

Make This Christmas Count

“Make Known”

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Digging Deeper

Make This Christmas Count: “Make Known”

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Background Notes

Key Scripture Text(s): Luke 2:9-12; 2:17-18; Matthew 2:11-12; Isaiah 12:4-5; Isaiah 52:7; Luke 1:76-77; Romans 10:13-18

Introduction

Advent, which climaxes in the great Christmas celebration, makes proclamation throughout the story it tells. Advent has something to *say*, to Israel and to the world. Because God’s Son would soon be formed in the belly of Mary through the impregnation of the Holy Spirit, the proclamation was about the humanizing of God and about His new appearance within history. This is a singular story, without precedent, and so it becomes a *sign* to capture the attention of the witnesses who see it. Such sign bears witness to the identity of God not fully known through the words of the ancient Hebrew prophets whose utterances were gestures to this new reality without being the reality itself. From the writer to the *Hebrews* in the New Testament we learn of this new development in the form of proclamation:

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, ² but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. ³ He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high ... (Hebrews 1:1-3).

God spoke “by the *prophets*” but through the promise of Advent He now speaks by a *Son*, Jesus of Nazareth, born of Mary in Bethlehem. His coming is material and visible, thus accessible to the testimony of eyewitnesses who can report his story. That report is the Gospel, the Good News, which bursts the boundaries of all other claims to good news. *This story begs to be made known.* Those who witness it cannot remain silent.

That is certainly true of the first witnesses recognized as Mary, Joseph, Zachariah, Elizabeth, angels, and shepherds in Luke’s telling of the Advent story (Luke 1-2). They are by no means silent for they have such a remarkable story to tell — a story they can now tell *about themselves*. It is *their* story, also. Perhaps the firmest evidence of Gospel truth is the witness of those transformed by the story it tells. What makes possible the kind of lives we see in these people? The biblical record is unanimous in testifying that the coming of Jesus born of Mary, God’s Son, makes such stories possible. Without the events that describe Advent, their story would make no sense. Therefore, Luke is eager to give us his accounts in the Gospel bearing his name, since by them the Good News of Advent is *made known*. He could have easily begun his Gospel by saying, “Wow, do I have a story for you!” What began with the earliest witnesses continues with us, the people who bear the Lord’s name, having received the gift of His Son made known to us by these characters who witnessed the Christmas story.

Our study this week is intent on making known what the original characters made known in their direct encounter with the God who announced the coming of His Son and in the re-telling of those accounts through the words of the evangelists who wrote down their testimony in the Gospels of the New Testament. From their testimony comes God’s invitation for us *to tell the story of our own encounter with Jesus*, born *then* in Bethlehem but *now* in us. Just as Jesus’ life and ministry announced God’s kingdom “in word and deed,” so are also do we.

Among the earliest witnesses was John the Baptizer and then the Twelve appointed by Jesus. In an insightful communication from Jesus during John’s imprisonment for speaking truth to power come these words:

²² And he answered them, "Go and tell John *what you have seen and heard*: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. ²³ And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me" (Luke 7:22-23).

The phrase "what you have seen and heard" echoes throughout the Gospel narratives and then into the teaching literature of the New Testament letters. The form of that testimony begins with Jesus himself:

³¹ The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks about earthly things. The one who comes from heaven is above all. ³² He testifies to *what he has seen and heard* (John 3:31-32).

But Peter and John answered them, "Whether it is right in God's sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; ²⁰ for we cannot keep from speaking about *what we have seen and heard*" (Acts 4:19-20).

¹⁴ Then he said, 'The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear his own voice; ¹⁵ for you will be his witness to all the world of *what you have seen and heard* (Acts 22:14-15).

Not at all detached from their ongoing mission, the witness of the earliest apostles became an invitation for others to join with them in God's new movement made known in Jesus, God's Son:

We declare to you what was from the beginning, *what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands*, concerning the word of life-- ² this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us-- ³ we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ (1 John 1:1-3).

