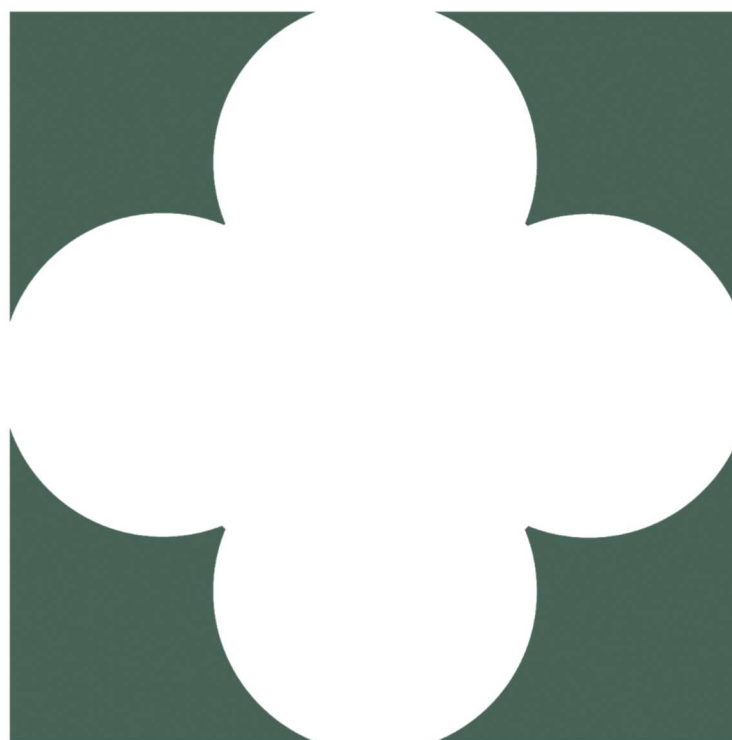


# The Call of Christmas

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Matthew 1.18-25  
Excerpts from I Samuel 1 & 2

On this fourth Sunday in Advent, it should be pretty clear by now that angelic birth announcements are standard procedure in the Bible. The most familiar, of course, is Mary's. But many centuries earlier there was Hagar's in the *wilderness*. Sarah's in *wonder* ... and laughter. Samson's mother promised a powerful son from the *womb*. And today's announcements to Joseph and Hannah by the *One who Hears*.

And maybe you have noticed that they all follow a pretty standard form: (1) You will have a child who (2) will change the world as you know it and (3) you shall name the child ... Ishmael (which means "God hears") or Isaac (which means "he will laugh") or a Nazarite who will deliver the people or Jesus (which means deliverer or liberator) or Emmanuel ("God-with-us") or, today, Hannah's child will be called Samuel, which also means "the One who Hears."

So, let's just be clear that anything we know of this Christmas story is rooted in the stories of the Hebrew Bible. The story of the birth of Jesus is not some new, never before told, tale of angels showing up to give a birth announcement. It would have been recognizable to the people of Mary and Joseph's day only because it had happened before with Hagar and Sarah and Samson's mother and Hannah.

And in advance of Lent and Good Friday and Easter, when churches have told those stories of the last days of Jesus in ways that have fed Anti-Semitism through the centuries, let's just remember that it all started - the story of Jesus started - with a pattern that is deeply rooted in Judaism and the Hebrew Bible. The early followers of Jesus couldn't have understood it any other way.

And sometimes this pattern of unexpected birth announcements gives us a song. We heard Mary's "Magnificat" last Sunday. And, today, Hannah has her song too.

I love this story of Hannah in I Samuel chapter 1. No one pushes her around. *She*, not her husband, gets the message about having a son. *She's* the one who names him. *She* refuses to go up to the Tabernacle with her husband at the appointed time because *she* has a plan to go on her own and give up her son to the service of God. You realize that all this is just not done. Hannah is a powerful woman.

And, like Joseph, Hannah's husband, Elkanah, seems to accept that, no matter how unusual this is, this is how it will be. Elkanah says to Hannah: "Do what is best in *your* eyes, stay until you have weaned him. May the FAITHFUL GOD establish the words of *your* mouth."

And so, it is Hannah, who takes her son to Shiloh and presents him to the old priest, Eli. She says: "I am the woman, the one who was standing beside you in this [place] to pray to the GOD WHO HEARS. For this boy I prayed; and the FAITHFUL GOD gave me my asking ... Therefore have I bequeathed him to the GRACIOUS GOD; all his days will be a bequest to the GOD WHOSE NAME IS HOLY."

And then she left her son with Eli and she fell down to worship and she sang:

*My heart exults in the HOLY ONE OF OLD;  
[sound familiar]  
my horn is lifted up in my God.  
My mouth [opens] wide against my enemies,  
for I will rejoice in my victory.  
There is none holy like the MOST HIGH,  
none besides you;  
there is no rock like our God ...  
The bows of the mighty are broken,*

*yet the feeble gird on warrior-strength.  
Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread,  
yet those who were hungry are fat.  
She who was barren has birthed seven children,  
yet she who has many children languishes ...  
The CREATOR OF ALL kills and gives life;  
brings down to Sheol and raises up.  
The GRACIOUS ONE makes poor and makes rich;  
brings low and also lifts up.  
God raises the poor from the dust,  
and lifts the needy from heaps of human waste,  
to seat them with nobles and inherit a seat of honor.  
For to the CREATOR belong the pillars of the earth,  
and on them God has set the world.*

If you think you are hearing an echo, you are. Mary sang last week:

*My soul magnifies the HOLY ONE,  
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior ...  
for the Mighty One has done great things for me ...  
God has shattered the arrogant ...  
has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;  
God has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty.*

This pattern isn't a coincidence. When these women get the microphone they have something to say about love and justice and the end of the world we have come to know and settle for. They are giving birth to a new kind of life that will be embodied in their children. And their songs are "freedom songs" that have more in common with those civil rights marches than the crooning of Christmas carols.

