

### *An Old Familiar Song*

A few years ago, when the most recent installment of the *Star Wars* franchise was released, a colleague of mine preached a sermon series using the titles of the original movies. At first, I didn't think there was a way in the world she could pull it off, but then I thought about it. The titles do sort of line up nicely: *A New Hope*, and *The Empire Strikes Back*...

I mean, that's the story of the Gospel right there, isn't it? Luke 2: Good news of great joy, for born to us this day... a new hope. Mark 15: Pilate asked him, "are you the king of the Jews?" The empire strikes back, indeed.

I was thinking about her sermon series this advent, and I found myself doing something that happens every time I think about *Star Wars*... I found myself humming the theme song.

Isn't it funny how just a few chords can immediately transport you? Bom. Bom, bom, BOM! BOM!

John Williams nailed it because you don't even have to have seen a single *Star Wars* movie and the music is ubiquitous. You know it.

Some chords, some words, just transport us.

Some of my friends have been driving around listening to Christmas Carols since Halloween.

A few of my friends have told me in no uncertain terms just *exactly* what they think of Advent Carols, and are absolutely mystified when I tell them that in the liturgical year Christmastide starts *after* Christmas and runs to Epiphany.

They don't understand me. They think I'm slightly crazy. But I suppose marking your life in liturgical time might lead to a mild form of insanity.

But it does have a way of shaping our lives doesn't it? When we wait for the song... the anticipation builds... like that opening fanfare before that famous chord progression.

Any way you cut it, songs are evocative.

When Mary breaks into song in Luke, she is transporting us. She is transporting us all the way to Hannah, way back in the books of 1-2 Samuel, who also broke into song praising God for changing *her* reality. Do you remember Hannah, who so desperately wanted a child?

Hannah's reality needed changing – that's when we break into song, you know, when reality needs changing.

Songs carry a whole weight of meaning when the evil galactic empire is threatening to cut off hope.

Songs carry a whole weight of meaning when a barren woman finds out that she is pregnant.

When Hannah breaks into song, it's a praise-song to God for changing things. Her womb is opened. Old Testament Scholar Walter Brueggemann reminds us also that the ancient Israelites, hearing Hannah's doxology to God, would have seen themselves in her song – that they too, have a new future, a future that God is opening. Thus, he concludes, Israel *must* sing along with her.

He writes, "Israel is peculiarly a community of doxology. Its life consists in praise to God for what God has *done* and for what God characteristically *continues* to do. Thus Hannah sings no new song, she appropriates a song already known in Israel. The 'Song of Hannah' thus is likely to have been taken from Israel's repertoire of public hymns."<sup>1</sup>

In other words, Hannah is singing an old familiar song.

And when Mary lifts her words just about verbatim off of Hannah's lips, she's doing the same thing. Mary is singing an old familiar song.

Christmas time is one of those moments when we crave familiarity, isn't it?

We love it! We eat it up.

We want the same recipes – sometimes things we wouldn't touch with a ten-foot pole the rest of the year. On a low-carb diet? Why yes, I will have a second helping of dressing.

We want the same tunes. The Chipmunk's Christmas Album? Well, no, that's never good. Silent Night six ways to Sunday? Why, thank you, I'll have another!

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, First and Second Samuel in *Interpretation* (JKP:Louisville, 1990) p16 (emphasis mine)

We want the same television programs – of COURSE I’ll watch the Charlie Brown Christmas special again this year, it wouldn’t be Christmas without Linus reading the Christmas story, would it?

We want the ring of familiarity, right down to the same songs and the same scriptures, and here’s Mary, singing an old, familiar song.

Which would be fine if she just stuck straight to Hannah’s words.

But Mary doesn’t. There is a twist.

You see, she disrupts the words. Mary doesn’t stick strictly to the script. Unlike my clergy friend who once warned me never to deviate from Luke 2 on Christmas eve, Mary finds her own voice and her words are an arrow shot straight into the heart of expectations. We could perk along just fine listening to that old familiar song, but then these words come out of her mouth, “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.”

Fred Craddock says, “Here we have a characteristic of the final judgment of God in which there is a complete reversal of fortunes: the powerful and rich will exchange places with the powerless and poor. And this eschatological reversal has already begun; God’s choice of Mary is evidence of it.”<sup>2</sup>

Mary’s song takes us into a new reality. However much we crave the familiar and comfortable, she takes our favorite old familiar song, and with all the finesse of a blues pianist, she shifts it into a minor key to disrupt the easy patterns of our listening. Like all good artists, she’s using the medium to tell her story. In God’s final redemption of humankind, the song will shift back into the sweet chords of salvation we loved in the overture, but not *until* the progression of the music carries us through a journey of redemption.

Good artists do that – they make us feel – and in feeling, they show us ourselves, as we are, and as we can yet be. Mary is a good artist.

Good artists take the familiar and disrupt it just enough to make us *see* and *hear*.

Disruption makes us see differently.