"Life was revealed," writes John, and that life is something "seen" about which "testimony" is given "so that you may have fellowship with us." *That is to say, we make known the life revealed to us so that others may give witness to that life also.* Advent leading to Christmas makes known this life if we avail ourselves of the many storied opportunities to tell others about it, if we reflect back into the world the witness of our lives as light for the world. John writes about a *material and tangible witness*, capable of being heard, seen, and touched by others. The kind of fellowship he imagines does not exist apart from the palpable witness "revealed to us." Fellowship is witness, for it speaks of the *commonness* (Greek: *koinonia*) and solidarity made possible by the Gospel story and its proclamation. When we *make it known*, there opens up a connecting bridge to the hearts of our hearers. That is the great promise of Advent and Christmas, and also their most joyful hope for needy and broken lives.

Among the myriad of imaginative symbols deployed during Advent are the "lights." Shared by Christian and Jews alike, the lighted candles, whether real or virtual, announce an end to the darkness so that the world might see what God is doing once more. For Jews, the miracle of the menorah lit during the triumphant days of the Maccabean victories over their 2nd century BCE oppressors and celebrated during Hanukkah — that miracle reminded a demoralized nation that God remains faithful to His people even when the whole world was against them. For Christians, the majesty of angelic light and the star of Bethlehem lifted the eyes of shepherds and magi alike so that they might see their lives through the eyes of the heavenly Father who shared His Son as the light of the world. Not long after the Bethlehem miracle, Jesus would invite his twelve disciples to embody the truth of the Advent light, made known at Christmas:

¹⁵ No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven (Matthew 5:15-16).

All along, God intended *to make known through His people* this transforming light, foreshadowed in Third Isaiah with a decisive invitation:

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. ² For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. ³ Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. ⁴ Lift up your eyes and look around; ... ⁵ Then you shall see and be radiant ... (Isaiah 60:1-5).

Making this Christmas count requires illumination that reflects the story of Advent, like an angled mirror, back into the world. Ours is a *reflected light* that comes first from Jesus, the Light of the World, but then pivots the lens back toward the mission for which God formed His people in the first the place. We must "arise and shine"

precisely because “the glory of Yahweh has risen upon” us at Christmas. We must make known as witnesses of the light that dispels the darkness — giving testimony to “nations” that will “come to our light,” like the magi. Advent offers us the opportunity to “lift up our eyes and look around” so that we might “see and be radiant,” that we might “know and *make known*.” There can be no passivity in this missional project. There must be intentionality that *plans to tell our stories* as clear instances of the great Advent story which climaxes with the feast of Christmas.

Angels, *Then* Shepherds (Luke 2:9-18)

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. (Luke 2:9-12, 15-18).

What prompted the testimony of the shepherds was the terrifying glory of the angels, followed by the evidence of the child in his manger. Angels bore witness to shepherds, but shepherds bore witness to the angels' message, made concrete by the tangible presence of the baby Jesus with his parents at the manger. The careful lining out of evidence provides later readers like you and me with reliable testimony. The shepherds required an intrusion of angels and their message in order to shed light on the fact and meaning of Jesus' birth. Angels were bringers of messages, as illustrated by the encounters already described in Luke 1. To the witness of the angel Gabriel for the benefit of Zacharias and Mary in *Luke* and that of Joseph in *Matthew*, the writer adds the unmistakable announcement and song of the angels to the shepherds. To ancient Israel, the appearance of repeated angelic visitations to human beings signaled a fresh move of God in the world. Angels brought messages, but they also led worship and fought battles. Calling the angels a “heavenly host” is equivalent to identifying an angel army surrounding the hillsides of Bethlehem. God was on the move in His battle with darkness, announced by the Good News of the heralding angel to the shepherds.

Armed with the testimony and the vision, the shepherds become the bearers of a sacred message for others — a message that left an indelible mark on them, forming them into a people with good news of their own. The witness, say the angels, is “Glory to God *in the highest*” — the true reality that lies beyond and above the world inhabited by shepherds and their flocks. Yet the witness is also “*on earth, peace*” to those under God's favor — the embodied reality found in bright light and audible voices and a baby lying in a manger. What makes the testimony such good news is that the God in the highest is also God on the earth.

