

A Call to Praise

Luke 2:1-20

Intro. Our December messages this year are entitled, The Call of Christmas. Behind them is the fact that by the arrival of Jesus, God is calling out to humanity. Each Sunday we've focused on an angelic appearance and what the angel said to one of the main characters in the Christmas story.

Among the many customs and traditions associated with Christmas, music has to be near the top. One webpage says there are more than 20 million Christmas songs or musical arrangements. Some of the world's most wonderful music was written to celebrate the birth of Jesus. But like lamprey that swim in same the river with trout, there's some pretty strange music out there too. If I hear It's a Holly Jolly Christmas, or The Jingle Bell Rock one more time, oh by golly I think I'll croak!" But music that proclaims the wonder of Christ's coming can't be overdone. When your heart is right with God, Christmas makes you want to sing! It won't make you able to sing if you can't, but it certainly makes you want to. This morning I want to visit the first songs of Christmas which trace back to the nativity. With one song following another, our sermon notes look like the program for a Christmas concert. But let's start at the beginning...about 4,000 years before Christ's coming.

According to the Bible, music was first associated with Creation. The singers were angels who formed an enormous choir. The stage was Heaven. **Job.38:7** says, "**the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy.**" In some phenomenal way beyond our comprehension, the inanimate celestial universe joined the angels to sing their Creator's praise. This chorus is again spoken of in **Psa.148:2, 3** which says, **Praise him, all his angels, praise him, all his heavenly hosts. Praise him, sun and moon, praise him, all you shining stars.** Isaac Watts captured this idea in the first verse of "Joy to the World" which says, "*Let Heaven and nature sing...*"

The second stop on our musical tour would have to be the Psalms. Music was an integral part of the social and spiritual life of the Hebrew people...especially vocal music. Even though psalms and hymns were used in public worship, they were suited more for personal and private use. The Hebrew people sang during family worship / at mealtime / and in social gatherings from house to house. Wherever God's goodness was acknowledged, His people praised Him in song.

But there's a flip side to Hebrew singing. The prophets spoke of joyless days when Israel's music had ceased. This happened during periods when the nation came under God's discipline. In **Isa.16:10** the Lord said, **Joy and gladness are taken away from the orchards; no one sings or shouts in the vineyards; no one treads out wine at the presses, for I have put an end to the shouting.**" The music died completely when the glory of God left the Temple in Ezekiel's day. **Amos 8:3** says, "**In that day,**" **declares the Sovereign LORD, "the songs in the temple will turn to wailing."**

Maybe you remember time in your life when praising God in song was the last thing you felt like doing. It was a season you'd rather forget...a time when songs of praise were irritating. I spoke to a young mother last week who lost a baby in a house fire. She said her whole life unraveled. She was angry at God for letting it happen. It's hard to sing when God seems distant and it feels like life is spiraling out of control. It's hard to sing when a relationship is strained and not what you hoped it would be. Nor is it easy to sing when we're living in disobedience or harboring some unconfessed sin / bitterness / or resentment. But when our hearts are in tune with God and conscious of His goodness ...when our thoughts turn away from ourselves to Jesus and what He has done for us...it's hard to keep from singing or whistling! Christmas is an annual reminder of God's goodness...it's a call to praise Him. Nine times the Bible speaks of **new songs**. A new song celebrates a fresh awareness of God's grace. It's a song with new meaning for the singer. New songs come from the heart. They're joyful offerings to the Lord. This is what the truth about Christmas does...it inspires new songs.

Christmas is a fresh reminder of God's grace and love. The most natural thing for God's people to do is to express gratitude and praise in song. We were made for this!

But consider what happened to Israel's music. From the time of Malachi to the birth of Jesus, there was no prophetic utterance...no word from Heaven. For 400 years, God was silent and His salvation program was on hold. Heaven and earth were on "pause" as though waiting for something. During this time the music died. No new songs were composed and the sound of singing was rare.

Then suddenly the silence of Heaven was broken by the arrival of Jesus and the first songs of Christmas. Luke reports 5 songs composed in the hearts of those who witnessed Christ's birth. These songs were spontaneous and Spirit-produced. For those who knew what God was up to, joy and singing returned to Israel! God was fulfilling His promises / pouring out His Spirit / and revealing Himself to His servants. The Messiah had come. Let's consider these new songs to see what they emphasize and how each one offers praise to the God of Christmas.

