

Christmas Call and Response

December 24, 2024 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

Rev. J. Michael Solberg

Texts: Luke 2: 8-20

Several weeks ago on a warm September afternoon, getting to know the congregation, I visited one of our older members. We exchanged pleasantries as she greeted me, but when we sat down at a patio table in the courtyard of her apartment complex, within three seconds, she dispensed with the pleasantries and got right to it: “So Mike, I want to get to know you. What makes you tick?” And I’m like, oh, this woman is direct. I guess she has decided that at her age there is no time to waste. This might be the last conversation of my life, and I want it to be a good one. Open the door to someone to bare their soul to you, or end your days watching wheel-of-fortune. Fish or cut bait as they say.

And God bless her. I wish I were more like that. And, there’s no time like the present, right? So, I ask you tonight, what makes you tick? I open the door for you to bare your soul. Well, there’s no time like the present, but there is a time you expect this service to be over, so I am not asking you tonight to say publicly what makes you tick. But I do hope to help you bare your soul to God tonight.

You see, I need to tell you something that will either be good news or bad news, depending on how you hear it. And how you hear it depends on what makes you tick. The news, be it good or bad, is that God is knocking at your door. That’s right, God is knocking at the door of your life. That’s what is unfolding in the scripture readings and songs we are hearing tonight. (do three knocks)

But maybe that’s a little too ominous. We don’t normally associate “ominous” with Christmas, but as you heard in my reading earlier, the shepherds were afraid, seriously afraid when the angels appeared, so ominous does seem to be at least part of the story.

So, I affirm the ominous tone of (knock, knock, knock) and maybe some of you appreciate the honesty of that tone as well. Still, I’m happy to try other ways to draw you into this message.

The news tonight, be it good or bad, is that God is inviting you to dance. Not a line dance, like in the second hour of dancing at a wedding, when people are all dancing side by side, as a group, but still individually, and not a night club dance, where you are people are the floor groovin’, but individually, but a more formal dance – partners, coordinated movement, like ballroom, or east coast swing, or if you get the Dirty Dancing reference, mambo. Yes, God is inviting you to dance a partner’s dance.

But if (knock, knock, knock) is too ominous, maybe the dancing image is too intimidating? Some of us do not like to dance publicly. Still, I think intimidating is there in the story we have heard, but I’ll try yet something else.

The news of tonight, be it good or bad, is that God is calling out for your response. It’s old school collegiate cheerleading – I say fight you say win, fight (win), fight (win), I say Harvard, you say Turkeys, Harvard (Turkeys). Harvard (Turkeys). No, seriously, that’s what a bunch of undergrads are pushing for: the Harvard Turkeys.

Or better, it's like preaching in the Black-church tradition: God is calling out for your response, can I get an amen to that? (Amen.) Say Alleluia if you hear me (Alleluia).

God is knocking at the door and wants you to answer. God is inviting you to dance and wants you to take her hand. God is calling out and wants you to respond. That's what Christmas is all about. Whether it is good news or bad news depends on what makes you tick.

Good news or bad? How could it be bad, you ask? Well, if you think you've got everything figured out, and you're pretty comfortable with the way things are, if you've got your pain well hidden, or your compassion well suppressed, or your shame buried in your soul, well then I'm not sure you want to hear that God is knocking at your door. If you open that door, if you let God in, everything is going to get real, real fast. Your priorities are going to get reset, you'll experience new discomfort at the way things are. Your compassion, not your competitiveness will shape your life. Your pain and shame? It's gonna hurt coming out, but as it is washed away by the love of God, you'll find a peace beyond understanding. Good news or bad?

If God is inviting you to dance, whether you will take her hand depends on you. Do you want to risk making a fool of yourself – a fool, like those who share, rather than accumulate, their wealth? A fool, like those who dare to live with joy and hope, when the prevailing mood is cynicism and self-protection? A fool, like those who believe we can work together for the common good, creating a vibrant world for all from the middle out, and the bottom up, rather than the top down? Good news or bad news?

