

“What Moves the Needle for Us?”

Luke 1:39–55

Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman

First Baptist Church, Raleigh

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I don't know what your normal rhythm of life is first thing in the morning, but I have changed my pattern recently. Change can be a good thing, even with spiritual discipline. But in addition to habits of prayer, I used to read about and listen to a good bit of news in the morning, from various sources to ensure a variety of perspectives, if not complete objectivity. Being informed is critical to responsible citizenship and faithful living, and I still seek information, but it's been pretty heavy and disturbing in recent weeks, months, and years.

We must not bury our heads in the sand, but if we are going to make a difference for good, we can't have our spirits drained the very first thing in the morning, as if some dementor has left the world of Harry Potter and attacked us! We need something to lift our spirits, at least I do, and so, I have started listening to music, a variety of music from classical and Celtic to jazz and rock. I can't quite handle the Bee Gees Dana may have cranking in the morning, but I can manage U2, the Eagles, Queen, Santana, or Earth, Wind & Fire.

With wars raging and people suffering, with meanness and ideology defining our national life, with all decency having disappeared and the church itself struggling to envision a future, we need something to give us energy and hope because in such a time, there is work to do. Music is at least part of the answer for me.

In like manner, we may need something to help us get ready for Christmas this year, for the coming of the Christ into our hearts and world this year. There is plenty to drag us down and deny us purpose and joy. There is more than enough hardship in the world, not to mention our own struggles with disappointment and grief, to cause us to give in the cynicism. What will lift our spirits and enable us to get ready? To use a dated term some may not appreciate, what will move the needle of our disposition and thus likely our experience also?

Probably not some new insight into a particular verse, though I would love to share numerous of those with you... in fact, it probably won't be any new information about the world or our faith that makes a difference. We know the story of Jesus' birth and what incarnation means, at least the essence of it. We should be moved, but are we? Most of us need something more in the affective realm, something that touches our hearts, something like music, even if our playlists vary.

As a result, our reading from Luke is helpful. There is plenty of affect in this story about cousins meeting and talking about their babies. People are moved left and right. And as Richard Vinson points out in his commentary on Luke, everyone seems to break out in song, not like an opera where the whole story is set to music, but like a musical such as "The Sound of Music" where words are interspersed with song and the music moves the narrative forward (Smyth and Helwys Bible Commentary, *Luke*, pp. 40-41).

Elizabeth is moved by the Holy Spirit and sings when Mary comes to see her, and her baby, who will be John the Baptist, leaps within her. Mary sings a prophetic vision we call the Magnificat in response to Elizabeth's song. And after our reading, Zechariah will be filled with the Spirit and inspired to offer a prophecy that is at least poetic if not musical. Everyone seems to be breaking out into song, but why? What lifts their spirits and moves them in this way?

The short answer is — what God is doing through them. For Mary, it is giving birth to the Son of God, a Savior for all the world; participating in incarnation, God's process of taking on flesh. For Elizabeth, it is playing a role in this plan by giving birth to John.

Mary sings first of the wonder of what God is doing through her such that all generations will call her blessed. They will also call her greatly distressed, as she will witness the brutal death of her son at an early age. Thank God she doesn't know everything that lies ahead! Thank God we never do!

But Mary sings of her experience and then quickly locates this experience in the context of what God has done through the ages, showing mercy from generation to generation, scattering the proud and

bringing down the powerful from their thrones, filling the hungry with good things and sending the rich away empty, helping Israel in fulfillment of promises made to Abraham and his descendants.

Our reading from Isaiah provides evidence that this is what God has done in the past, as it speaks of bringing good news to the oppressed, binding up the brokenhearted, and proclaiming liberty to the captives. But all of this also points to what Jesus' ministry will be like, which foreshadows the likelihood of his hardship. Rarely do the powerful appreciate being brought down from their thrones nor do the rich like being sent away empty.

