

The Rev. Joan M. Kilian

Trinity Episcopal Church

Isaiah 9: 2 – 7
Titus 2: 11 – 14Psalm 96
Luke 2: 1 – 14 (15 – 20)

*My life goes on in endless song
Above earth's lamentations,
I hear the real, though far-off hymn
That hails a new creation.*

*Through all the tumult and the strife
I hear its music ringing,
It sounds an echo in my soul.
How can I keep from singing?*

[Songwriters: Eithne Ni Bhraonain / Nicky Ryan / Roma Ryan
How Can I Keep From Singing lyrics © Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC]

Indeed! How CAN I keep from singing?? How can I keep from singing? How can any of us keep from singing on this luminous night? “O sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the whole earth.” That’s what the psalmist tells us to do as well. The joy and hope that abound this night are more than what can be contained in mere words. They are enlightening, enlivening, liberating, transforming. Joy and hope dance among the stars this night and bow to envelope the earth and all of creation.

Hello! I am Grace. God’s grace. In the grander scheme of things, I dance in the heavens with the celestial bodies as the music of the spheres. In the tiny details of life, I leave little calling cards, grace notes, to embellish and ornament more earthly music. I make your heart sing with joy. I lament in the saltiness of your tears. I am the sigh of your breath and the beat of your heart. When you are beyond words, I am your voice.

Tonight is a night not only of joy and hope, but also of awe and wonderment. So much so, that it is understandable if you *are* beyond words. Because God has acted mightily this night. God is with us. Emmanuel. “For to us, a child is born, a son is given.” *That* is Good News that needs to be danced and sung! But I am afraid that the familiarity of tonight breeds – well, not contempt or you wouldn’t be here – but sentimentality. It’s an amazing and lovely story, but it has been so domesticated, and hallmarked by comfort and a cozy nostalgia. And well, Hallmark. And that is most assuredly *not* what this night and Christmas are all about.

Tonight – tonight is about God coming into the world in a time of hunger, social injustice and war. Does that sound at all familiar? God comes with a message of abundance, a preferential option for the outcast and the oppressed, and a peace that passes *all* understanding. Tonight is about God coming into the midst of this world’s distress, guilt, dis-ease, brokenness, and loneliness, in the form of a love letter named Jesus. God comes, bringing light into the darkness, hope into despair, life from death. Tonight, God lets each of us know that we are not alone in the midst of the world’s evil, and that we, too, have a role in this story..

God comes to earth tonight as this tiny, vulnerable baby, not to be cute and adorable – though that is what is often made of it – but to show what it means to have a new beginning at life, what it means to trust God. God comes tonight as this tiny, vulnerable baby to slide in under your defense radars. God comes tonight as this tiny, vulnerable baby and *not* with mighty armies to show you what hope and true strength look like. God comes, not to reward people for being good, but to save people from themselves and their choices that take them away from God. God comes this night to bring love, mercy, forgiveness and “grace” into the midst of a harsh, uncompromising and dangerous world.

Listening to the headlines, it doesn’t *sound* as if there is very much grace in this world. Luke knows that, too. The nativity story, thanks to all the creches, Christmas cards and carols, can get all gauzy and sweetly gooey and magical. But before Luke gets to that part of the story, he plants it starkly

in its geopolitical context, complete with emperors and governors, registration and taxation. It doesn't get much grittier than that. Except perhaps for the scandal and smell of shepherds, sheep and stables.

Luke isn't writing a fairy tale. He writes about reality. Reality with which all of you are acquainted as well. If we peel back the layers of misty nostalgia, we can see the harshness and the danger of which Luke writes. But we can also see God's grace – the "yes" from both Mary and Joseph to this child; God's choice of despised and marginalized shepherds to spread the Good News; a way and a place for this child to be born when a way and a place were not apparent, and so much more.

"For unto us, a child is born." Such a familiar line from Isaiah that is attached to this oh-so-familiar story from Luke. Some of you are probably even singing it inside your hearts right now. Handel did such a magnificent job in writing this chorus from *The Messiah* (a "Grace-filled" piece, if ever I heard one!). Did you know that a number of years ago, Robert Shaw, the famed conductor of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and Chorale, took a whole year off to study this oratorio? At the time, most performances were heavily laden with Victorian preferences: slow and dignified tempos, ponderous and dense instrumentation, heavy vocal and tonal colors. In short, somber and seriously serious.

In researching and studying the original musical text from Handel, and taking into account what was known of music in Handel's lifetime and setting, Shaw decided that the entire musical piece had been smothered in layers and layers of sentiment that were discordant with Handel's original intent. A heavy, wet wool blanket of Victorian interpretation and sentiment. Shaw then shaped a concert production of the *Messiah* that cast off that heavy Victorian covering and allowed the music to dance and to breathe. Tempos once again moved with energy like gusts of wind. Instrumentation was pared down and became sparkling. Vocal portions became light and agile, clear and moving. Emotional intensity came not from the palpable heaviness of the music, but rather from its "grace" and spontaneity. In the opening line of "For unto us, a child is born," one can almost imagine the voices leaping and skipping and tumbling over one another like leaves in the wind. The result of Shaw's work is that listeners feel their hearts leap, their bodies pulse, their tears fall. One writer has said that "expected holiday cheer [is] engulfed in fierce, explosive joy."

That's why God – and I – have come to *you* this night. To help move you from the sentimentality that so often takes over this night, to help you go beyond awe and wonder to a place where your heart, your life, your faith are engulfed in a fierce and explosive joy. Like Handel's *Messiah*, and like Shaw's liberating work with it, the challenge for you is always to live in the tension of this world, somewhere between hope and despair, but always waiting for a surprise – always waiting for "God's grace"! – to break in. I have come so that you might realize that Christmas is not about happy times remembered or even anticipated, but rather about the here and now, that through God-with-us, Emmanuel, Jesus, God brings unexpected liberation into the apparently hopeless bondage of this world. I have come to help you see the world as it actually is: gritty, yes, but also full of grace. And I have come to help you see your role in this story.

It is a night for transformation. A night for acknowledging the world as it is and yourselves as you are, and yet acknowledging the hope that is yours because of this night. It is a night in which, like the shepherds, you are invited to move towards the baby in the manger, and to experience the truth for yourselves. A night for throwing off the heavy, wet wool blankets of sentiment and superficiality that weigh down your hearts and your lives. A night for singing and dancing and breathing deeply – and for sparkling spontaneity. A night to allow God's grace to bring you that light and love, that mercy and forgiveness, that comfort and healing, that peace and hope for which you so long. And a night for spreading that Good News to all the others in this darkened world who so yearn for it. Not everyone who is seeking those things knows its name. But because of Christmas, *you* do. Its name is Jesus.

Tonight, come and 'see this thing which has taken place.' Absorb it. Breathe deeply and then sing out with gratitude.

O sing to the Lord a new song;

sing to the Lord, all the whole earth.

Sing to the Lord and bless his Name;

proclaim the good news of his salvation from day to day!

Indeed, how can we *keep* from singing?

[The Messiah – “For unto us, a child is born”]

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