

Preached by Dr. Carl A. Rush
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church
Alexandria, VA 22310
December 12, 2010

James 5:7–10
Luke 1:47–55

CHRISTMAS MUST BE SUNG

The belief that we surrender to God and in so doing, we unlock the door to the life that we have always wanted, is part of what holds us together. Surrendering to God literally is the willingness to receive what God wants to give us.

Mary has just such surrender as she goes to see her cousin Elizabeth. And in that surrender, she receives a Christmas blessing. Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit; and before we hear the *Magnificat*, we hear Elizabeth sing to Mary: “Blessed are you among women; blessed is the fruit of your womb. You are the mother of my Lord.”

Where does such music begin? How can we share in these songs of Christmas—songs of joy born of service? Elizabeth seeks to serve Mary. Mary seeks to serve the will of God. It is not because of their circumstances, surely. Elizabeth is far advanced in age, well beyond the age of child-bearing. And yet she still seeks to serve the younger, stronger Mary. And Mary is willing to serve, not out of her circumstances, but in spite of them.

When we read about Mary in the New Testament, we often translate her lowly estate to mean her humbleness. But the truth is Mary was poor—very poor. And without resources or any means of taking care of herself, she was completely dependent on her family and on Joseph. And to one who had such little power—such bereft standing in the community—this is the one that God comes and asks to be his handmaiden, to be his servant.

The joy which Mary sings comes not from her circumstances, but from her surrender. That’s why the message of Christmas has to be sung. The message is too profound for any sermon. “My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God, my Savior.” Can’t you just see Mary with Jesus after the birth? She’s still singing these words the way we sing a lullaby to our children.

I believe that God fills the hungry with good words of music—those things which this world longs to share from one generation to the next. And our Savior learned at the knee of his mother in the same way that we learn from the generation that goes before us. We learn in the songs they sing to us of their love, of the security, of the affirmation of our lives. Jesus learned these very lessons from the music that God placed within Mary’s heart.

Jesus learned that much of what Luke shares about God’s plan is that the world is turned upside down by God’s spirit. The words of his mother’s lyrics live on in us and in

the faith that we have received. It's like an eternal piece of music. The self-reliant, the proud, the rich are sent away as if they are poor because surrender is the rhythm of Christmas—the essence of all the lyrics of faith. And such a rhythm is not a burden. This surrender is actually liberation. The service is actually receiving the joy that comes from a fourteen year old servant of the Lord.

Mary's song is beautiful. It is powerful. It is life-changing, and it is a song which challenges us to bring good gifts to one another—the uplifting gift of embracing one another. Later in Luke when Jesus is fully grown and has lived his ministry, he's with his disciple, and as we said in the children's message, "I am among you as one who serves. I came not to be served but to be of service for others." The lyrics take many forms and the music is as varied as our lives are different from one another.

George Bernard Shaw put it this way: "True joy in life comes from being used for a purpose ... being thoroughly worn out by being used as a force for a mighty purpose." And he contrasts that with the alternative: "For when we're not willing to serve, when we resist being used like a mighty force of nature," he says, "our lives become like a feverish, selfish clod of ailments and grievances, complaining that the world will not devote itself to making us happy."

Do you see the contrast? When we seek to be a clod of ailment and grievance, complaining that the world doesn't revolve around our happiness, that is our lowest ebb. It is when we say, "It doesn't feel like Christmas. It doesn't seem like Christmas somehow," we've lost our purpose. We haven't been worn out like a force of nature for a mighty purpose in serving one another. Such surrender will cause us as Christmas Christians to sing because Christ comes to people—to you and to me—in the midst of our service.

Whether we are grieving, whether we are carrying the burden of loneliness, whether our prayers seem to stop at the ceiling, none of that prevents us from simply laying down all that weight and surrendering to God's place for our life. You see, God still cares for the hungry and the lonely and the empty. And God comes to us and asks us if we will care alongside God for those who are precious, those who are in need; and who among us can say that we don't need the embrace and encouragement of another?

Truly, the music of Christmas—the proclamation of all that we sing and we say—all that we pray is that the words of the Lord have become flesh and they live among us to remind us again of God's eternal promises to show us without exception that God keeps those promises for us and for generations to come.

So what will be the music of our season? Will we hear Shaw's words to be used up, worn out like a mighty force of nature for a purpose greater than our own in service to one another? Maybe that's what has taken charge of our Sunday afternoon. Maybe that's why so many people are planning to come back this afternoon and share Christmas carols—to share a meal together at five o'clock today here. I'm told that we have so many people we might have people eating spaghetti in the sanctuary. What would

we do if someone did something like that, they asked? And I said it will be okay. It'll be just fine. We'll get through it.

I hope that when you come this afternoon and we sing all of our sacred and our favorite secular Christmas carols, we will be doing so to glorify God and to recognize that we need the music of one another's lives—music that comes from our faith and feeds our souls. Music that we share as an expression of our desire to share everything that God has given us. I pray that it will be as much worship as it is celebration of all our childhood memories, that it will be a time when we know that what we say we believe we must sing and we must share with one another. And here is what we believe: That God's promises are still true and they come to us today. They come in this season because God is with us. Emmanuel. Amen.