

“For Pretend”
Luke 1:39-56
2nd Sunday of Advent

December 5, 2021
Westminster, Greenville
Ben Dorr

Last weekend, after the Christmas tree went up at our house, my parents were visiting and our family got to discussing Christmas songs, what each of our favorites is at this time of year.

The list included:
In the Bleak Midwinter
Carol of the Bells
Once in Royal David’s City

One of us said: Santa Claus Is Coming to Town—by the Jackson 5.
I’ll leave it up to you to guess which one of us that was.

No one mentioned “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas,” but later during Thanksgiving weekend, I heard a member of the family singing that song to themselves. And if the criteria were Christmas songs with an interesting backstory, this is the song that would have made the TOP of my list.

Do you know the history of this song?

It debuted in the 1943 movie, *Meet Me in St. Louis*,
which starred Judy Garland.

And then years later, Frank Sinatra made a recording of the song, and it’s this recording that most of us probably remember.

The last part of the lyrics, as you know, go like this:

*Through the years we all will be together
If the fates allow*

*Hang a shining star upon the highest bough
And have yourself a merry little Christmas now.*

That's the 1957 version, the one that Sinatra recorded.

But he only recorded it after complaining to the song's composer, Hugh Martin, that the Judy Garland version, from the movie, wasn't "jolly enough" for Christmas.

Meet Me in St. Louis opened during the hard days of WWII,
and what Judy Garland sang was this:

**Someday soon we all will be together
If the fates allow
Until then, we'll have to muddle through somehow
So have yourself a merry little Christmas now**

What's fascinating is that after many years, the Garland version made a comeback of sorts. For example, in the months after 9/11, James Taylor recorded the song, and he used the lyrics that Garland sang, not the ones that Sinatra sang.

Commenting about his decision, James Taylor said:

"It's as though people were suddenly experiencing everything on a deeper level for a while...in times of strife, we 'muddle through' as the lyric says."

And then Taylor added, "As the *best* lyric says."¹

Now that's an interesting question.

¹ Chris Willman, "How 'Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas' became one of the season's most beloved songs," in *Entertainment Weekly*, found at [The history of Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas | EW.com](http://www.ew.com).

Is it the best lyric?

One can make the case that it's the most REALISTIC lyric.

That the Judy Garland version is the way that many people experience Christmas, not just during WWII days but any December day—perhaps putting on a smiling face, when behind that face you're feeling stressed, or anxious, or sad.

And the reality is that you're muddling through. In other words, the Sinatra version...it's nice, it's cheery, but perhaps for some people at this time of year...it's just pretend.

Have any of you ever felt, when you went to a party or even when you came to church in the days before Christmas—that you had to pretend at this time of year?

Of course, what interests me today is not the song that Judy Garland sang or the version Sinatra sang. What interests me is the song that Mary sang long ago.

Mary's Magnificat. You remember it, right?
When it begins, it makes all the sense in the world:

“My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.”

But then Mary goes on:

*“He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.*

*“He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;*

*he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.”*

And what I want to know is:

Mary—are you pretending?

Why does she sing those words?

They may be her personal experience, but they're not everyone's experience.

Just compare the Magnificat to what's happening in the world right now:

Migrants suffering as pawns in a political game played by the Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko? That does NOT sound like the powerful being brought down from their thrones.

Or how about the millions in Afghanistan who are in danger of starving through this winter?

That doesn't sound like the hungry being filled.

And Mary doesn't say these things WILL happen.

She speaks as if they've ALREADY happened.

The powerful have been brought down,
the hungry have been filled...

Mary...are you pretending?

Look, it's one thing when kids pretend.

I remember when I was a young boy in church, my parents would always sit in the back with me. Why the back?

Because every time the choir would sing up front, I needed to stand on the chair in back and pretend I was conducting the choir right along with the choir director.

Pretending is what kids are supposed to do.
But when adults do it?

- Maybe a friend of yours pretends they don't have a drinking problem...
- Or maybe your father pretends that he's really not too old to keep driving...

It's frustrating when an adult you love cannot stop pretending.

But the more I think about Mary's song, the more I realize that what UNSETTLES me is not that I believe Mary was just pretending. What makes me unsettled...**is that part of me wishes she was.**

Part of me wishes that she was just making this stuff up.

Why?

Because Mary's song is a song of revolution.

It says that God will not keep things the way they are.

It's an echo of Hannah's song, the one we heard from 1st Samuel today.

"The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength. Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry are fat with spoil."

Mary's song isn't just about God changing her life.

It says that God will OVERTURN everyone's life.

What's down will be up, and what's up will be down.
 The empty will become full, and those who are full will be emptied.

The claim and content of the Magnificat is that God does not enter this world to keep the world the same.

God enters the world to change our world.
 God enters our church to change our church.
 God enters my heart to change my heart.

All of which poses a big problem for me at Advent.
 Advent says that God is coming.
 Advent says that God wants to change my heart.
 What if I don't want my heart to change?

A few decades ago, during my first semester in college, I wandered into the gym to shoot baskets one evening, but there was volleyball practice going on in the gym, and I got annoyed that there was no place for me to play basketball.

So I came back to the lounge of our dormitory with a scowl on my face.

Someone asked what was wrong.
 I said, "The girl's volleyball team is practicing, I can't play basketball."

She said, "The what?"
 She must not have heard me.

"The girl's volleyball team is practicing, I can't play basketball."
 She said, "The what?"

I spoke very slowly this time.
“The girl’s....volleyball team....is practicing. I can’t...play...
basketball.”