By materializing *on earth* the God who is in the highest becomes accessible to even the least, to shepherds, and the baby announced by angels is in fact “born *to you* this day in the city of David.” Both the *when* and the *where* are localized, personalized, and humanized. God does not remain hovering above the world of ordinary existence but is made known as *the God on earth in material form for human beings to see and hear and tell*. In response to this grand drama of God-come-to-earth, the shepherds, who know a great deal about tending flocks and seeking out pastureland, follow their best instincts to “see this thing which has taken place, which has been *made known* to us.” They know that *the witness of angels still requires a witness of people* if the truth of the story they are caught up in is to be told with any credibility. To their great relief and satisfaction, “they went and they found” the truth contained in the original angelic testimony. In this completed circle of testimony is an example for us, having received from the Lord the original witness, we in turn make known the Jesus story through our own story.

Early in the church's history, Peter tells his story to his fellow Jews, who in turn become new living witnesses to the ongoing story made possible by the gift of the Holy Spirit:

³² This Jesus God raised up, and of that *all of us are witnesses*. ³³ Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this *that you both see and hear* (Acts 2:32-33).

Further,

¹⁴ But you rejected the Holy and Righteous One and asked to have a murderer given to you, ¹⁵ and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. *To this we are witnesses* (Acts 3:14-15).

³⁰ The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. ³¹ God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. ³² And *we are witnesses to these things*, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him" (Acts 5:30-32).

³⁹ We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; ⁴⁰ but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, ⁴¹ not to all the people but to us *who were chosen by God as witnesses*, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. ⁴² He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead (Acts 10:39-42).

²⁸ Even though they found no cause for a sentence of death, they asked Pilate to have him killed. ²⁹ When they had carried out everything that was written about him, they took him down from the tree and laid him in a tomb. ³⁰ But God raised him from the dead; ³¹ and for many days he appeared to those who came up with him from Galilee to Jerusalem, and *they are now his witnesses to the people* (Acts 13:28-31).

Consider the *testimony* that began with the shepherds when they witnessed Jesus' birth and then continued into the life and work of the dying and rising Jesus — consider that to be a *chain of witnesses* that grew stronger as each link was forged by the added stories of more people transformed by the self-same message. The baton passes now to our time, to a new *when* and *where*, the certified testimony of the Holy Spirit through you and me, through the community of the church. Together with the shepherds we witness the glory *above* and the Jesus *below*, and then we go and find the truth of the sign about "the Savior, who is Christ the Lord." Paul, in his last letter to Timothy, commissions us to keep the chain of witnesses going and growing:

You then, my child, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus; ² and what you have heard from me *through many witnesses entrust to faithful people who will be able to teach others as well* (2 Timothy 2:1-2).

This is the true apostolic succession, the lively story that produces fresh narratives with faithful testimony to the original story that began on the hillsides of Bethlehem and in the manger where the Christ child was born.

Prequels to the Gospel (Isaiah 12:4-5; Isaiah 52:7; Luke 1:76-80)

⁴ And you will say in that day: Give thanks to the LORD, call on his name; *make known his deeds among the nations; proclaim that his name is exalted*. ⁵ Sing praises to the LORD, for he has done gloriously; *let this be known in all the earth* (Isaiah 12:4-5).

⁷ How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, *who announces salvation*, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns" (Isaiah 52:7).

⁷⁶ And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for *you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways*, ⁷⁷ *to give knowledge of salvation* to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. ⁷⁸ By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, ⁷⁹ *to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace*." ⁸⁰ The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel (Luke 1:76-80).

Between the Advent story and the older story of Israel there is both continuity and discontinuity. From the prophets came the glimmering light of a promised future for Israel. The first division of the book we call *Isaiah* announced the grateful past of God's people. The God of Israel, Yahweh by name, performed notable "deeds among the people," having called Abraham through a covenant promise and then raised up Israel from Egyptian bondage through Moses. From this people He formed a nation to inhabit the land of Canaan, driving out its former occupants and showering blessings on the kingdom of David. To these "deeds" the people are called upon to bear witness and "make known" God's achievements "among the nations" and then "let this be known in all the earth." Israel had been given a world-wide mission, for God "has done gloriously."

