

The Birthday Song

Luke 1:39-45 (46-55)

Group singing is rapidly becoming a lost art in our wired culture. Members of the Greatest Generation who are still among us remember the simple joy of singalongs around a piano in someone's living room or a church hall, but that's a pleasure largely lost on most of us who are younger.

There are just three occasions — outside of hymn-singing in church — when we typically consent to remove the earbuds, stow the smartphone and join our neighbors in song.

The first is a solemn observance: singing the National Anthem together at a sporting event or community gathering.

The second is during the seventh-inning stretch at a baseball game. Against all odds, the first stanza of “Take Me Out to the Ball Game” — a pop song of a bygone era — stubbornly endures.

The third is singing “Happy Birthday to You” just before the guest of honor blows out the candles on the cake. For quite some time, that couldn't happen in restaurants — which is why they made up their own cheerful, often irritating, hand-clapping ditties. The song was still under copyright. Now that it's in the public domain, “Happy Birthday to You” is bigger than ever.

There's something very personal, even intimate, about singing “Happy Birthday to You.” Unlike the other numbers in our oh-so-limited national songbook, this is the only song directed *to a particular individual*. Except for the restaurant setting — in which the whole gang may cheerfully join in, even if they don't know what name to insert at the end — those who sing this song generally know the birthday boy or girl very well. It's personal that way.

When we gathered in our Fellowship Hall a couple of Saturdays ago, to celebrate Kay Marvin's 90th birthday, it was a very personal group of family and friends.

We do remember and observe the birthdays of some people we don't know personally, mainly because there are Monday holidays associated with them — George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King Jr. — but if it weren't for the day off from work, even those would probably escape our attention.

The other big public birthday celebration, of course, is Christmas. The irony here, though, is that nobody knows when Jesus' real birthday was. December 25 was chosen by the early church, several generations later, as a way to blunt the impact of Roman winter solstice celebrations. As the pagans celebrated the coming of the sun, Christians celebrated the birth of the Son of Righteousness.

The people who are there at the true birthday of Jesus — whenever that may have been — know him very well. The only family members present are Mary and Joseph. Tipped off by an angel, various and sundry strangers show up — hard-living shepherds stumbling down from their high pastures, an angelic army arrayed in the heavens and later (according to Matthew), a few bewildered astrologers from the East — but the scene in the Bethlehem stable is astonishingly low-key and intimate, considering the fact that this birthday boy is the Savior of the world.

There is a birthday song, of course. It's not "Happy Birthday to You," but "Gloria in Excelsis Deo."

How do Mary and Joseph receive this child? Is his birth a joyous celebration, or a burden?

Not every birthday is a cause for joy.

Most births are moments of joy, because even the most anxious, impoverished mother typically finds some way to put worry aside and marvel at the gift of new life cradled in her arms. But as we journey through the years of our lives, and as birthdays pile up one atop the other, many of us greet the day with resentment or even dread, especially if we're turning 60!

Birthdays, of course, are not only an acknowledgment of who we are. They're also potent signs of the passage of time, and many of us are not happy about growing old.

Think of the poignant celebrations of 100-year birthdays, which even in this time of lengthening life expectancies still sometimes make the newspapers. As the new centenarian gathers her precious breath to blow out the candles on her cake — surely fewer than 100 — there's the lingering question of how many more such celebrations there may be for her. There's also the awareness of how many of her contemporaries are no longer around to join the festivities. In 2019 Merle Graning turns 101, and Al Severin turns 100.

As Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth, she sings her own birthday song: an anthem of God's triumph that is not without its dark themes — the scattering of the proud, the fall of kings. What a burden she has to bear! Yet, what a blessing she discerns in the midst of it all. Jesus' birthday is a burden for Mary and Joseph, no doubt about it. The news of Mary's pregnancy during her betrothal period sets off a minor scandal. It nearly leads to a breakup of her relationship with Joseph. As so often happens with awkward pregnancies everywhere, Mary travels away from home for a while. Whether her parents arrange to have her sent away, or whether she undertakes the journey on her own, no one knows. It could very well be that everyone needs to get a little distance from each other to sort out this ambiguous news —

a mixture of joy and anxiety.

