

## “Unlikely”

A sermon based on Luke 1:46-55  
Delivered at the First Presbyterian Church, Urbana  
On Sunday, December 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2018  
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From time to time, I will hear a song somewhere, that will stick in my head and will not go away. You know how it is. Well, it happened to me this week. The song was “Santa Claus is Coming to Town.”

Since it has been cycling through my mind this week, I’ve been marveling at the power ascribed to Santa. “He sees you when you’re sleeping. He knows when you’re awake. He knows if you’ve been bad or good...” Powerful guy, that Santa!

The song continued to play in my mind, and I naturally began to do moral equations. How good have I been this year? While I certainly haven’t been perfect, I know I’ve been good enough for the shirts that always come for Christmas. I’ve probably been good enough for gift cards from book stores. But how about a new pair of cross country skis? Or a canoe? Have I been good enough for either of those? Have I been that nice?

At that point, I could not help but think theologically. Who here has ever been good enough for their presents? Who here has ever merited the kindness shown to us? Who has ever deserved salvation? That is what we are very close to celebrating, right? Salvation? The coming of God-with-us?

That thought helped to free my mind from the icy grip of “Santa Claus Is Coming to Town.” For the coming of Immanuel eclipses all our equations of naughty and nice.

The writer and farmer Wendell Berry presented a series of lectures at my seminary years ago. It is customary at these events to offer an extended introduction of the speaker, listing their publications and accomplishments. Wendell Berry’s list is quite long.

But the one who introduced him at that time felt the need to go beyond listing those things to making a statement about how important Berry is. Many at that time referred to Berry as a prophet, as indeed he is.

Mr. Berry stood up to the podium, and rather than launching right into his address, he offered a reminiscence. He said that once, when he was overcome with

emotion for his wife, Tanya, he blurted out to her, "What did I ever do to deserve you?!" He said she immediately answered, "Nothing."

The chapel erupted in laughter, and we took his point. The one who introduced him had really said too much. In his praise, he had painted a caricature, rather than the man. Mr. Berry is simply determined to remain a man, a man who is a poet and essayist, farmer and novelist, and, yes, at times even a prophet, but a man who is also a fallible husband.

The one who introduced him had only told part of the truth. Mr. Berry wanted everyone to know the whole truth, and he relied on his wife to help tell it, much to the delight of all who were listening.

So it is for all of us. When the whole truth is told, we must confess that none of us can ever hope to merit the kindnesses, graces and love that we are shown. God's grace comes, and we know not how.

Is that not the meaning of the words in the carol "O Little Town of Bethlehem?"

*How silently, how silently, the wondrous Gift is giv'n;  
so God imparts to human hearts the blessings of His heav'n...  
No ear my hear his coming..."*

God's grace comes, and we know not how.

Mary, who sang these wonderful, sobering words we have heard this morning, knew this. There she was, a poor girl, in a poor, backwater country. As a young girl, she could claim no importance or standing. No one in the world would expect to look to her for the coming of the One who would change everything.

Yet when the angel appeared to her, announcing God's intentions for the deliverance of her people, she did not doubt, but in faith answered, "Let it be done to me as you have said."

Then, in the face of great danger, she continued to believe. Immediately, she had to wonder, "What would Joseph do?" She was betrothed to him, but they were not yet married. What would he do when he found out? It turned out that Joseph was a good man, who resolved only to divorce her quietly when he found out, until the angel appeared to him in a dream, and let him know that he could do better than that.

How harrowing those days must have been for Mary, who, because God had chosen her, and because she had believed and consented, lived in danger at least of being made an outcast, but maybe even ran the risk of being stoned to death.

Maybe that is partly why she left to pay a visit to her cousin Elizabeth. She needed welcome without judgment, hospitality without fear. She needed solidarity. It all seemed so unlikely, so unimaginable really. Here was Elizabeth, who was too old to have a child, and yet she was expecting. And here was Mary, who was so young, and who was not even married yet, and she was expecting. It all seemed so unlikely, so unimaginable.

But somehow, through their faith, through the gift of the Holy Spirit, they knew that God's grace often works in just this way. It comes and we know not how. And the best response is to sing. Which is what Mary does.

"My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior because he has looked upon the humiliation of his servant... He has come to the help of Israel his servant, mindful of his faithful love, according to the promise made to our ancestors..."

## II

God's grace comes and we know not how. Since at least our father Abraham it has been so. Why would God choose an old man, and his old, barren wife to be the progenitors of a nation? And why would God choose to do this with them, not where they were, among their own families, but in an altogether foreign place, among strangers? And then, once Abraham and Sarah reach the land of promise, they had to wait 25 years before Sarah finally conceived. It all seemed so unlikely, so unimaginable.

The question from Genesis 12 through the remainder of the Hebrew scriptures is will the promise to Abraham be kept? Will God's dream prevail? Would the promise prevail over the hostility between Jacob and Esau? Would the promise survive the scheming of Joseph's brothers? Would Joseph survive his first years in Egypt? Would the children of Jacob survive the 7-year famine? Time after time, the promise does prevail, and it all seems so unlikely, so unimaginable.

Following God's deliverance of the Hebrew slaves from Egypt, we wonder if the promise will prevail despite the nostalgia and infidelity of Jacob's descendants. It is

amazing to read the account. They had seen the marvelous acts God had done. They had seen Pharaoh's chariots stopped in the waters they themselves had just passed through. And yet, within a matter of days, when they began to feel hunger and thirst, what do they do? They accuse Moses of deceiving them, and demand that they be taken back to Egypt. And we wonder: how can the promise prevail among a people who behave in such a way?

Yet the promise does prevail, despite seeming unlikely and unimaginable. Indeed, by the time the Word of God comes to Mary to be born among us, we can begin to wonder if anything is more trustworthy and reliable than God's promises.

What is it Paul wrote? "If there are any prophecies, they will be done away with; if tongues, they will fall silent; if knowledge, it will be done away with. For we know only imperfectly, and we prophecy imperfectly; but once the perfect comes, all imperfect things will be done away with. As it is, these remain: faith, hope, and love, and the greatest of these is love."

That is the wonder of these days of promise, the wonder captured by Mary's song. Yes, it seems so unlikely, so unimaginable. But Jesus told us why the promises can be counted on. "For God so loved the world..."

In these Advent days, we celebrate the gift of God's love in Jesus. Light and life have come among us. But the story of God's ways with God's world is not yet finished. We are between the Already and the Not Yet. The good news is we are now players in the grand story of salvation. As Uncle Walt Whitman wrote, "O Me! O life! Of the questions of these recurring... What good amid these, O me, O life?"

The answer?

"That you are here - ...That the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse."

Of if you prefer, here is how it is written in the Letter to the Hebrews: "With so many witnesses in a great cloud all around us, we, too, then, should throw off everything that weighs us down and the sin that clings so closely, and with perseverance keep running the race which lies ahead of us. Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, who leads us in our faith and brings it to perfection." (12:1&2)

Perfection? Among us? Yes, it so often seems unlikely, maybe even unimaginable. But by this late date, we surely know that God's promises are trustworthy. Thanks be to God. Amen.