1. Elizabeth's Song of Praise - Lk.1:42b-45

The old priest Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth lived in the hill country north of Jerusalem. For decades they endured the embarrassment of being childless. One day when Zechariah was on duty at the temple, an angel appeared. Now it doesn't matter if you're a priest / a president / a pastor / or a painter...it rocks your world when an angel shows up! After Zechariah's heart returned to normal rhythms the angel identified himself as Gabriel and told Zechariah his wife was pregnant. He gasped and almost swallowed his dentures. The angel said their baby was to be named John and God would use Him to bring many people back to Himself. Zechariah's instinct was to tell everybody. But because he doubted this divine promise, he was unable to speak until John was born.

In the 6th month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, Gabriel appeared to Mary in Nazareth. The angel told her God's favor was upon her and she would be mother to Israel's Messiah, the Son of God. Listen again to the angel's announcement. **Lk.1:30-38 - But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give Him the throne of his father David, and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever; His kingdom will never end."** "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God." "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said."

After the angel left, Mary hurried to the home of Zechariah and Elizabeth. **v. 41** says, When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. There's nothing unusual about a baby's movements in it's mother's womb! But this unusual jump served as a happy confirmation to Elizabeth. In that instant, she was filled with the Holy Spirit. From her heart came the first song of Christmas. Because Elisabeth and Zechariah lived off the grid in the hill country, her song may have been flavored with a little Loretta Lynn...I'm just guessing here.

vs. 42-45 - In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!"

Elizabeth erupted in a loud voice because her heart was filled with excitement, thanksgiving, and amazement. She couldn't contain the wonder of what God was doing! She had been given a leading role in the arrival God's Messiah and it made her want to sing. 3x's she repeats the word, **blessed**. Her song reminds me of the chorus, We are so blessed. Blessed is the word Jesus repeated in the Beatitudes to describe the joy and deep satisfaction of all who enter His Kingdom.

Christmas should remind us of the many blessings God has lavished upon us. **Eph.1:3** says, **Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ**. In Christ, we are overly blessed! Like packages stacked beneath the Christmas tree, **Jn. 1:16** says, **From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after (or on top of) another**. Elizabeth's enthusiasm was contagious. And just like a concert, the moment her song ended, Mary's song began...

2. Mary's Song of Praise - Lk.1:46-55 - And Mary said: "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me--holy is his name. His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers."

Mary's song has been called, "The Magnificat". It began this way..."**my soul glorifies the Lord**". In other words, I know in my soul how impressive God is! Her song is very similar to Hannah's prayer found in **I Sam. 2**. This is pretty remarkable when we consider that Mary was a young teenager. But here's what Paul wrote to Timothy..."**from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.**" We suspect this was true of Mary as well. She was raised in a home where God was honored. She probably went to Saturday School. And long before education became afflicted with memorization phobia, she learned Hannah's prayer and knew it word for word. In this joyous moment, she expressed her jubilation with ideas / phrases / and terms she had learned from the Hebrew Scriptures.

If Elizabeth's song praised God for all He was doing, Mary's song acknowledged that God's favor was on her and it was owed to nothing she was and nothing she had done. His favor was undeserved and all of grace. Mary's song reminds us of how God blesses those who are humble before Him. His mercy extends to those who fear Him. He fills the hungry with good things but sends the rich away empty. He brings down rulers but exalts the humble. Mary was an ordinary young woman with an extraordinary faith. She realized God was blessing her in an unimaginable way. His goodness ignored and exceeded anything she deserved. Her song lists nothing praise-worthy about herself but concentrates solely on the Lord and His faithfulness. Mary praised God for His power / His holiness / and His mercy. These are the big things that inspire songs in the hearts of those who know the Lord.

This leads me to a thought. What sort of person really appreciates Christmas...I mean really appreciates it? It isn't the proud who think God and the world owes them something. You won't find many rich and famous bowing to the Christ of Bethlehem's manger either. Instead it's the humble shepherd-type who bow before the Lord Jesus. It's sinners who acknowledge their sin and realize how unworthy they are. Though Mary was highly favored, she saw herself on the same level with every other woman. She wasn't above or beneath anyone. As a sinner, she was over-whelmed by God's grace and goodness. She rejoiced that He had chosen her to be mother to the Savior she needed as much as everyone else.

