

Did you know that the beginning of Luke—the narrative of Jesus’ birth—is a musical? The canticle we sang earlier today, the Song of Zechariah, is just one of the songs found in the first few chapters of Luke. We also hear the Magnificat, which is Mary’s song, and the Gloria at Jesus’ birth, to name a few. To be fair, we are the ones who set them to music, but they are poetry, not unlike the poem we heard in the Gospel reading today. That one has also been turned into a song. Fans of Handel’s Messiah may hear in their heads, “Every valley...”

Our reading today introduces the ministry of John the Baptist, and as far as John the Baptist goes, today’s reading is fairly tame. Next Sunday—ironically the Sunday we celebrate Joy—John comes screaming out the gate with “You brood of vipers!” but today the Word of God comes to John and we have a meditation on the work of God in this moment right before the start of Jesus’s ministry.

Every valley shall be lifted and every hill made low. God will come on a highway laid in the desert, and John is the forerunner, part of the work of God to create a path where there was no path, to draw all people to God.

The thing about musicals is there is always a huge cast. That is part of the fun, and it is part of what makes musicals or music in general work. Many people work together to make something none of them could have done alone. Of course there are leads, there are solos, but it is all a part of the fabric of a greater whole, something made possible by many people working together.

That is also the work of the gospel. Jesus is not born all by himself. God comes to Mary and asks her to take part. Mary has the support of Joseph, who needed a nudge from God, and the support of Elizabeth, who was pregnant with John the Baptist at about the same time, along with many others who were never named. Jesus does not start ministry alone. His cousin, whom he may have grown up visiting, John the Baptist begins in tandem, drawing crowds who will eventually follow Jesus. And Jesus does not do ministry alone. He gathers twelve disciples, and he shares his life and ministry with them. The gospel is never lonely. That is part of the point. That is incarnation.

My family has been here this weekend. We gather together about this time every year to make Swedish Christmas cookies together. They are called Klenetter. It is deep-fried dough, more savory than sweet, and spiced with cardamom. In addition to my family, my aunt and my cousin come and join us, and over the course of an entire day, we churn out 98 dozen cookies that will go to 11 different households.

Now, I have made Klenetter on my own before. There has been a time or two when we have not been able to get together and make them. It is nowhere near as daunting, but it is nowhere near as fun either. We could make enough for ourselves, but what we make together is more than just for ourselves. It feeds not only those

who are there, but many who are not. In addition, I think Klenetter tastes as good as it does because we had a great time making it together. We spent the whole day in each other's company, and the cookies are better because of it.

The incarnation, God coming among us, God choosing community is all about the type of joy we find when we come together to make Christmas cookies. It is not enough for God to simply save individuals. The repentance that John and Jesus preach and the salvation that God extends is not individual in nature. God chooses to knit us together in community.

When we choose to follow God, we choose to be baptized into a community. When we celebrate Eucharist, we celebrate it in community. I am not able to consecrate bread and wine on my own. It requires community. That is why I invite the Eucharistic Ministers up to join me at the altar. They symbolize what all of us are doing. We are all joining together to consecrate the bread and wine, then we come forward to receive it together.

All our Christian life is based on community. That is why we choose more and more outreach that links us to other communities. We are meant to share life, to meet real needs, and we only do that when we come close. That is when we are able to help fill in valleys and help bring down mountains, when we work together not only with our own community, but with others. God means for us to come together. The path is made straight, and creation is made right only in community.

In Year C, we get excerpts from Philippians to round out our lectionary readings. Philippians is one of my absolute favorite letters of the New Testament because Paul's love for the church at Philippi is tangible. It is often how I feel about the church myself, and it is definitely how I feel about you here at Christ & Grace. I love Philippians because it is a picture of community as God intended it, sharing together in the work, praying for and lifting each other up. It is a place where God's Kingdom resides, and it is like that because they are willing to share life together.

In Philippians it says, "And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more..." That is my prayer for us. As we begin this new liturgical year, let us rejoice in the community we have here, and let's let our love overflow, opening our arms to everyone.