Let me tell you a story. I love the movie *A Christmas Story*. It just straight up goofy with the leg lamp, the red-rider BB gun, and Christmas Dinner at the Chinese

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<sup>2</sup> Fred Craddock. Luke in *Interpretation* (JKP: Louisville, 1990) p30

Restaurant. It's great, because you can sort of jump into it anywhere, watch a while, be lifted into a holiday spirit, and it doesn't demand very much from you. It's not high art, or maybe it is.

So, many years ago, I was watching *A Christmas Story* while staying overnight with a group of guests in the church where I was serving. It was our ministry to welcome homeless guests to sleep in the fellowship hall during the cold months of the year; we joined with other churches to make it happen, and I had signed up to spend the night so that if anyone needed anything they would have someone who knew the church who could help.

I hadn't identified myself as one of the ministers of the church, so I was surprised when a man approached me asking if I was a minister. "Yes," I said, "I am."

"Can we go outside and talk for a while," he asked.

We stepped out of the youth center. It was a cold night and I just had on a light sweater. I crossed my arms and put my hands underneath them to stay warm, hoping this would be quick. He lit a cigarette, offered me one, and sat down on a bench in the cold. All I wanted to do was go back inside where it was warm and watch the movie.

Then he started a monologue.

"I spent twelve years in prison, I just got out last year."

I must have looked shocked.

"I didn't do anything all that bad, but I got caught with drugs, enough that they said it showed I had an intention to distribute. I wasn't about to share but I couldn't convince the judge of that."

"Twelve years sounds like a long time for possession," I said.

"It wasn't the first time," he replied, "But that's not what I want to talk about. Down at the Urban Ministry Center, they have computers so I can e-mail my sister. She was shocked to hear from me, and she told me not to come home for Christmas. She said my daddy has cancer and he's dying, and he doesn't need to see me like this."

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Well, it's my own fault, but I'm fifty-two years old and I don't want to have to start over, but here I am."

I didn't say anything.

“Well, I guess I just wanted to talk about that,” he said, and he dropped his cigarette on the grass and ground it into the ground with his toe, and walked back into the church.

I sat for a few minutes on the bench and then I turned and walked into the church.

The movie was still playing, but I couldn’t get those words out of my head.

The song had been disrupted.

That’s what a good artist does, you know.

Jesus himself is a disruption. Sure, he brings comfort, and he brings peace, but he doesn’t do it by keeping everything the way it has always been. He doesn’t bring comfort and peace by using the same old recipes, the same old scripts, the same old notes.

No, there’s a twist. There’s a reversal. The narrative changes.

Christmas is one of those thin spaces in time where God is trying to get us. Our lives do sort of play along, the years passing as background to whatever we’re doing at any given moment, rushing hither and thither, big events give way to little things, and the time slips past. But every year we come around to the birth of Jesus and it’s a thin space in the year. We’re easier to transport then.

Indeed, the late Peter Gomes tells a wonderful story of a Christmas Eve Mass that he attended when he was ten years old and later could remember as if it were yesterday,

“With the darkened church lit only by candles, the smell of the pine branches, and the beauty of the liturgy; and I remember that toward the close of the service all the lights were put out and the congregation knelt facing the manger and sang ‘Silent Night’ by candlelight... Christmas evening in Christ Church fifty years ago tonight was one of those thin places. There was magic in the manger – not of the abracadabra kind nor a trick against nature – in a moment of transformation where a sorry world and a gracious savior met, and the difference was made not in the world but in the heart.”<sup>3</sup>

An old familiar song plays in the background, the tune is nostalgic, the melody is haunting, and as the finger slips just slightly to the black keys, the chord turns and we hear it differently – and the change is made, maybe not in the world, but in our hearts.

Have you seen the one where Linus drops his blanket? I never noticed it but someone sent it to me earlier this week – I think it’s on Facebook or YouTube or

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<sup>3</sup> Peter Gomes, Doing What You Can (WordTech, Stoneham MA, 2004) p116

something. It's Linus, who always, always has his security blanket, reading the Christmas Story, and at exactly the moment when he quotes the angels, who say, "Fear Not!" he drops the security blanket. The good artist disrupts the narrative we expect and leaves us with the narrative of grace.

Or maybe you were in the drugstore in a long line, feeling utterly unchristian and you heard, "parrrrrumpumpumpum..." and you exhaled.

Or maybe all you want is to see the movie, bom, bom, bom, BOM, BOM, and it's not *time* for the movie, it's time to talk.

The story of "God with us" is a long story. It's our story. It's the story of salvation and redemption, and God just keeps telling it, over and over and over again. Over and over, twisting and turning, rising and falling, black keys and white keys, riffing and vamping until we *hear* it, until it breaks in, disrupting our lives, disrupting them with grace.

It's an old familiar song, all the way back to Mary, all the way back to Hannah, all the way back to creation, an old familiar song, waiting to break in, waiting to disrupt, waiting to change us, to change our hearts. It goes a little like this,

*My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior.*

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.