Don't get me wrong. I love the music of this season. And we have heard lots of it in these weeks. It has been rich and beautiful and uplifting and it stirs our hearts. And it should.

But these women are asking us to sing the rest of the story – their story – in a way that disrupts power and challenges our comfort and imagines a different world for our children.

While it appears to be an urban legend that Mary's song was banned by certain governments because it was too obviously subversive, you can probably imagine it. One wonders if it shouldn't be banned in a country that likes to make a big deal about "keeping Christ in Christmas" and then hypocritically defies everything his mother sings about.

And it's more than the words. It's the music.

At Bible Study on Thursday, Cherry Johnson referenced an article by Dietrich Bonhoeffer – that subversive pastor who was murdered by the Nazis in a concentration camp. Perhaps he was channeling the apostles singing in prison when he wrote:

*. . . Our spoken words are inadequate to express what we want to say, that the object of our singing reaches far beyond all human words. Nevertheless, we do not mumble unintelligible words; rather we sing words of praise to God, words of thanksgiving, confession, and prayer. Thus the music is completely the servant of the Word. It elucidates the Word in its incomprehensibility . . . This is singing from the heart, singing to the Lord, singing the Word; this is singing in unity.*

Hannah and Mary know something about this; that words themselves cannot capture the power that comes from the music of the heart. Their songs were meant to convey something that calls us to more than lovely lyrics or poetic phrases that we can recite with ease. They call us to use our bodies, to fill our lungs

with air and raise our voices to sing with them the songs of freedom and love with justice.

If Christmas has gotten a little boring, a little too platitude-y, a little too superficial, maybe it's time to sing a different kind of song – one that jolts the neighborhood into action with the lowly and brings down the powerful from their thrones, that lifts up the needy from heaps of human waste, that exposes wealth for its emptiness, and fills the hungry with good things.

What would *that* music sound like? And would you sing along if you heard it?

Those few times that I break into song in a sermon, I realize I am taking a risk. I don't imagine myself a singer and so it feels vulnerable and outside my comfort zone. And I think some of our great singers might say the same. We are risking ourselves in singing.

I think Hannah and Mary would tell you that their stories aren't meant to be told so much as to be sung – to put our own bodies on the line like they did. Because you remember that Mary's response to Gabriel was: "Here am I ... let it be with me according to your word."

And Hannah's child grows up to serve the Holy One in the Tabernacle. And one day Samuel hears someone calling his name in the night. He thinks it must be Eli because he wasn't quite at the place to hear the voice of God for himself. He got confused like we do sometimes. We conflate the voice of God with the voices of parents or others who have power or popularity or a really good ad campaign. Or we think God doesn't have any interest in calling us to put our lives on the line because who are we? How do we count in the grand scheme of things?

But there it is again. His name. And Samuel says: "Here I am."

Christmas isn't supposed to be easy. And I don't mean keeping up with all the festivities and gifts or the generations of compounded disappointment that make some of us recoil from it.

It isn't supposed to be easy because it asks something of us.

I love the great Madeline L'Engle's description of art. She says all art is "incarnational activity."

*... each work of art, she says, whether it is a work of great genius, or something very small, comes to the artist and says, "Here I am. Enflesh me. Give birth to me." And the artist either says, "My soul doth magnify the Lord," and willingly becomes the bearer of the work, or refuses ...*

Beloved ones, these songs of Hannah and Mary present themselves to us and they say: "Here we are. Enflesh us. Give us birth. Put your own bodies out there to sing the songs of love and justice and about the powerful being brought down and the hungry fed." And we either say: "Here I am." Or we don't.

For many Christmas Eves we have ended the service with Howard Thurman's poem, "The Work of Christmas." Perhaps that's a bad time for it. Perhaps we skip over it because we are ready to get on with the next thing – the gifts or the celebrations or we just want to be done with it all so we can finally get some rest. Perhaps the last thing we want to hear is that there is more work to do. Or perhaps it has become so familiar it has lost its punch.

But I think, in a way, it's our own Hannah and Mary song. And like theirs, Howard's song calls us to something. He says:

*When the song of the angels is stilled,  
when the star in the sky is gone,  
when the kings and princes are home,  
when the shepherds are back with their flocks,  
the work of Christmas begins:  
to find the lost,*

*to heal the broken,  
to feed the hungry,  
to release the prisoner,  
to rebuild the nations,  
to bring peace among the people,  
to make music in the heart.*

That song presents itself to us today. And either we say, “Here I am.” Or we don’t.

So, today, if you hear the work of Christmas calling your name – if you hear that voice, do not harden your hearts.

NOTES:

We are continuing to use Dr. Wilda C. Gafney’s translations from *Year W: A Women’s Lectionary for the Whole Church* (Church Publishing Incorporated, 2021), pp.11-14. The Bonhoeffer quote comes from a compilation of his writings about hymns/canticles and congregational singing provided by Cherry Johnson. Madeline L’Engle, *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith & Art* (Harold Shaw Publishers, 1980), p.18. Howard Thurman, “The Work of Christmas Begins,” comes from his *The Mood of Christmas and Other Celebrations*.