

For this Advent season, our sermon series is built around the theme, “The Story in Song.” Each Sunday, we will be led by a hymn that moves us through Advent and brings to mind the story we love to tell.

Today, the second Sunday of Advent, we’ve sung the Advent hymn, “Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus” which sets the tone for Mary’s visit to her cousin Elizabeth.

(Read Luke 1:39-45)

I think I was only 3 or 4, early one Christmas morning, we had spent the night at my grandparents’ house, we lived next door, and two of my aunts, high school and college age, were waking me up: “Bruce, Bruce, listen...”

“What?” “Listen,” one of them said.

And I heard them, the little bells, not big bells like a clock or a church tower, but little bells, like a...like little bells on a sleigh...

A SLEIGH! I was wide awake then, and my aunts were excited, “We heard it, too! Let’s go look under the tree!”

Yes, it had to be the bells of a sleigh, because when we got to the tree, Santa Claus had come to my grandparents’ house.

And ever since then, when I wake up on Christmas morning, I lie quiet in the dark, listening again, for Christmas.

I’ve grown some in the past sixty-five years, and I know that Christmas is more than Santa Claus and gifts under the tree, but there is still the listening for the long-expected sounds of Christmas.

What about you? I’m asking you to put on your Advent ears. What is it you listen for that says Christmas is near?

The first songs of the season, the bells of the Salvation Army, the shuffling of boxes full of Christmas decorations coming out of the attic, the ringing of the doorbell by UPS with packages from family far away, our children singing in the Christmas pageant or the beautiful Lessons and Carols next week?

But what is it in this story that Luke wants us to listen for, that when you hear it, it’s the sound of the long-expected good news of Christmas?

Joseph and Mary both heard from angels.

Mary was told by the angel Gabriel that she was going to have a child who would be the Son of God. She said, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?”

The angel told her that the Holy Spirit would come upon her so that the child’s conception would be divine.

And then Gabriel gave Mary the added confirmation that nothing was impossible with God by telling her that her cousin Elizabeth was also pregnant.

Joseph was told, “Don’t be afraid to take Mary as your wife”, and he wasn’t. He did as God told him to do.

Mary, also, when she heard the news, simply said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

It’s at this point that our story in Luke begins and in reading this story, I heard about Christmas in a way I had never heard before.

In all my listening to the Christmas stories in Matthew and Luke or in the prophecies in Isaiah and Malachi and all the others, I had never really heard this particular sound for Christmas.

But I’m getting ahead of myself.

Mary goes to the hill country, to her cousin Elizabeth, who is pregnant with a little boy who will grow up to be John the Baptist.

Let me remind you about Elizabeth and Zechariah. Zechariah is a priest, and Elizabeth comes from a family of priests.

They are both old. Luke says it nicely, they are “getting on in years.”

They are also childless, and this was no small matter. In economic terms, children supported parents in their old age; so, to have no children meant growing poorer as you ‘got on in years.’

Socially, religiously, to have no children, barren is the biblical word, carried with it an assumption of sin, of judgment.

But Luke tells us at the very beginning that Zechariah and Elizabeth are clearly righteous, and the Jewish reader of this story would immediately think of another older, childless couple: Abraham and Sarah with whom God had made the covenant for a blessing for the world.

What Luke is telling us, if we’re listening to his story, is that this is the beginning of a new covenant, a new blessing, and this old couple and their son have a very important role.

As Luke tells the story, Zechariah is going about his priestly business in the temple when Gabriel appears and tells him that his wife will have a child, and their son will be the prophet sent to announce the coming of the Messiah.

Zechariah should have been like Joseph and kept his mouth shut, but I have yet to meet a religious professional who, even when he has nothing to say, has to say something!

Gabriel strikes Zechariah speechless, and he is unable to speak until the baby is born and circumcised.

Elizabeth, getting on in years, has to ask her doctor of geriatrics to recommend an obstetrician and pediatrician!

