



***Fear Not! Sing for Joy!***

I read an article recently about a woman who was born unable to feel pain. For 39 years she was unable to feel any type of physical pain. Here is the scientific explanation of the condition – *The disorder is caused by a rare genetic mutation that results in a lack of ion channels that transport sodium across sensory nerves. Without these channels, known as Nav1.7 channels, nerve cells are unable to communicate pain. Researchers quickly sought to make compounds that blocked Nav1.7 channels, thinking they might be able to block pain in people without the disorder.*

<https://www.newscientist.com/article/dn28623-woman-who-has-never-felt-pain-experiences-it-for-the-first-time/>

As I was reading I couldn't help but think, *those pesky Nav1.7 channels; that's exactly what I would diagnose!*

Doctors found a way to reverse her condition so that she was able to feel pain, and upon receiving the treatment there is only one way to test its success – inflict pain. I'm not sure why the doctors settled on this type of test, but they burned her with a laser, and upon receiving the burn she remarked that it felt good to experience pain.

There are a couple of fascinating matters elements related to that story. First, the next story listed for reading on the journal's web site was titled *7 Ways to Reduce the Pain You're Feeling*. I think there's some irony there somewhere. Secondly, it did not address the other types of pain people experience, such as spiritual and emotional pain and how prevalent those kinds of pains are and what can be done about preventing them. Third, that someone immune to physical pain is viewed as having a medical deficiency and, upon, being cured of that deficiency, would remark that she was glad to experience the sensation of pain. How is it that, while most people seek to avoid pain, here is someone who found it a blessing to be able to feel pain?

Which begs the question, I think, does pain make us more open to, or more prepared for, blessing? In a moment we'll read the Scripture text for today's message. It comes from the first chapter of Luke's gospel, and it is a song of celebration, known as Zechariah's song. God had been mostly silent for 400-plus years. People had many questions about that silence. The people were suffering under the rule of Rome. Times were difficult. There were many reasons for people to feel pain, but because they had experienced so much pain, perhaps it made their time of rejoicing even sweeter.

Zechariah was the father of John the Baptist, and here is his song, offered after the birth of his son –

**67** *His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:*

**68** *"Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them.*

**69** *He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David*

70 (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago),  
 71 salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us—  
 72 to show mercy to our ancestors and to remember his holy covenant,  
 73 the oath he swore to our father Abraham:  
 74 to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear  
 75 in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.  
 76 And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to  
 prepare the way for him,  
 77 to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins,  
 78 because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven  
 79 to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of  
 peace.”

When we think about all that is associated with Christmas, music would certainly be near the top of everyone’s list. Who doesn’t love Christmas music? We all love the songs of the season – *Silent Night*, *Joy to the World*, *Angels We Have Heard On High*, *The First Noel*, and so many more that are beloved by millions. This morning, I want to use the idea of a song to frame this message.

### ***1. Sometimes we sing a sad song.***

There are few things as powerful as music. Music expresses our emotions, it alters our emotions, it lifts us up, it challenges us, and it can literally change the world. Sometimes we want a sad or melancholy song – a song like *How Can You Mend a Broken Heart* by the Bee Gees, because it reflects our downcast state of being. I can look at my recently played songs on my iPod and know what I was feeling on those days by what songs I chose to listen to. The song choices sometimes reveal that my day was one of a sad song.

I love to read interviews with musicians, guitar players in particular, and one that is often asked of blues musicians is this – can you write a blues song when life is going well? Maybe not. Blues come from a unique time and place and history and blues was the musical language of suffering.

The people of Israel, suffering under the occupying Roman army, had experienced a four-century drought in hearing from God. Had he gone silent forever, some probably wondered, and, if not, when would they hear from God again?

There are many passages in Scripture that we might call the Bible’s blues. We find many of those passages in the psalms, such as the 22<sup>nd</sup>, which Jesus quoted while on the cross –

*1 My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish?*

*2 My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, but I find no rest.*

*4 In you our ancestors put their trust; they trusted and you delivered them.*

*5 To you they cried out and were saved; in you they trusted and were not put to shame.*

*6 But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by everyone, despised by the people.*

*7 All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads.*

*8 “He trusts in the Lord,” they say, “let the Lord rescue him. Let him deliver him, since he delights in him.”*

*11 Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help.*

There are many, many such passages throughout the Bible; sad songs, blues songs, songs of despair, mining the entire range of the difficulty of the human condition.

And that’s not at all a bad thing. Music – sad music, blues music – purges our souls of the bitterness that builds up within us from the struggles of life. Sometimes we sing a sad song, and in singing the sad

song we release some of the sadness and the struggle.

By the time of the events in this morning's Scripture passage, God's people had been singing a lot of sad songs, a lot of blues. They had been through centuries of struggles, and had not given up. They had experienced much pain, but persevered.

## ***2. Sometimes we sing a song of joy!***

I'm going to date myself here, but I still remember the first time I heard the song *Joy To the World*. Not the Christmas carol, but the song by Three Dog Night. Who remembers that song? I was getting ready for school one morning and as I came into our kitchen those first lines came blasting out of the radio on the table – *Jeremiah was a bullfrog! Was a good friend of mine! Never understood a single word he said...* Of course you wouldn't understand a word he said – he's a bullfrog! I thought those were some of the strangest lyrics ever but it's a really cool, fun, joyful song when the chorus kicks in and I still love to listen to it.

Zechariah's song was one of joy! There was joy in the world! God was again moving, and in a very big way, and in Luke's gospel, in the Christmas story passages, there are four different songs that burst forth from the blessing and joy of God's moving.

