003/03/wyntons-blues/302684/>. Lauren Winner mentions this event in her article.

Hear me over all the distractions. Seek me. Your life will never settle enough for you to hear me. Work. I am here. I am always here. The cloudiness in your eyes—in your heart—will clear when you seek me and find me in the busyness of your day. I never promised that leisure would bring peace. You must find peace in spite of the hectic days, in the middle of the hectic days. Carry it with you. Offer it to others. Be my peace. I am not security. I am calm. I am the calm in life's storms. Share me. Love me above all others, above all things. Do this, and I will provide.³

Imagine all of the distractions Elizabeth and Mary must have experienced: the whispers of other women, the smirking glances of male neighbors, the questions of family, the questions in their own hearts. Both of those women stood in the midst of a life storm, yet neither one ran for temporary shelter. They made their way resolutely to the one place they knew would provide true shelter from the storm—their faith in God.

That is peace. That is a sense of wholeness and well-being we often long for but never experience. That is what Jesus and his Hebrew ancestors called *shalom*. It is the gift the angels sang to the shepherds the night Jesus was born. Peace makes possible improvisation which is essential in life.

A few weeks ago, Amy shared with me a video she had seen which many of you may have seen as well. It is of a little girl, about three or four years old, sitting on the stairs in her house, imploring her mother to learn how to get along with her former husband, the father of this little girl. She is very confident in what she says. Her young mind and heart are uncluttered with so many of the things that distract us adults. She has been thrust into a situation not of her own choosing, and she has found a way to make it manageable. She says,

Mom, are you ready to be his friend? (“Yes,” she answers.) Then try not to be that high up to be friends. I want everything to be low. Just try your best . . . I am not trying to be mean. I just want everyone to be friends. If I can be nice, I think all of us can be nice, too . . . I am not trying to be mean. I think you can settle your mean height down a little to a short height. I am not trying to be mean. I am not trying to be a bully. I am trying to be steady . . . If we live in a world where everyone is being mean, everyone

³Anna Taylor Freeman, “Life Guide December 19,” in Carol Boseman Taylor, *I Promise. Rejoice!: A Daily Life Guide* (Macon: Nurturing Faith, 2015), 154.

would be a monster . . . What if there is just a little bit of persons . . . we would eat them. Then no one would ever be here, only the monsters in our place. We need everyone to be a person. Everyone, including me . . . I just want everything to be as good as possible. Nothing else.⁴

Sadly, we see many monsters in our world today, people whose meanness is so high that they cannot be friends with anyone else. Their hatred, their inability to improvise when things do not go their way, causes them to devour anyone who gets in their way. We see it in people whose warped sense of faith causes them to terrorize others, in racists who do not recognize a brother or sister wearing a different color of skin, in people so consumed by fear that they are unwilling to lend a helping hand to a fellow traveler in need, in anyone whose personal insecurity leads them to trample on the rights and welfare of another person.

About forty-eight years ago, Ron Miller and Bryan Wells wrote a song which Stevie Wonder recorded. Many other artists have covered it through the years, but a new ad with Stevie Wonder and Andra Day singing a fresh version of the song caught my ear. Listen to the lyrics:

Someday at Christmas men won't be boys
Playing with bombs like kids play with toys.
One warm December our hearts will see
A world where men are free.

Someday at Christmas there'll be no wars.
When we have learned what Christmas is for,
When we have found what life's really worth,
There'll be peace on earth.

Someday at Christmas we'll see a land
With no hungry children, no empty hand.
One happy morning people will share
Our world where people care.

Someday at Christmas there'll be no tears,
All men are equal and no men have fears.
One shining moment, one prayer away
From our world today.

⁴"Girl Asking Her Divorced Parents To Be Friends Is Touching the Hearts of Millions"; available online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0oelgh3lemc>.

Someday at Christmas man will not fail,
Hate will be gone and love will prevail.
Someday a new world that we can start
With hope in every heart.

Someday all our dreams will come to be
Someday in a world where men are free.
Maybe not in time for you and me,
But someday at Christmastime.
Someday at Christmastime.⁵

I wonder of this day at Christmas time might be that day for peace to come to all people. True peace is improvisation on the circumstances of life. Mary and her cousin demonstrate the way in which God can permeate our lives in the most tumultuous of times and turn the blues into songs of rejoicing. It happens when a little light pierces the darkness, a light that falls on the stage of life where we stand, ready to sing. That light is Christ, God with us. What will be our song? Starry Stranger, Guiding Light, guide us to peace. Amen.

⁵Ron Miller and Bryan Wells, "Someday At Christmas," on Stevie Wonder, *Someday at Christmas*, Motown Records, November 27, 1967.

December 20, 2015

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Isaiah certainly dreamed of a world that is far different from the world in which we live, O God. In our world, predators and prey do not lie down together. Enemies do not get along. Peace is not the word for our day.

We wish we could all go to sleep and dream as Isaiah did and then wake to a world transformed into your world, but we do not see it happening, at least not anytime soon. Teach us, O God, the reality of peace in our lives and how to live in peace with one another. Teach us, O God, how to create a peaceable kingdom, your kingdom.

Teach us peace in the midst of strife when our ideas and opinions clash. Open our minds and hearts to learn from one another. Open our minds and hearts to dialogue with one another. Open our minds and hearts to disagree with one another without conflict and harm. Open our minds and hearts to love one another enough to tolerate each other.

Teach us peace in the turmoil of life when illness strikes or tragedy invades our lives. Bring to us people who can help us. Bring physicians and scientists and health care workers who will take care of us. Bring us family and friends who will love us. Bring us assurance of your presence to calm us.

Teach us peace in the anxiety of our own hearts when our doubts are not healthy and the way forward is not clear. Help us to deal honestly with our lives, O God. Give us courage to make needed changes, to venture in a direction that may be unfamiliar, and to risk doing the right thing even when it may not be for us the best thing.

Teach us peace, O God, the peace which was born in a babe long ago and into our own hearts when he became our Messiah. Teach us peace so that our lives will be more focused and our hearts more resolute. Teach us peace so that we might be your servants sharing peace with the world; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.