She said, “The what?”

At this point I knew she wanted me to say something else, I didn’t know what it was, until my roommate—who had been watching the whole exchange—he leaned over and whispered:

“Ben—it’s the WOMEN’S team
not the girls’ team.”

Ugh! I couldn’t believe it.
First I can’t play basketball, then I can’t even TALK about my inability to play basketball in the right way??

Well, I went back in my room and stewed.
For weeks after that, I avoided her, wouldn’t talk to her.

But here’s the thing.
It’s been over 32 years since that happened, and I still remember it.
Why do I remember it?

Because something in my heart needed to change.

It wasn’t the girls team.
It was the women’s team.
And words matter.
How we talk about other people matters.
I didn’t want to change.
But I needed to change.

And I can promise you—all these years later, in plenty of OTHER ways, that RESISTANCE TO CHANGE...is still there.

Advent says that God is coming—not to bless the status quo, but to change it, to help us grow in the ways that God wants us to grow. And we all know that growth is not easy.

It requires self-examination.

It requires accountability, and making mistakes.

It requires humility, and hard work.

But the good news of the season is that any growth we experience is IMPOSSIBLE without the intervention of God's grace.

Take one more look at our text.

What is it, exactly, that prompts Mary to sing the Magnificat?

It's easy to assume that it's Gabriel's announcement:

“Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.”

But Mary didn't sing after Gabriel left her.

She got scared.

When our text for today begins, Mary is a poor, pregnant teenager.

She's with child, out of wedlock.

Gabriel is long gone.

And the text tells us that Mary “set out and went with haste” to visit her cousin Elizabeth.

With haste...one gets the impression that Mary is...afraid!

Afraid of what people in her town will think once they find out, afraid of the gossip that will surely begin.

After all, who's going to believe HER story?

So Mary shows up at her cousin Elizabeth's door.

And what does Elizabeth say?

Well...I can think of plenty of things she COULD have said.

“How'd you get into this mess?”

“What are you going to do now?”

But instead of scolding her or shaming her or turning her away...Elizabeth errs on the side of grace with Mary.

Luke writes that Elizabeth “*was filled with the Holy Spirit,*” and cries out, “*Blessed are you among women.*”

No wonder Mary sings her song.

Elizabeth erred on the side of grace with Mary,
 and I like to imagine that this experience helped Mary
 when she and Joseph were raising their son, Jesus...
 I like to think that Mary remembered the gift of grace
 that Elizabeth gave her—
 and it helped her teach her son Jesus
 what God's grace was all about.

It's a powerful thing, when someone errs on the side of grace.

It gives you a chance to change.

An opportunity to grow.

To become the person whom God has created you to be.

Back in 1992, Auburn Sandstrom was 29 years old,

and she was curled up in a fetal position
on the carpet of her apartment in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

She was addicted to drugs, she was going through withdrawal.
She was in a dark and desperate place.

At that time in her life, Auburn was a mother to a one-year-old child. She had been born into a house of privilege, grew up, got a college degree, a Master's degree...and now she was throwing it all away.

One item she had not thrown away was a phone number.
In her hand was a crumpled up piece of paper with a phone number on it.

The phone number was given to Auburn by her mother.
Mind you, Auburn hadn't spoken with her mother for a few years.

But Auburn's mother had sent her daughter this phone number, in the mail, telling her daughter that it was the number for a Christian counselor, should she ever need someone to talk to, please call this number...

Auburn was so desperate that night, she called the number.
A man answered, and said, "Hello?"

"Do you think you could talk to me?" Auburn asked.

She could hear the man shifting things around in the room, turning down the radio. "Yes, yes, yes...what's going on?"

Auburn hadn't told the truth, to herself or to anyone, in a long time.

But that evening, she did.

She said she was scared, she said that things were bad, she admitted that she had a drug problem.

And the man on the other end of the phone listened to her without judgment.

“Tell me more,” he would say.

“That must hurt,” he would say.

He was present. He was patient.

He was extraordinarily kind.

She called at 2am, and he stayed on the phone with her until the sun rose.

And Auburn was very grateful.

She was so grateful, she said to the man at the end of the phone call, “I really appreciate you. Now aren’t you supposed to give me some Bible verses to read or something?”

Auburn wasn’t into reading the Bible, but she says she would have done it, she was so grateful for what that man did, she would have read whatever Bible verses he told her to read.

Well, the man laughed, changed the subject, but Auburn brought it up again.

“How long have you been a Christian counselor?” she asked him.

And the man said, “I need to tell you something I’ve been avoiding. And I need you not to hang up. That number you called when you reached me? It was a wrong number.”

Well, Auburn didn't hang up.
And she never learned his name.

All she knew is that the next morning, she experienced, in her words "a peace that passes understanding."

Her life didn't turn around on a dime, but it did turn around.
She raised her boy, her son went on to Princeton, graduated not too long ago.

Of that night, Auburn says:
"I experienced...random, unconditional love."

And then she said this:

"In the deepest, bleakest night of despair, it only takes a pinhole of light, and all of grace can come in."²

How many of you enjoy giving gifts to other people at Christmas?
Not a trick question, show of hands...how many of you like to give gifts to other people at Christmas?

Good, good.

How many of you have a list of gifts that you still need to give?

What if, on the list of gifts that you need to give to others,
what if you made erring on the side of grace...number one?

Amen.

² As told on *The Moth* podcast by Auburn Sandstrom, July 12, 2016.