When the imperial aggression of Assyria and Babylon disrupted Israel's national life, ending in exile, the same Lord Yahweh opened up the way for return and restoration. To this dramatic development, the third division of *Isaiah* turns its attention to deliverance once more, not unlike the liberation of slaves from Egypt centuries before. This third prophetic voice celebrates the "beautiful feet" of the messenger who announces *shalom*, whose message is called "good news," that is, "the Gospel." Here then is something wholly new, salvation is arriving in Zion God's city. King Yahweh is back in town! The early followers of Jesus grasped this message as discontinuity with the past and the embrace of what Jesus would call "the kingdom of God," in Isaiah's words, "Your God reigns." Jesus *makes known* the fulfillment of what for *Isaiah* was promise. The old story, found in Isaiah's prequel, has reached its climax in the Jesus story.

But we must not forget that other human figure, the immediate prequel to Jesus, a man named John the Baptizer, son of Zachariah and Elizabeth whose birth receives extended treatment in Luke's first chapter. A full reading of that material would benefit the reader, and you are encouraged to reflect on Luke 1. Woven together there is the angelic announcement to Zechariah of John's birth, followed by the annunciation to Mary about Jesus' coming, supported by the counsel of Elizabeth to Mary, affirmed by the arrival of John, and concluded by Zechariah's great prayer of thanksgiving on the birth of his son John. It is a dense chapter with intertwining themes. Each character received fresh revelation from the Lord and therefore has considerable testimony to *make known to others*.

In his thanksgiving prayer, Zechariah addresses his newborn son with prescient words about John's calling as "the prophet of the Most High." John is the prequel to Jesus, "preparing his ways" by giving "knowledge of salvation to his people" about "the forgiveness of their sins." From John's testimony would come the famous witness, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). Above all else the testimony of John to Jesus would make known "the tender mercy of our God." In this phrase we see the faithfulness of God, known in Hebrew as His *hesed*, that covenant loyalty which fulfills the promises made to Abraham and his descendants and to David his king. A further phrase, "the dawn from on high will break upon us" echoes the Isaiah hope of the coming "light for people who sit [and walk] in darkness" (9:1; 42:7). John is the one who will "bear witness to the light" that is Jesus:

⁶ There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. ⁸ He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. ⁹ The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world (John 1:6-9).

From John's perspective, the light is always greater than the witness which reflects the light. "He himself is not the light..." When both John and Jesus reach adulthood, their ministries intersect, and on one occasion the followers of John wonder aloud about the continuing importance of their witness now that Jesus has begun his public ministry. In reply John offers the necessary comparison that elevates the light of Jesus while accepting his own role as the witness to that light:

²⁶ They came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, the one who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you testified, here he is baptizing, and all are going to him." ²⁷ John answered, "No one can receive anything except what has been given from heaven. ²⁸ You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, 'I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him.' ²⁹ He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled. ³⁰ He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:26-30).

What was on that occasion the prequel to the Gospel is a useful guide to the role of our witness to Jesus. When we make known the story of Jesus through the example of our own stories, the net effect on our hearers should be a heightened worship of Jesus and not our own self-importance. We are all prequels to God's main event, His big story made known when Advent climaxes in Christmas, and the Good News finds good soil in listening hearts. We "stand and hear" the voice of the bridegroom and so we rejoice in our testimony of his work in us. At every moment of our witness, *Jesus must increase and we must decrease*.

The Indispensable Witness (Romans 10:13-18)

¹³ For, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved." ¹⁴ But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? ¹⁵ And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" ¹⁶ But not all have obeyed the good news; for Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed our message?" ¹⁷ So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ. ¹⁸ But I ask, have they not heard? Indeed they have; for "Their voice has gone out to all the earth, and their words to the ends of the world" (Romans 10:13-18).