But right now, Mary is not concerned with this, she is blissfully unaware of this. She is filled with joy and wonder that God will use her to extend love to the whole world, and so she cannot help but break forth in singing. Music expresses what words alone cannot, and her music inspires others to consider what God is doing to this day.

The question is — what lifts our spirits and moves us to singing? What moves the needle for our experience, especially in a year when there is so much to drag us down?

For many of us, a service like Hanging of the Greens is part of the answer. I don't know how many people I have heard say that it would not be Christmas without HOG or that they have experienced Christmas because of the service. For those who put the service together — through music and decorations, coaching and choreography — it not only stirs a sense of wonder but also allows us to get in touch with the messiness of incarnation... but it is all a labor of love, and it moves the needle.

But for others little things can make a difference, and these little things often involve children. I think of the Weekday Preschool children who presented the ministers calendars this year, singing "Jingle Bells" and beaming with joy. I think of the children who lead the offertory procession, today Asher Helms, always bringing a smile to our faces. I think of a recent Thirty-Niners meeting when the Cardinal Singers were with us and preschool children joined us for a few songs. One of the

leaders asked the children if they knew “Frosty the Snowman” and child after child said, “I do, I do, I do,” until one solitary child said, “I don’t.”

He was immediately introduced to the song, if not the snowman, and there was joy in the room because of the children in all their openness and curiosity, and because of the singing of the very young, and the slightly older... Little things can move us, children often lift our spirits, we never know when we might be surprised out of our dismay.

But perhaps the most common way we are alerted to the central reality of this season, God’s willingness to enter this world in order to redeem it, is through our service to others, because in service we continue the work of incarnation. In this church, it begins with Toy Joy, which is about so much more than toys. It’s about toys and books and food with handbells playing, and it’s mostly about people — kindness, connections, compassion, and love. Anyone who can participate in this ministry and not have their spirits lifted may need to check with a doctor and see if they are alive!

But there are many other ways we serve people, and these acts of caring have a way of moving us at least as much as they move others. Many travel to Honduras as a part of Sharefish, others serve right here at home through our clothing ministry, our food truck ministry, our partnerships with Habitat for Humanity, Urban Ministries, etc.

And others act on our own, whether anyone else knows about our actions or not. For example, Azamat, in our church, a refugee from Russia, has just sponsored two Ukrainian refugees who have worshipped with us. If we are not moved by his act of compassion, if this kind of transcendent kind of service doesn’t get us in the mood for Christmas, we don’t know what Christmas is all about!

I suppose the only remaining question is — what about those who are carrying heavy loads of grief in this season? What about those who face great challenges? What about those living in the context of war? Is there anything that can lift the spirits of those who are most down? That’s not for those of us who are not similarly burdened to say. Each of us has to find our own way through grief and hardship. But the message of Christmas is about God’s love for all people in all circumstances, even the messiest.

We can only pray for some measure of grace to creep through the darkness and pain, some way that people who are suffering can retain hope that God will turn the world around, in the words of “The Canticle of the Turning,” that the hungry poor shall weep no more, that the spear and rod will be crushed by God. Sometimes the world does turn around, even if only in small ways that portend a more significant turning.

For example, on Christmas Eve 1914, some British Expeditionary Forces on the Western Front heard some German soldiers singing Christmas carols. Messages were exchanged, planning a limited ceasefire for the next day. On Christmas, they met in the middle ground between their trenches, exchanged gifts, buried their casualties, and played football. It was a brief break for a few soldiers in the horror of war, the first World War — this church lost a number of members in it— but for a day, those soldiers fighting on different sides experienced a foretaste of what God will eventually make permanent.

We pray that in this season all who live in poverty and violence, with grief and disappointment, may experience some foretaste of what God intends, a sign of hope for a better day.

What will it take for us this year? What will get us ready for Christmas? What will move the needle? God in Christ continues to enter this world. There is much to celebrate, if only we leave room for the possibility of what God-With-Us, Emmanuel, will do.