I can only imagine, though, the unbelievable, unimaginable joy and thankfulness going through her mind.

Pregnant, and not just pregnant, but pregnant with the first prophet for Israel in 400 years. As she is marking the calendar to her due date, she is visited by her relative, Mary.

This is the story we read today from Luke’s gospel.

Mary who has been visited by the same angel as Zechariah, comes with news of her own. Elizabeth may be pregnant with the prophet, but Mary is pregnant with the Messiah.

And this is where I began to hear Christmas in a new key, a new tune of exclamations and excitements!

I had never listened to Elizabeth before. But what Elizabeth said to Mary really caught my ear, to listen for Christmas in a new way.

I was struck by how Elizabeth praised Mary, and I mean no disrespect to any woman, but I wondered if some women might have felt a little miffed, upset, slighted, resentful, that Mary showed up and sort of stole their “thunder.”

Because Elizabeth was in a barren winter world, waiting some 40, 50, 60 years to have a child, and now this country girl, this teenage relative comes to her house, and when they take pictures, Elizabeth is in the background again.

But Elizabeth’s response is totally selfless: “Why am I so blessed that the mother of my Lord has come to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy!”

As the psalmist had written centuries before, This is the new song to the Lord, “...*bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day...for great is the Lord and greatly to be praised...*”

“My Lord”, she says; the sound of exclamation and excitement and a relationship, all in the same breath of humility.

Elizabeth's humility seems to be the key that unlocked the door to Mary's song of justice and kindness, and in their pregnancies, the barren older one and the young virgin, they offered a new vision of how God saves his people, what God expects of his people.

Elizabeth understood that this was not about her, not about her child, not about her life, not about her at all.

It was all about Mary's child, the long-expected Messiah.

It is no wonder that years later her son John would say of himself that he must decrease while Christ must increase.

Humility was a family trait and handed down from parents to child in the home of Zechariah and Elizabeth.

Let's go a little deeper. Listen a little bit more.

Remember that the men are strangely quiet. Zechariah's voice was taken away and Joseph never speaks.

The words of Elizabeth and Mary are the ones heard, recorded, and remembered.

So why does Luke focus our eyes and ears upon these women and make their words immortal?

First, look at who they are.

As you know from your study of ancient cultures, for the most part, women were seen and not heard, the least worth listening to.

I think Luke is trying to tell us that by listening to these two women, God is having us listen to voices that get drowned out at other times by the clamor of our culture's more powerful noises.

We can hear Christmas in a new way when we listen to Elizabeth; this is a time for listening to those who are normally ignored or rejected.

Then look at what's happening in Elizabeth and Mary's lives:

- They were both facing a challenge that was bigger than they were.
- Their world had been turned upside down and was out of their control.
- They were traveling down an unfamiliar road, anxious and excited.

I think Luke is trying to tell us that by looking at Elizabeth and Mary, God is having us listen for Christmas in the midst of our lives, our challenges, our chaos, our fears.

That in this winter world of ours, where so many are waiting: the war-torn waiting for peace, the hungry waiting for bread, the refugees waiting for a homeland, the sick waiting for a healer, a world waiting for a long-expected word to come and bring peace.

Before the song was ever written, listen to Elizabeth, "*Come, thou long expected Jesus, Born Thy people to deliver, Born a child and yet a king, Born to reign in us forever, Now Thy gracious kingdom bring.*"

Elizabeth, before anyone else, before the child of Mary was even born, proclaimed the excitement of Christmas and the significance of his life: My Lord!

So, I think Luke wants us to put on our Advent ears and listen for Christmas in a new way, to listen, truly listen, just like Elizabeth, as Kenneth Phifer says, to "...take the pressure off [and] feel the presence of the Child of Bethlehem."

"Wake up, wake up," the angels around us say, for you and me to hear the long-expected good news of Christmas, the joy of heaven come to earth!

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.