Paul in his letter to the Romans grapples in chapters 9-11 with the problem of Israel's national unbelief in Jesus as Messiah, an unbelief which festered around the edges of church life during the apostle's Gentile mission from Jerusalem to Spain. Paul himself was a Jew, firmly rooted in the traditions of Torah truth, inspired by the poetry of the Writings, and emboldened by the message of the Prophets. As an observant Jew, Paul held fast to the validity of the scriptures handed down by his ancestors, starting with Moses. In these old texts he discovered the meaning of his vision on the road to Damascus where the risen Jesus commissioned him to be the "apostle to the Gentiles," that is, to the nations outside of Judaism. His role was that of a witness — from a Jew to the nations — a mission he gratefully accepted and faithfully executed until his death sometime at the beginning of the 60's CE. God had chosen him, in the words of his letter to the Ephesians:

With all wisdom and insight ⁹ [and] *he has made known to us the mystery of his will*, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, ¹⁰ as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth (Ephesians 1:8-10).

When he writes about "all things" gathered up in Christ, Paul includes the long-separated Jew and Gentile. The mission would ultimately bring him to that sacred task where the nations would flow into Zion in response to the witness Israel would bear to them.

It is to this question of salvation for the unbelieving Jews that Paul turns in Romans 9-11. He does so with optimism found in his opening statement, "Everyone who *calls* on the name of the Lord shall be saved" (10:13). That is good news, but it needs further development as described in the sequence of questions which follow. "How?" Paul asks. *Call* implies *belief*. *Belief* implies *hearing*. *Hearing* implies *proclamation*. *Proclamation* implies *sending* (10:14-15a). At the core of this sequence is the act of *hearing* which comes from the "word of Christ" contained in *the witness of the Gospel — the Gospel made known*. Each of these affirmations is given support from the quoted texts taken from the Old Testament that was read by the Jews. What makes the *hearing* referred to by Paul distinct for him is that it takes the form of "the word of Christ," another way of saying, "the Gospel preached" by the apostles. This Gospel has been heard through the voice of the apostles which "has gone out to all the earth, the ends of the world" (10:18), a direct quote from Psalm 19:4. Wherever the Gospel goes, Paul affirms elsewhere in his letters, *it bears fruit*:

You have heard of this hope before in the word of the truth, the gospel ⁶ that has come to you. Just as it is *bearing fruit and growing in the whole world*, so it has been bearing fruit among yourselves from the day you heard it and truly comprehended the grace of God (Colossians 1:5-6).

Persons call on the Lord *whom they know*, and that implies that there are those who *make known* to them the Gospel. The witness of the church through the lives of its members is the indispensable witness. The goal of witness is fruit-bearing and fruit-multiplying with world-wide consequences. Furthermore, Paul focuses on "bearing fruit *among yourselves*," a specific testimony to the life of *local congregations* like those in Colossae to whom he writes his letter. *Through fruitful congregations, the witness to the Advent Gospel is localized and therefore readily observable by the surrounding community. To that community the "word of truth" receives concrete expression in the actual experience of persons whose lives are formed by it.* People observing the local church have opportunity to see whether the Gospel produces Christ-like persons capable of sustaining a community that is distinctive and worthy of imitation. Given that enormous opportunity, Advent which climaxes in Christmas holds the promise of fruitful witness that distinguishes the church from the commercialism of the surrounding culture. What the church makes known is that the Christ of Christmas known through the Gospel is the "power of God for salvation to all who believe..." (Romans 1:16). *Making this Christmas count means bearing the indispensable witness through fruitful lives found nowhere else than the community where Jesus is Lord, both in word and in deed.*

Paul reminds the Romans that it is “the *name* of the Lord” that saves us. Therefore, Paul is confident that persons may call on that name, believe in that name, hear that name, proclaim that name, and be sent with that name. It is, after all, *the name above every name* (Philippians 2:9-11), worthy of worship and power for witness. Bearing witness to such a name involves us in a life-long obedience to the best good news — news so good that people have a hard time believing it can be true (10:16 compare Isaiah 53:1). To be silent in the presence of such a name poses a deep moral question: “What are we waiting for? Don’t we want others to know? After all, the word we speak is not our own, but ‘the word of Christ!’” What better time than during the Christian calendar to renew our baptismal vows and receive the promise of Isaiah, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!” (Romans 10:15 compare Isaiah 52:7). With good news on our lips and agile feet on the mountains, could we imagine any better vocation than the one whose “voice has gone out to all the earth”?