The next song was sung by Zechariah at the time of John's birth. It was more of a prophecy than a song. We sing this kind of song today. Tell me your heart isn't stirred when we sing, "*Behold He comes, riding on the clouds, shining like the sun, at the trumpet's call...lift your voice, it's the year of Jubilee, out of Zion's hill salvation comes!* (I wish we could sing it right now!) After God disabled his vocal chords for a while, Zechariah's speech returned and he had whole bunch to say. His first sentence was words of praise to the Lord. News that the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth's was someone very special spread quickly. God was fulfilling a promise made through Malachi.

3. Zechariah's Song of Praise - Lk.1:67-79 - His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied: "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because He has come and has redeemed his people. He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago), salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us--to show mercy to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham: to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace."

Like Mary's Magnificat, Zechariah's *Benedictus*, is loaded with OT quotations and allusions. God loves to hear His Words set to music and sung by His people. Zechariah's song focused on hope. He understood that God was fulfilling the His promises and the covenant made to Abraham centuries earlier. He viewed Christmas as a promise kept. God had come near and it made him want to sing. He urged his contemporaries to "**Praise...the Lord, the God of Israel, because He has come...**" The long awaited Messiah was on the nations' doorstep. Uppermost in Zechariah's mind was thoughts of redemption / salvation / rescue / forgiveness / and guidance. These are among the many blessings Messiah would bring. Just as the **horns** of an animal symbolize its power, the Messiah would be Israel's **horn of salvation** because He alone possesses the power to save.

Zechariah's song is filled with faith and hope. Even though Jesus wasn't born for another 3 months, Zechariah was dead sure He was coming. He believed the Messiah would accomplish everything that God promised He would do. Do you have Zechariah's kind of faith and hope? The same Scriptures that promised Christ's first coming promise He's coming back. Do thoughts of Christ's return make you want to sing? Are you confident God will do all He promised to do? Are you looking forward to the miraculous transformation that will happen in the twinkling of an eye? Do you really believe the best is yet to come? Christmas proclaims a certain hope...a hope that carries us through the hard times while enabling us to sing all the way home! Though isolated in an assisted living facility, Betty Anspach sang a Christmas carol with me last week. Like so many believers, she knows the reality of this hope!

Next, an angel appeared to a band of sleepy, smelly shepherds. Shepherds were lowlife and social outcasts. They were considered lowly in occupation / untrustworthy in character / and ceremonially unclean for worship. Each sinner is just like them before Christ forgives and cleanses us. **Eph. 2:12 says, we were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world.**

4. The Angel's Song of Praise - Lk. 2:8-14 - And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.

Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests."

At last, the day came and Mary gave birth to Jesus. After the shepherds regained their composure, the angel told them their Savior had been born and where they could find Him. And don't miss this...the angels said, **a Savior has been born** to you. The tag on the gift reads "For Shepherds, from God." Suddenly a great entourage of angels appeared. This was heart-stopping! Notice the kindness of God. He sent one angel until the shepherds got used to the idea. Then the crowd showed up.

Tradition follows the carol which says, "*Hark, the Herald Angels Sing*"... (Contrary to what some say, the angel's name or rank wasn't "Harold. It's Herald Angels not the angel, Harold.) But technically speaking, the Bible doesn't come right out and say the angels actually sang. Another carol suggests they sang, "*Gloria, in excelsis deo*" or "*Glory to God in the Highest.*" But we can't be sure whether angels spoke or sang these words. We know that angels sing and we also know the word translated **saying** can include singing. We're just not sure whether this was a singing or a saying group. (What say you?) Either way, adoration and praise resounded from this angel chorus.

More than any human being could imagine, the angels were overwhelmed by the significance of this holy moment. They'd walked the streets of Heaven. They'd known Christ in His pre-incarnate glory. They knew the glorious home He traded for a stable. They understood the terrible contrast between God's purity and the sin-stained world He came to save. But on this night, they witnessed something they'd never imagined before. They had never known such love and condescension! They had never understood the grace of God that was so readily apparent that night. God had become a human being...and a baby one at that! It's no wonder they said, "**Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.**" Like Mary, they ascribed glory to God. They proclaimed the peace and joy Jesus brought from God in heaven to people on earth. Once again we find that Christmas is a call to praise. The true meaning of Christ's coming makes you want to sing. And like the impact Elizabeth had on Mary, the shepherds were deeply moved by the angel choir. After they found the baby Jesus, these rugged outcasts were transformed into a praise team. **Lk. 2:20 says, the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.** Never underestimate the power and uplifting influence of your praise! A heart filled with thanksgiving and praise tends to be contagious. The fifth and final song came from the heart of Simeon.

