

a carol of joy

Luke 1:46-55

December 24, 2017

You just heard “God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen” arranged and played by Natalie MacMaster and Donnell Leahy. I heard Natalie and Donnell in concert last Sunday afternoon at the Gallagher-Bluedorn Performing Arts Center. They were joined by four other amazing musicians from Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, Cuba, and Ireland, and by five of their six children: Mary Frances, Michael, Clare, Julia, and Alec. The children range in age from twelve to five and are all extraordinarily talented, just like their Mom and Dad: singing, playing fiddle and accordion and piano and drums, and step dancing.

I have seen Natalie perform five times now and I must say I much prefer hearing and seeing her play live to listening to her recordings. Because it’s not just about the music. The music is the catalyst, but it’s all about movement and dancing and passion and energy, so much energy, and about joy, so much joy!

“God rest you merry.” The carol is about joy. It’s an old carol, as much as four or five hundred years old, and it is the carol referenced by the title of Charles Dickens, “A Christmas Carol.” Ebenezer Scrooge’s deficit was not simply a lack of generosity, but a lack of joy. God rest you merry!

It’s an English carol, an old English carol, but because it is old and uses some archaic English expressions, we risk mistaking some of its meaning. And we must, once again, pay close attention to the punctuation! Where’s the comma? It’s “God rest you merry, gentlemen” not “God rest you, merry gentlemen.” The gentlemen in question are not already merry. We are not merely wishing them a nice nap.

No, the carol is a blessing, an offering of the blessing of joy. God rest you merry. God make and keep you merry. God fill you with joy. Let nothing dismay you. Let nothing distress you, but let all be joy! Because?

Because Christ was born. God rests us merry when we remember that Christ was born on Christmas Day. God gives us joy when we remember that Christ, our savior, was born on Christmas Day: “to save us all from Satan’s power when we were gone astray.”

The old carol is nicely blunt, not nicely pretty and sweet, but nicely blunt. Joy can only be joy if it is real. Other pleasures are mere escape, ephemeral and insubstantial and finally unsatisfying, but joy is real and joy is lasting and joy fills you up for a lifetime. Joy doesn’t turn away from the world as it is, but sees this world as it is, and finds gladness in this world as it is, because God helps us see it in a new light and live in it in a new way. The carol reminds us we will have joy, we do have joy, because Christ saves us, because Christ saves us all, from Satan’s power.

What is Satan’s power?

Satan's power is the power to mislead: to entice us into devoting our time and energy and the passion of our hearts to chasing after things, chasing after things that don't matter, while turning our backs and hearts to the things and to the people that do matter. Does it really matter to win -- the game, the fight, the attention -- if it costs you a friend?

Satan's power is the power to divide: to persuade us to see an other, any other, not as a neighbor, but as my competition, my nemesis, my threat, my enemy. But we only have the enemies we choose. We only have the enemies we choose.

And Satan's power is the power to confuse and complicate: to get us wanting many things instead of one thing, to make us hoarders instead of lovers.

And the result? What is the outcome of deception and division and confusion? Look around you and see. The outcome is suspicion, mistrust, oppression, poverty, inequality, unfairness, loneliness, emptiness, and death, both spiritual death and literal death which in fact amount to the same thing.

Satan's power is the power to lead us astray, to lead us away from where we belong, away from each other, away from God, away from ourselves. But rest you merry! Christ was born to save us all from Satan's power when we were gone astray.

It's a song about joy and Mary's song too is a song about joy.

*My soul is glad because of God my Savior,
for God has remembered me, his lowly servant!
From now on all people will call me happy,
because of the great things God has done for me.*

She is glad because God has remembered her. She is happy because of all God has done for her: choosing her, blessing her with this pregnancy, blessing her by choosing her to be the mother of this child.

But that's not what she sings about, is it? And her song is not really about her own personal joy, is it? The lowly servant God has remembered is not just her, but all of Israel, and the great things God has done, the great things God is doing and will do, are not just for her, but for all God's people.

These great things. Showing kindness to people who honor God and thwarting the ambitious plans of proud people. Pulling down powerful people and lifting up humble people. Filling hungry people with good things and sending rich people away empty. Do you see how the great things God does challenge the bastions of Satan's power: inequality, poverty, injustice, a divided humanity?

And do you see that all these great things are the very things that Jesus did, the very things that Jesus does? Jesus shows mercy, telling the woman, the foreign woman, the sinful woman, the woman thirsty for God's kindness, that he would give her a drink of living water if only she ask. And Jesus scatters the proud with all their plans, just as he scattered the merchants and moneylenders from the Temple.

Jesus brings down the mighty, just as he left Pilate speechless and flustered and powerless in the face of his own powerful silence, in the face of his own unconquerable humility. And Jesus lifts up the lowly: lifting up a crippled man from his bed, lifting up a little child onto his bended knee, lifting up Zacchaeus by bringing him down out of a tree and going to his house for dinner.

Jesus fills hungry people with good things, five thousand hungry people with bread and fish, one hungry Pharisee with words that bring eternal life. And Jesus sends the rich away empty, the rich young man who walks away from Jesus with an empty heart because he cannot give up what he owns.

It's about joy! Do you see that it is all about joy? Joy for whom? Joy for all. Joy to the world!

The hungry cannot have joy until they are filled, by God. The humiliated cannot have joy until they are lifted up, by God. The hurting cannot have joy until they are shown mercy, by God.

And, at the same time, the proud cannot have joy until they give up their scheming and learn to depend on God's mercy. The powerful cannot have joy until they realize the tenuous and flimsy nature of their own power and seek only God's approval. The wealthy cannot have joy until they trade the riches of this world for the riches only God can supply.

And none can have joy, none of us can have joy, until we come together as mere human beings, as children of God alike, until we see each other as we are, until we love each other as we are, as God loves us, as God has always loved us.

May you have joy, because God loves you, because God is lifting you up or pulling you down as you need, because God is filling you up or emptying you out as you need, because God is showing you mercy when you need mercy and setting up roadblocks when you start to wander. God rest you merry, because Christ was born to save us all, to save us all from Satan's power when we were gone astray.

What is the opposite of astray? Being where you belong. Being home. It is joy to be where we belong. It is joy to be home. Jesus was born to bring you home. Jesus was born to bring you home ...