

Sermon notes from the pulpit of
First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois
Fourth Sunday of Advent, December 23, 2018
Matt Matthews

God is good.
All the time.

I love getting Christmas cards. And I especially love the photocopied Christmas letters. They are wonderful. But sometimes these Christmas letters have a way of sticking in my craw. The harmony I read in these letters, the perfect family pictures, the nicely ordered lives is just too much. You know what I mean:

Christmas Greetings to you all! Our family is doing very well.

Little Johnny is no longer little. He's 7'2" and playing center for the New York Nicks. Of course, he's still at Yale where he's made straight As and has invented a cure for hair loss.

Little Sally graduated college this May and is vice president of France. We always knew being a political science major would pay off.

Jack is doing great at his job. He's president of the company and has whittled his golf score down so low, Jack Nicholas calls *him* "The Bear."

And I'm doing fine too. I do 600 push-ups each day after my four hours of morning prayer and greek yogurt. I have run six marathons this year for charity.

Finally, everything is going well at our church. We have sixty thousand members, but it still has that "small church feel." Our pastor is the best, the perfect combination of humor and intellectual insight. He's forceful and deeply sensitive. He's good looking in an ecclesiastical sort of way. His sermons are just right, and while I feel challenged by them, he never pushes anybody too far. His politics are perfectly balanced and his theology warms the cockles of my heart.

Three cheers to you, our friends and family. Merry Christmas!"

Besides the letters from my perfect friends, sometimes the Christmas message itself feels too saccharine, too sweet, too perfect.

In fact, the real Christmas story is filled with danger. Mary is found to be pregnant without a husband, the punishment for which is public stoning. Pregnant Mary and faithful Joseph travel to Bethlehem on a donkey; for those of you women who have been pregnant, I'm sure there's nothing "sweet" about that aspect of the story, either, jolting across uneven ground on the back of an animal. Jesus was born in a stranger's stable; while we romanticize, a manger was useful but, perhaps, not ideal. Evil was knocking at the door practically before Mary had learned to breast feed. You'll remember that after the birth and after the wise men come and go, we read in Matthew's gospel, that Herod was so jealous of any threat that a messiah could pose to his rule, he ordered all the children under two years old in Bethlehem killed. Mary, Joseph, and Jesus had fled into Egypt just in the nick of time. Like it or not, brutality is woven into the sweetness of the Christmas story.

Peter Marty says that "God came into the world through intense labor pains to meet [head on] the absence of brotherly and sisterly love." Jesus was born precisely into the middle of the world's pain. And Jesus has been in the middle ever since, always a lover in a dangerous time . . .

Which I suppose is why Mary sings her heart out. There was joy in a world of hurt "My soul doth magnify the Lord," we read in the King James Version of the Bible. Mary is overjoyed at the news that God would become incarnate in a son that *she is bearing in her womb*. The greek word is "megalyno" (mega-luno); it means to esteem highly, to extol, laud, celebrate. *My soul magnifies the LORD*.

I'm bursting with God-news (writes Eugene Peterson)
I'm dancing the song of my Savior God.

* * *

Hold that thought.

How many of you have hiked the Appalachian Trail? Camino de Santiago?

A family friend, Andrew Forsthoeffel, walked across America some years ago. He says there is a phenomenon among distance hikers who walk such trails called "Trail Magic." Trail Magic is when you think you're going to have a can of ravioli for dinner all by yourself, and you happen upon a friendly group of campers who offer you camaraderie and a fancy dinner of grilled steak and fresh vegetables. Things like this happened all the time on his journey, and Andrew was awash in gratitude. Let me let him tell you in his own words:

Gratitude. Intense gratitude. I think that's really what trail magic is. And if that's the case, then it's all around us, just waiting to be realized. Tonight, some friends invited me over for dinner. We'll enjoy food and company together for awhile and then I'll head back home and take a shower. Then I'll go to bed, in a bed. If I were on the road, this sequence of events would be a miracle, an astonishing, against-all-the-odds genuine miracle. And isn't it? How precious, the presence of friends. How luxurious, a warm bed. How awesome, how truly *awesome*, water and food.

Mary finds herself the beneficiary of God's amazing grace. She is to bear God's son into the world. Mary thanks God, celebrates God, *magnifies* God. She is filled with gratitude.

We find Mary's annual Christmas letter in Luke's Gospel.

At first blush, the Christmas story may seem a little too perfect what with all the shepherds and singing angels. But the world is a tough place, and I guess God knew we needed a touch of beauty and a spark of light on a dark, dark night. In an aching world then and now, Mary's letter vibrates with hope and joy.

God still chooses to come right smack dab into the middle of the hurt and fill the broken places with a little trail magic, with wonder, and unexpected hope, and holy surprise, and healing and grace and song and love.

Mary's response? Mary's response to God's desire to work through her was to sing a song of praise, *magnifying* this Holy God with gratitude, praise, and joy.

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I'm dancing the song of my Savior God.

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All the time.

AMEN.

Luke 1:39-55) ³⁹In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, ⁴⁰where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴²and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of

your womb. ⁴³And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

⁴⁶And Mary said,

"My soul magnifies the LORD,

⁴⁷and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

⁴⁸for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

⁴⁹for the Mighty One has done great things for me,

and holy is his name.

⁵⁰His mercy is for those who fear him

from generation to generation.

⁵¹He has shown strength with his arm;

he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

⁵²He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,

and lifted up the lowly;

⁵³he has filled the hungry with good things,

and sent the rich away empty.

⁵⁴He has helped his servant Israel,

in remembrance of his mercy,

⁵⁵according to the promise he made to our ancestors,

to Abraham and to his descendants forever."