If God is calling out, whether you respond depends on you. In this time, when some Christians have turned our faith into a political weapon, defending white supremacy and misogyny and transphobia, are you still willing to join with a different type of Christian, and respond to God's call? In this time, when some Christians, the loud ones, refuse to accept queer love, and seem to make close-mindedness a Christian virtue, are you still willing to come and sit in the pew with a different type of Christian, and respond to God's call? Can I get an amen to that? Good news or bad?

This knock at the door, this invitation to dance, this call and response, it's how the story of this night unfolds. In John, the Logos became flesh and dwelt among us, and God waited to see how the world would respond. In Luke, the angel invites Mary to be part of God's rescuing of the world, and waits to see how Mary will respond. In Matthew, the messenger of God invites a highly skeptical Joseph to share the shame of his "virgin" betrothed, and waits to see how Joseph will respond. In the presence of common shepherds, a throng of the heavenly army praises God, calling out, In the highest realms, glory unto God, and on earth, peace unto all of good-will – and that praise hangs there in the night, it echoes in the hills, it spreads throughout the world – and the heavens wait to see how the world will respond.

And then the shepherds show us the way. Although filled with fear initially, they risk opening the door, they take God's hand, they respond to the call: They go to Bethlehem and meet the newborn prince of peace, the Logos who makes sense of the world, Emmanuel, God with us, and as they go back to the fields they are glorifying and praising God – as they go back to the fields they show us the way, and they assure us that what they have seen and heard, what has unfolded before their eyes, is good news indeed. As ominous as it may seem, we can open the door and let God in, as intimidating as it may be, we take God's hand and dance like fools, as different as it may be from all too many Christians today, we can respond to God's call with other followers of Christ who know what a life of glorifying and praising God really looks like. Can I get an amen to that? There you go.

I have to give credit tonight to Edmond Sears, a clergyman from Wayland, just 15 miles west of here. He's the author of the hymn we are about to sing: It came upon a midnight clear. I'm sure I've sung it a hundred times in my life, but I just noticed a few days ago what Sears was doing with this hymn. He presents the story of Christmas as a call awaiting a response.

The thing that came upon a midnight clear was the song of the angels: "Peace on the earth, good will to all, from heaven great news we bring." But the song of the angels, the invitation to be part of a peace filled world, just hangs there in the night, and "still their heavenly music floats O'er all the weary world." Indeed, in 1849, Edmond Sears had the troubles of his own day in mind. The 1840s were filled with revolution and war in Europe, and here, Edmund Sears was aghast at the land grab we call the Mexican-American War, an utterly unnecessary war of choice, in which we seized the whole southwest from Mexico, 10s of thousands died. Edmond Sears was disillusioned by the brutal form that white supremacy took in his day, the dehumanization of slavery, and he was often despondent at the demise of the church in his day.

The third stanza that Edmond Sears wrote is particularly dark, so dark, in fact, that it has been left out of the hymnals in all the churches I've served – until now. We will sing this third stanza tonight, as it goes:

*Yet with the woes of sin and strife
The world has suffered long;
Beneath the angel-strain have rolled
Two thousand years of wrong;
And we, with bitter wars, hear not
The love song which they bring;
O hush the noise, ye ones of strife,
And hear the angels sing!*

Of course, we will also sing the joyful ending of this hymn. For Edmond Sears envisions the day when we hush the noise, open the door, take God's hand to dance, respond to God's call, take up and give back the song which now the angels sing – the day when we respond to the angel's song, with our voices and our lives:

*For lo! the days are hastening on
By prophet bards foretold,
When, with the ever circling years
Shall come the age of gold;
When Peace shall over all the earth,
Its ancient splendors fling,
And the whole world give back the song,
Which now the angels sing.*

(knock knock knock)
(hand out to dance)
Amen?

I see you believe Christmas is good news, and, baring your soul, you will give back the song which now the angels sing. Alleluia.

In the name of the living God, born this night unto us. Amen.