Fortunately for Mary, she has somewhere to go, a place where she can be assured of a warm welcome. Her older cousin Elizabeth is also expecting. Whatever her neighbors in Nazareth may be whispering about her, she knows she and Elizabeth will have much to talk about.

Elizabeth receives her with the warmest possible greeting: “Blessed are you...” It’s not the sort of thing people typically say to an unmarried teenage mother. No, the people around such a young woman are more likely to say, “Cursed are you. Cursed are you, to have brought such a fate down upon yourself and upon this family.”

Elizabeth, however, has no such reservations. She welcomes her kinswoman with open arms. She blesses her.

More than that, Elizabeth treats Mary as her social superior, despite their difference in age: “And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?” The very fact that Elizabeth’s own unborn child leaps in the womb is an early sign of what the adult John the Baptist will one day say of his cousin Jesus: “He must increase, and I must decrease.”

Mary’s not the only one who can sense the blessing in this upcoming birthday. Elizabeth does too. Between them, they have more than enough faith to see this thing through, giving life to both Jesus and John: two men who, between them, will change the world.

It couldn’t have happened, though, without the faithful vision of Mary and Elizabeth, enabling them to bear the burden of this birthday.

It’s not always an easy thing to glimpse God’s promise in these days before Christmas. It’s so much easier to see the things the world is fond of seeing this time of year.

As all of us know, the promise of the secular Christmas is merrymaking, without true joy.

It's a profusion of material goods, bereft of spiritual values. It's frantic, scurrying people grasping for things they don't have, all the while failing to celebrate gifts of the Spirit they've already been offered in abundance.

Faced with the onslaught of Christmas materialism, it's easy for good, Christian people to get discouraged about the holiday. We all do it: we complain.

- We complain about Christmas trees going up in department stores before Halloween.
- We complain of how "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" and "I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus" so often seem to drown out "O Come, All Ye Faithful" and "Silent Night."
- We complain about giant inflatable Santas and snowmen on front lawns.
- We complain that the holiday seems to have hijacked the holy day.

Well, these things are all true observations, but if we let our distaste for yuletide materialism eclipse the spiritual meaning of Christmas, then the materialists have won. The birthday will have become a burden.

There are two ways to get sidetracked by secularism at Christmas: We can simply surrender, giving in completely to shallow "Seasons Greetings" materialism, or we can invest so much energy fighting it that we lose track of what Christmas is all about.

Far better to go through these few remaining days of Advent smiling with amusement at the tinsel excess all around us — all the while remaining attentive to the true gold that glimmers only briefly, and can be discovered only by those who truly and earnestly seek it.

So how do we teach others to remain attentive to the "true gold" of the Christ child?

How do we teach this sort of spiritual discernment to others?

Dorothy Bass, a woman I met while on sabbatical at Holden Village in the Cascade Mountains, tells the story of a mother who has a rather wonderful way of teaching her children to be attentive to signs of God’s activity around them. At the end of each day, instead of asking her young kids, “How was your day?” or something similar, she asks them instead, “Where did you meet God today?”

“And they tell her,” Dorothy says, “one by one: a teacher helped me, there was a homeless person in the park, I saw a tree with lots of flowers in it. She tells them where she met God, too. Before the children drop off to sleep, the stuff of this day has become the substance of their prayer.”

We could do much the same thing in these swiftly-passing days before Christmas. If, as we move in and out of both the sacred and secular manifestations of the holiday, we only ask ourselves, “Where can I meet God in this?” we may be pleasantly surprised at how often God pops up.

Even the tackiest, most materialistic holiday observances have at their base a deep yearning for the good, the kind, the beautiful. Better to affirm the good that’s present there than to lose ourselves in griping and criticism. It’s a sure-fire way to make the birthday a blessing, not a burden.

In the words of Luke, “blessed are you, O Mary, who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord” (v. 45).

Blessed are you, as well, if you walk through these final days of Advent with eyes wide open to the signs of God’s presence — and God’s promise — all around!

May the peace of God...

#265 – The Angel Gabriel from Heaven Came