Were you aware of the four songs in Luke's telling of the Christmas story? There are actually many other songs in the Scriptures, although we might not always realize we are reading a song. Many of the psalms, for instance, were probably sung in worship services. The early church probably sang portions of Scripture such as Philippians 2:1-12.

As the Christmas story begins, music enters as a response to the good news that God was indeed moving. The first song in the Christmas story is Mary's Song, in 1:46-55. Also referred to as the *Magnificat* (so titled because the first word in the Latin translation of this passage is *magnificat*) it has become one of the most well-known passages of the Christmas story. Mary's *magnificat*, her response to God's choosing her as the mother of the Messiah, is a song of hope and joy at what God was about to do.

The second song is the song of Zechariah, from the passage we study this morning. Zechariah's song (Zechariah was the father of John the Baptist) came after he had regained his voice (Zechariah was unable to speak from the time the angel told him that he and his wife would have a child until the eighth day after John's birth). It is known as the *benedictus*, a name taken from the first Latin words of this passage, which means *blessed be the Lord God of Israel*.

The third is the song of the angels, in 2:13-14. The angels sang after announcing the good news of the birth of Christ to the shepherds.

The fourth is the song of Simeon, in 2:29-32. Simeon sings when Jesus is brought to the Temple eight days after his birth. Simeon had long waited and hoped for the good news of the coming of the Messiah, and he had been promised he would not die until after he had seen that promise fulfilled. His song is also known as the *Nunc Dimittis*, which also comes from the first Latin words of the passage, and mean *now you dismiss*. Simeon felt that, upon seeing the Messiah, God could dismiss him not only from his priestly duties but from life itself, as he had lived to see the fulfillment of his hopes and dreams – the coming of the Messiah.

All four of these songs are songs of joy, bursting forth in a time of great difficulty, as if to say, *it is time for a song of joy! We have sung the blues for centuries, but now it is a time of celebration! God is on the move!*

In today's Scripture passage there are words and phrases that would hold particularly joyful meaning at the time of the birth of Jesus – *a horn of salvation* (verse 69), and *the oath he swore to our father Abraham* (verse 73). These refer to Jesus and his standing as the Messiah. In the next part of the passage there are words and phrases that refer to John the Baptist – *a prophet of the Most High* and *you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him* (verse 76). There are also words rich with

theological meaning – *salvation* (verse 71), *mercy* and *covenant*, (both found in verse 72), *forgiveness* (verse 77), and *peace* (verse 79). The words and phrases in this passage are testimony that God was on the move, that something great was about to take place, and that the course of history would be forever changed.

### 3. *Let God help you Sing for Joy!*

I have always wished I could sing. Music is such a powerful gift, and the gift of a great singing voice is a great gift, I believe. One of my favorite and most enduring memories of Christmas is hearing my father, who had a beautiful tenor voice, singing *O Holy Night*.

The story behind that great song is really fascinating. In 1847, Placide Cappeau de Roquemaure was the commissionaire of wines in a small French town. He was a poet and was not a person who was interested in church, so he was most likely surprised when the local priest asked him to write a poem for Christmas mass.

He used Luke's gospel as a guide and imagined what the events of that night in Bethlehem must have been like. Soon, he had completed the *Cantique de Noel*. He decided that it must be more than a poem, that it needed music, so he asked one of his friends, Adolphe Charles Adams to compose music for the piece. He was a well-known musician at the time and received many requests to write music. His work was well received by his friend and the priest, so only three weeks later it was performed at a midnight mass on Christmas Eve.

The song quickly became popular, but then things changed. When Cappeau left the church to become part of the socialist movement and when church leaders realized that Adams did not share the Christian faith, the song was denounced by the church and they declared it was not fit to be used in worship.

Around a decade later an American writer named John Sullivan Dwight brought the song to the attention of an American audience by publishing it in his own magazine. Dwight was an abolitionist and was especially moved by the third verse of the song – *truly he taught us to love one another; his law is love and his gospel is peace. Chains shall he break, for the slave is our brother; and in his name all oppression shall cease.*

In France, though the song had been banned from the church for close to twenty years, many people still sang it in their homes. Legend tells us that on Christmas Eve of 1871, in the midst of fighting between the armies of Germany and France, a French soldier suddenly climbed out of the trench where he was stationed and began to sing *Minuit, Chretiens, c'est l'heure solennelle ou L'Homme Dieu descendit jusqu'a nous*, the opening words to *Cantique de Noel*.

When he finished singing, a German soldier climbed from his trench to sing in return *Vom Himmel noch, da komm' ich her. Ich bring' euch gute neue Mar, Der guten Mar bring' ich so viel, Davon ich sing'n und sagen will*, the beginning of Martin Luther's hymn *From Heaven Above to Earth I Come*. The story continues by telling that for the next twenty-four hours there was no fighting, in honor of Christmas day.

On Christmas Eve of 1906, Reginald Fessenden, who had worked with Thomas Edison, picked up a microphone and, for the first time in history, broadcast the human voice over the airwaves. He read the Christmas story from the second chapter of Luke, and upon completion, picked up a violin and played *O Holy Night*, making it the first song ever broadcast across the airwaves.

<http://www.beliefnet.com/Entertainment/Movies/The-Nativity-Story/The-Amazing-Story-Of-O-Holy-Night.aspx>

I love that story, because it reflects the many twists and turns of the history of *O Holy Night*, a twisting and turning journey that is much like our own lives.

Some of us need a new song. Some of us have been singing a sad song for far too long. Some of us need to sing a song of joy. Allow this Advent to be the time when God gives to you a song of joy!