

Advent 3, Year B
Dec. 17, 2017
St. James, Wheat Ridge

By the Rev. Becky Jones

As Episcopalians, you all know there is a proper time for Christmas carols,
and the third Sunday of Advent is not it.
One more week to go.
We can hold out.

But there's another time, a surprising time,
that is also amazingly appropriate for a Christmas carol.
It never would have occurred to me –
which just goes to show, I don't know everything there is to know.
I learned about this little liturgical sleight of hand
from country singer Travis Tritt.

Before he was a big star,
Tritt spent a lot of years playing in some pretty out-of-the-way places.
Pretty seedy places.
Places where the danger of getting caught up in drunken brawls and knife
fights
was generally pretty high.
But Tritt says he discovered a surefire way
to restore peace
when tempers were threatening to get out of hand.

If people started reaching for their pool cues
or heading for their gun racks,
Tritt would signal his band to begin playing "Silent Night."
Even if it were in the middle of July,
he would start singing that Christmas carol.
And invariably, people calmed down.
Fights would stop.
The bar would grow quiet.
Sometimes people even started crying.

Try it, the next time a family argument gets too heated,
and see if it doesn't cool things down.

You just can't stay agitated
when someone is singing a lullaby to the Christ child.

It's ironic, isn't it,
that this well-loved Christmas carol
about the Blessed Virgin and her baby
has such a calming effect.
Because as you can see for yourselves,
the ACTUAL words of the Blessed Virgin
are anything BUT calming.

Rather, Bible scholars have called them "dynamite."
They've been called "the most revolutionary document in the history of the world."
William Temple, the Archbishop of Canterbury during World War II,
instructed missionaries to poverty-stricken countries
never to read these words in public
because they could incite riots.

I'm speaking, of course, about the Magnificat,
the canticle we all read together just a few moments ago.

It's called the "magnificat"
because that's the first word of the Mary's speech in Latin.
Today, we said "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,"
but in the older version,
the version Sally prefers,
it's "my soul doth magnify the Lord,"
so the connection to the Latin "magnificat" is clearer.

Now, let's put this all in perspective.
In the story as told by Luke,
an unmarried, teen-age Mary has been told by the angel Gabriel
that she's about to become pregnant.
And Mary consents to this.
Then she decides to visit her older cousin, Elizabeth,
who she's learned is also unexpectedly expecting.
Elizabeth welcomes her and honors her,
and tells her that she's blessed.
And Mary agrees that yes,

this is something people are going to be talking about for a long time.

And then she bursts into this song –
this amazing song in which the powerful are stripped of their entitlements
and the humble are given pre-eminence.

One thing Bible scholars have long puzzled over
is the way Mary curiously switches tenses
in the middle of her speech.
She goes from present tense to future tense to past tense
in the course of a couple of verses.

This is the sort of thing that drives a grammar nerd like me nuts.
Had I been editing Mary,
I would have changed her speech back to present or future tense.
But again,
this just proves that I don't know everything there is to know.

Here's this young woman who BEFORE giving birth
begins speaking of her son's approaching mission
AS IF it were already accomplished,
already a done deal.

There's a fancy name for this literary technique.
It's called prolepsis.
It means referring to a future event as if it had already happened.
It's a way of expressing anticipation and assurance
regarding that future event.

For example, if you're invited to a party,
you might respond, "I'm there."
Of course you're not literally there yet,
but it indicates your excited anticipation of the party.
Or, to use a less-happy example,
a soon-to-be executed prisoner may be referred to
as "dead man walking."
He's not dead yet, but he's walking a short road to get there.

Now, in Mary's case, we hear both a kind of prophecy
about what's going to happen,
as well as a re-telling of history,

because Mary's words sound a whole lot
 like another famous song attributed to another woman
 that Mary would have been familiar with.
 Mary's magnificat is almost certainly based on the Song of Hannah,
 which we find in the Book of First Samuel.
 Hannah was the prophet Samuel's mother,
 and when Samuel was born, Hannah felt vindicated.
 Like Mary's song, Hannah's song speaks about God
 raising up the poor and humble,
 and putting down the rich and the arrogant.
 So Mary was calling forth both the past AND the future
 as if both were part of her present reality.

In short, Mary did what WE do every Sunday
 as we gather round the altar.
 We call forth the past, we retell the story:
 "On the night he was betrayed, Jesus took bread ... "
 We summon that event out of the past
 to make it part of our present reality,
 so we can experience it in our present moment.
 And then we pull a future vision also into the present,
 so that past and present and future all become one,
 the eternal now.
 Did you know that that's what we're doing when we celebrate Holy
 Eucharist?
 Pretty cool, huh?
 And that's what Mary was doing.
 She was speaking of the future, as though it had already happened.

And in so doing, she reminds us
 that the saving justice of God's reign
 is as good as accomplished.
 Yes, it is our future.
 But for those who have eyes to see,
 it is also our present.
 That is our message.
 That is our faith.

At the time Mary spoke these words,
 Jesus was not yet born.

He was just a little spark of life within Mary.

Thirty years would go by.

Yet when the adult Jesus was ready to launch his public ministry,
he went to the synagogue in Nazareth,
and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him.
He unrolled it and found the place
where the words that we heard read this morning were.

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.’

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down.
The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.
Then he said, ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’

The prophet Isaiah’s vision of the year of Jubilee,
the time when debts are forgiven
and slaves set free,
that legendary Day of Jubilee
that Scripture tells us happened at some time in the past
and is to come in the future,
Jesus just proclaimed as a present reality.

The Kingdom of God is not some far off thing
that will come to pass some time in the future.
It is here now.
It is in the past, and the present and the future.
Time is merely a human construct.
God is not bound by our human need of a calendar.

I know this is enough to make your head swim.
It’s hard to wrap your mind around all this.
How can we live in the reality of something that hasn’t yet happened?
How can we remember the future, as though it had already happened?

How can we anticipate the past, as though it were still to come?

That, my friends, is just all part of the mystery of God.

Somehow Mary understood all this.

Jesus understood all this.

Maybe the best we can do is to be like Travis Tritt,
who could somehow transform a bar into a stable,
and a hot July night into a peaceful Christmas Eve,
and could turn people's present realities
into something quite different, quite unexpected.

Today, let us join with Mary

in a song of praise,

proclaiming with her the good news

that every generation has longed to hear.

And rejoice!

Amen.