"In Praise of Birth"
A Homily by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May
First Parish in Wayland
December 17, 2017

Before staff meeting each week, I read something short that we reflect on together. Earlier this month, I read an essay by Christian author, Quinn Caldwell. In part, he writes:

> Is there anybody else out there who hates tasteful Christmas decorations? Who's appalled by genteel ornamentation? Who, when faced with a color-coordinated Christmas tree covered in matching ornaments, has to fight the urge to set it on fire just to liven things up a little?
>
> I mean, this is *Christmas* we're talking about, people! *Christmas*! The day that unto us a child is born? The day that made all of heaven sing in wonderment and joy? The day the Creator of all the cosmos *entered history and changed it [forever]*?
>
> This calls for tinsel. . . . Christmas is not a day for restraint; it's a day for blowing the doors off their hinges.

Not only did this reading lead to a very revealing discussion about decorating differences among the staff, it also made me think differently about this morning.

On Music Sunday, we disrupt the normal flow of our Sunday service and let the music expand to fill the hour. And, today, the piece we will hear is a big, celebratory piece. I think Bach would have agreed with Caldwell's call to liven things up. This is *Christmas*—this calls for strings and woodwinds, brass and drums. This calls for a full range of human voices, tempos, and volumes. This calls for music that might just blow the doors off their hinges. *But, really musicians, no expectations...*

The piece is based on a text in the Christian scripture of Luke that is itself a joyous and powerful declaration. Mary has just learned she has been chosen for an extraordinary purpose - to give birth to Jesus, the anticipated messiah, the prophetic leader, who will change everything in her life and in the life of many. She celebrates not only her role in the events, but also the hope for change that this baby brings. This is *good news* and she erupts into a song - a song that has become known in the Christian scripture and tradition as the Magnificat.

While the words we hear sung today will be in a language we may not know, I hope that we will hear in the music the language of joy. Whatever we may or may not believe about the

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divinity of Jesus, the birth of every child is a miracle of life, of new possibilities, of the hope for what may come. The hope of birth is the counterpoint to the sorrow of death. Birth invites us to lean into the unknown future and all that it could bring.

And so, may listening to this piece connect us to our own joy when someone or something is born anew in our lives. May our listening today remind us to celebrate these precious moments of new life - however and whenever they may appear in our lives. May we sing and play and listen without restraint as we join Mary in a song in praise of birth and all the hope that birth carries with it.

So may it be. Amen.

Book: All I Really Want: Readings for a Modern Christmas, *Quinn G. Caldwell, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2014), December 6.*

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