

Singing in the Season: Go Tell It on the Mountain**Luke 2:8-20****Third Sunday of Advent****December 11, 2011****Rev. René Rodgers Jensen****First Christian Church****Omaha, Nebraska**

8 In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 11 to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. 12 This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." 13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 14 "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" 15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." 16 So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. 17 When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; 18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. 19 But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. 20 The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

It is the least memorable part of the story, the part that gets lost among the more familiar and beloved elements: angels, a star, the stable, the new baby, the anxious parents, and the manger. But it's really one of my favorite parts: *The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God.*

Because this is where the Christmas rubber meets reality road: what do we do, how do we act, when Christmas is over? How do we return? How do we go back to the rest of our lives? Now perhaps it seems strange to be talking **now** about Christmas being over when the big day is still two weeks away, but maybe if we start thinking about it now, we won't end up with our usual post-Christmas hangover as we contemplate heaps of crumpled wrapping paper, stacks of bills, piles of gifts to be returned, decorations to be taken down, diets to be started, and that niggling little voice inside of us that looks around and asks, "Is that all there is?"

Wouldn't it be so much more wonderful this year we were like the shepherds, and returned glorifying and praising God!

Sing: Go tell it on the mountain, over the hill and everywhere...

This is, after all, the real test of Christmas, isn't it? Not the presents, not the lights, not the decorations, not the parties, but who we are after Christmas is over. We all have to go back—back to jobs, back to chores, back to cold winter weather, back to the mundane reality of all the days that aren't the Christmas season. The true test of Christmas is how we go back. Do we go back moaning and complaining and heaving a sigh of relief that thank God it's over for another year?

Or do we, like the shepherds, go back singing songs of praise, ecstatic with joy over the birth of the Christ Child?

***Sing: Go, tell it on the mountain, over the hill and everywhere,
Go, tell it on the mountain that Jesus Christ is born.***

As we continue our Advent/Christmas series on "Singing in the Season" today's carol is "Go, Tell It on the Mountain," this exuberant musical tribute to the shepherds who went back to their sheep singing songs of praises. It is an African-American spiritual, and that we have this spiritual and many others is due to the diligent effort of John Wesley Work and his family. Work was a choir director in Nashville, Tennessee, in the years immediately following the Civil War. One of the few educated African Americans in the South, Work was eager to preserve the culture of southern slaves by preserving their music. He spent years collecting the spirituals that had been composed by black slaves. Work's sons, John Wesley II and Frederick, shared their father's passion and also saved a huge number of spirituals from being forever lost or forgotten.

"Go, Tell It on the Mountain" was one of the spirituals the second generation of Works discovered. Interestingly, it is one of the very few spirituals written about Christmas. As Ace Collins notes in his book about

the stories behind the songs of Christmas, “Most [spirituals], as would seem only natural, centered on earthly pain and suffering, and the joy and happiness that only heaven seemed to offer. Yet here, standing against the backdrop of such haunting spirituals as ‘Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child’ is ‘Go Tell It on the Mountain,’ a triumphant piece that embraces the wonder of the lowly shepherds touched by God at the very first Christmas.”¹

Like most spirituals, the composer is unknown, but we can make some educated guesses. He or she was probably a slave, almost certainly illiterate, and was certainly gifted musically. And clearly this unknown, uneducated man or woman understood the essence of the Christmas story better than any highly educated theologian and infinitely better than me, with my seminary degree and shelves full of books on biblical interpretation. Because for the writer of this spiritual, the Christmas story wasn’t an academic exercise, it wasn’t a theological statement, it wasn’t a pretty picture that you hang on your wall or put on a Christmas card. It was a story about grinding poverty and powerlessness and oppression. It was the story of this slave’s own life. Like the shepherds in the field, he knew

¹ Ace Collins *Stories Behind the Best-Loved Songs of Christmas*. Zondervan Publishing: 2001. P. 50

what it was to be despised by the rest of society. Like Mary and Joseph, she knew what it was to live victimized by the whims of the rich and powerful. Like the infant Jesus, he knew what it was to be born into poverty and from the moment of birth to be in danger of your life. The composer understood the core of the promise of Christ's birth—that in it was to these—the least, the last, the lost, the poor and the powerless that the Christ Child came. Jesus came to people just like this unknown slave; even more Christ came among them as one of them—poor and apparently powerless himself. This was the Good News. The slave composer knew this was news that needed telling.

***Sing: Down in a lowly manger the humble Christ was born,
And God sent us salvation that blessed Christmas morn.
Go, tell it on the mountain, over the hills and everywhere.
Go, tell it on the mountain that Jesus Christ is born.***

The unknown composer of "Go, Tell It on the Mountain" was enslaved and powerless, owning nothing, not even his name—yet he (or she) could write this exuberant, joyful proclamation of Christ's birth because she (or he) understood in a deeply personal way that it was unto such as them that a Child had been born, a Savior given.

The shepherds, poor, marginalized, outcast, didn't return to their hillsides complaining because there were no more angels, or upset because they had to go back to their same old dirty job of watching sheep, or wondering why the world looked so much the same the morning after that miraculous night. Instead, they returned glorifying and praising God.

How will we go back this year? Will we return having captured something of the elation of the shepherds and the faith of an anonymous slave composer? Once the carols have been sung and the presents have been opened and the Christmas dinner has been eaten, will we emerge from Christmas unchanged by Christ's birth? Will we go back bored and cynical, the same as we were before? Or will we take with us some lingering glow from the Christmas star? Will we tuck into our hearts the promise of the Christ Child? Will we let ourselves embrace the real life possibility of the justice and peace and generosity and goodness and forgiveness and reconciliation and hope and joy and love that were born in Bethlehem so long ago, and are waiting to be born in us and in our world today? Will this be the year when Christmas is just the beginning of the celebration because we finally understand, believe, really *know*, that unto

us a Child is born? Will this be the year when we shout the news from the rooftops and tell it on the mountain?

***Sing: When I was a seeker, I sought both night and day
I asked the Lord to help me and he showed me the way.
Go, tell it on the mountain, over the hill and everywhere,
Go, tell it on the mountain that Jesus Christ is born.***