



From the Community Pulpit
Christmas Music Sunday - December 14, 2008

ANGELS:

Hail to the Favored Ones

Text: Luke 1:26-37

Communion Meditation by Dr. Robert Lee Hill

Pastoral Prayer by Rev. Kevin Snow

Offertory Invitation by Rev. Melissa St. Clair

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Pastoral Prayer by Rev. Kevin Snow

God of wonder, for whom nothing is impossible, hear our prayers this day

Hear our voices, lifted up in praise, as we sing alongside the *Angels We Have Heard on High*. Hear us as we sweetly sing o'er the plains, throughout the city, and around the world. Walk along side us as we *Wonder While we Wander*, out under the sky, poor ordinary people, like you and like I. When we find ourselves marveling at your creation *Upon the Midnight Clear*, bring us "Peace on the earth, good will to all, from heaven's all gracious King." Let this pronouncement of peace and good will bring *Joy to the World*, because the Lord is come...let every heart prepare him room...as heaven and nature sing. Remind us that it is our task to share this joyful Christmas story with all those who will listen. Whether we find them *Away in a Manger, In a Little Town of Bethlehem, or In Royal David's City*...we are called to proclaim and share the answer to the question, *What Child Is This? Allow the Holy Night to be Silent for The Sweet Little Jesus Boy, While Shepherds Watch their Flocks*...but do not allow the silence to linger for too long, as we are called daily to *Go, Tell It On the Mountain*...that Jesus Christ is Born! Let us tell about *Her Baby, Newly Breathing*...let us tell about *God's Love Made Visible*...about this *Infant Holy, Infant Lowly*...that has come into our world bringing grace and mercy. Although we may find ourselves trapped this time of year *In The Bleak Midwinter, In The Moon of Wintertime*, help us to find *A Song in the Air*, as we *Come All Ye Faithful*...with *Good Christian Friends to Rejoice*...alongside the *Angels From the Realms of Glory*...*How great our Joy!* As we look forward to Christ's birth. Amen.

Offertory Invitation - Rev. Melissa St. Clair

In a second Peanuts Christmas special, "*It's Christmastime Again, Charlie Brown*," Charlie Brown's little sister Sallie is sitting at her desk working on an English theme entitled "The Meaning of Christmas." She writes, "To me, Christmas is the joy of getting." Charlie Brown, looking over her shoulder, says, "You mean giving. Christmas is the joy of giving." Sallie looks at him in disbelief and replies, "I don't have the slightest idea what you're talking about."

A few scenes later, Sallie asks Linus to tell her about Christmas. Linus opens the Bible and begins to read the birth narrative as it's found in Luke, but Sallie soon interrupts, pondering what to buy her brother for Christmas. "Actually, I don't want to spend any money," she says. "Maybe I could get him something for free." As Linus continues to read, Sallie grumbles about she hopes she doesn't get socks again this year. Finally, Linus closes the Bible and slumps in his chair in frustration.

This time, Charlie Brown has it just right. Christmas is the joy of giving. The commercialization of the holiday season is kind of like Sallie's obsession with her Christmas list - it can detract and distract us from a crucial narrative of our faith - the birth of our Savior.

As we continue to journey through this Advent season, may we remember the joy of giving. Each gift, tithe, and offering we share transforms the Good News from words into witness.

Luke 1:26-37a – 26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, 27 to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. 28 And he came to her and said, "Hail, O favored one! The Lord is with you." 29 But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. 30 The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31 And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. 32 He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. 33 He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." 34 Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" 35 The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. 36 And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. 37 For nothing will be impossible with God."

Communion Meditation by Robert Lee Hill

In the long reach of Church tradition, today is called *Gaudate Sunday*, meaning, in Latin, this is the Sunday for "Rejoicing." This third Sunday in Advent, in the annals of Christian heritage, is also related to Mary. Thus the pink candle on the Advent wreath, to represent the unparalleled relationship Mary enjoyed with Jesus.

At Community Christian Church, this is customarily the Sunday when Music is put front and center for the enrichment and inspiration of one and all. Some of the Church's greatest music happens in Advent and at Christmas time, and we rejoice in it all. And, like Mary, we take it all in and ponder it in our hearts. And like the first Christmas characters who witnessed "*a multitude of the heavenly host praising God....*," we too are witnesses to the angelic voices of these musicians inspiring us ever upward to realms of glory and exultation never dreamed of.

At this point I have a confession to make. Two weeks ago, I emphatically declared that the shepherds had become my absolute favorite Christmas characters. Last week, I introduced the sermon with the admission that I had changed my mind and felt compelled to claim the magi as my favorites. This morning I'm changing my mind again and am happy to say that the angels are now my favorites! I'm changing my mind this morning because of the joy the angels inspired then and inspire even now and because of the favor they confer upon Mary and the world.

So, why and what about the joy? And how in the world can angels pronounce favor? To be particular, how can they pronounce such favor on a poor peasant girl like Mary? And how in the world could they ever issue such a blessing of favor on the likes of us?

First, let us remember that they are angels, and as G.K. Chesterton was famed to say, "*Angels can fly because they take themselves lightly.*" To wit, the angels have it in their nature to take themselves lightly and God's grace seriously. Thus they can soar to heavenly heights with joy. The angel brought Mary favor, because it was in the angel's nature to do so: angels are the favor-bearers. To a world weighted down with seething brutality, heavy burdens, deep guilt, and pernicious guile, the angel offers Mary joyful good news. The angel, in fact, offers us all an invitation not to take ourselves so seriously. (Perhaps if we took up the angel's invitation, we too could fly, or, if not fly, at least soar in our hearts with sheer joy.)

But why the favor of joy for any one – in the face of a cruel world, uncertain financial markets, dysfunctional relationships on so many levels, a world gone berserk with too much information and too little wisdom, a world in which cancers creeps into one's body and hope seeps out, a world in which the dinning drudgery of war seems, to some at first, to trump the lily-like lyricism of a song sung with great daring and grace? Why the favor of joy?

Because we were made for joy. Jesus says to his apostles, according to John's, that he has come that we might have joy and that our joy might be complete. (John 15:11) The favor of joy because, as Psalm 30 says, "Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes the morning." (Psalm 30:5) The favor of joy because as the participants in this year's Advent Pastor's Class prompted me to remind you this morning: "*God will never give up on you and me. God loves us forever, and wants us to follow Christ's example of love and forgiveness.*"

Today – the pink candle, the grace of our services, the reading of the Holy Scripture, the glorious music that has been rendered on our behalf in order to praise God – all of these elements remind us that we have been favored plentifully and are being graced again with favor this season.

If we will take in this favor and receive the joy that is ours, then we shall be able to sing with great conviction "*When God is a Child*," the song that will usher us to the Lord's Table for communion today: "*... there's joy in our song, the last shall be first, and the weak shall be strong, and none shall be afraid.*"