5. Simeon's Song of Praise - Lk. 2:29-32 - Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying: "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."

The Bible says Simeon, like Joseph, was a **righteous** man. This means he trusted God and sought to obey His commands. He wasn't a perfect man because there are none. But Simeon was forgiven. Unlike Israel's leaders at that time, Simeon believed the Scriptures and was waiting for God's Messiah. The Holy Spirit told him his earthly life wouldn't end until he saw the Messiah with his own eyes. So Simeon waited. The day finally came.

On the 8th day after His birth, Joseph and Mary brought Jesus to the Temple to be circumcised and presented to the Lord and Simeon "just happened" to be there. This was Simeon's finest moment. The Scripture doesn't tell us how he knew Jesus was the Messiah ...he just knew. There was no doubt about it. When God wants us to know something, we know it. God's Spirit led him to the Temple that day. Like the baby that leaped in Elizabeth, Simeon was given some unmistakable assurance that "this is the One." As He held the infant Jesus in his arms, he said, *"Lord you can take me home now. My waiting is over. This child is the One I've been waiting for. I've seen all I needed to see. I've seen your salvation. Beam me up, I'm ready to go."*

Let me wrap this up with a Christmas riddle. *What does a late middle aged woman / a young Jewish girl / a late middle aged priest / a company of angels / a band of shepherds / and an old man have in common?* The answer is this...they authored and sang the first Christmas carols. Filled with wonder and thankfulness, they praised the God of Christmas. Ever since that event long ago many have written carols and composed great music to celebrate the wonder of Christ's birth. One song sums up this phenomena. The lyrics say, *"He started the whole world singing a song..."* Among these composers are Johanne Sebastian Bach / Phillip Brooks / Charles Wesley / Felix Mendelssohn / George Handel / Issac Watts / Franz Gruber / Josiah Holland / B.B. McKinney / Don Wyrzten / John W. Peterson / Michael Card / Steve Green / and too many others to name. You see, Christmas is something to sing about. When you know the Christ of Christmas, He makes you want to sing!

- To Elizabeth, Christmas signified unimaginable blessing
- To Mary, Christmas meant God had showered her life with undeserved favor
- To Zechariah, Christmas meant hope through a promise kept
- To the angels, Christ's coming brought glory to God and peace to people on earth
- To the shepherds, the night of Christ's birth meant, *"Shazaam, God loves even smelly shepherds like us!"*
- To Simeon, Christmas meant, *"All is well...I can go home now, the Savior has come."*

6. Our Song of Praise – Heb. 13:15

So, what does Christmas mean to you? What songs are you singing this Season? The Bible tells us God is blessed by songs that praise Him. They're like an offering to Him. When Christ saves, He gives the believer a new song. In **Psa. 40:2, 3** David said, **He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire; he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand. He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God.** Then when God's Spirit fills us, the NT says we'll **sing and make melody in our hearts to the Lord. (Eph. 5:18, 19)** In all of history, nothing compares with the songs of Christmas. Yet listen to this...a new hymnbook is about to be written. Soon to be released are some songs that have never been sung before. They're brand new!

Rev. 5:9-13 says, **And they sang a new song: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth."** Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. In a loud voice they **sang**: **"Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!"** Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, **singing**: **"To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!"**

Your singing voice may be below grade for the church choir, but someday what you imagine while singing in the shower will come to pass. You'll sing like Stephen Curtis Chapman or Brooke Fraser. The God who touched Zechariah's vocal chords will retune yours. Because of Christmas, all who believe will join a multi-national / multi-racial / multi-generational / vocal band that will be millions strong. Do you know what we're doing when we praise the Lord today? We're practicing for eternity. **Heb. 13:15 - Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise--the fruit of lips that confess his name.** Christmas is many things...but rising above them all...is a fresh call to praise the Lord.

Before Rudolf the Red-nosed Reindeer and I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus go silent for another year, let's end our service this morning with several carols that are rich with substance and meaning. As Pastor Dale comes to lead us, let's ask the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with an offering to the Lord as we sing together.

Pray