A word about “beautiful feet”... In the ancient world most people traveled on foot, especially across uneven dusty terrain, following the shortest distances to urgent places. Feet beaten by the unforgiving ground are hardly beautiful in any aesthetic sense, covered by dust and scarred with rocks. They are, however, beautiful in their *swiftness* attained by the herald who runs with good news. In the Hebrew, Third Isaiah uses the word *nā’weh*, an expression describing “beautiful” and also “suitable, befitting.” They are beautiful through the *message they bear*. They are beautiful when the words *bring good news*, as is the case with Isaiah’s messenger. Whatever the adversity that brought the messenger to his audience, *the benefit and outcome* of the message when received by the listeners anoints his words with beauty. On feet depends the weight and balance of the body. With feet comes mobility, agility, poise, stance, and symbolic determination. St. Paul attributed to feet the good news of Jesus:

As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace (Ephesians 6:15).

At the Last Supper, it was the feet of his disciples that Jesus washed, an act of supreme love of the Master to his servants so that they might in turn, for the sake of the Gospel, do the same for each other:

¹⁴ So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵ For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. ¹⁶ Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. ¹⁷ If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them (John 13:14-17).

It was in this act of reciprocation through the foot-washing that Jesus invested his followers with his love for the world through them. And so he concludes the truth of such washing with the words:

³⁴ I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵ *By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another*” (John 13:34-35).

We *make known* the truth of Advent and Christmas precisely at the point where we make known what the life of Jesus looks like when lived out as messengers with beautiful feet in service to one another.

Conclusion

In the lost history of Christmas carol composition, poets discovered fresh inspiration from the biblical texts, which were themselves commonly written in Hebrew poetry. Not all these poets were known and yet often reflected a growing hymnody from the community life of the marginalized. The carol we know as “Go Tell It On the Mountain” easily falls into that scenario, deriving its theme from Isaiah 52:7, read in the context of the Gospel preached by Paul in Romans 10. It was left to John Wesley Work, Jr. in 1907 to publish for common use in hymnals the standardized lyrics used in our congregations. His edited version reads like this:

Refrain

*Go, tell it on the mountain,
Over the hills and everywhere
Go, tell it on the mountain,
That Jesus Christ is born.*

1. While shepherds kept their watching
Over silent flocks by night
Behold throughout the heavens
There shone a holy light.

Refrain

2. The shepherds feared and trembled,
When lo! above the earth,
Rang out the angels chorus
That hailed the Savior's birth.

Refrain

3. Down in a lowly manger
The humble Christ was born
And God sent us salvation
That blessed Christmas morn.

Refrain

John Wesley Work, Jr., may not have originated the Negro spiritual “Go, Tell It on the Mountain,” but he can take credit for the fact that we still sing it every Christmas. As the son of a church choir director, Work grew up in Nashville loving music. Even though he earned his Master's in Latin and went on to teach ancient Latin and Greek, his first love continued to be music, and he went on to become the first African-American collector of Negro spirituals. This proved to be a daunting task for Work because they were passed down orally, from plantation to plantation; very few were ever written down. But Work proved up to the challenge, publishing his first book, *New Jubilee Songs as Sung by the Fisk Jubilee Singers*, in *Songs of the American Negro*, six years later. It was in this second volume that “Go, Tell It on the Mountain” first appeared. The original singers of the song fulfilled the same important task the angels gave the shepherds that first Christmas night outside of Bethlehem, proclaiming, “that Jesus Christ is born!” And thanks to John Wesley Work, so can we.¹

C. Michael Hawn, in *History of Hymns*, describes the spiritual chemistry which birthed this well-loved carol. He points out that Work's version is a much condensed version, since the poetry grew over time. It grew because the words came from the shared experienced of a people whose struggles and triumphs were formed in the life of a church within the nation we call America. Such a people had no choice but to “make known” their story, shaped by the national story of a majority community supported by the violence of slavery. Who can remain silent in the face of that injustice? Where else could African Americans go to re-form their story but to the good news on the mountain tops where feet are beautiful and the view is breath-taking. Like Martin, they must have felt like Moses: “I've been to the mountain top and have seen the promise land.” How can a people keep silent when there is such a story to be told?

Hawn in his own words continues:

“Go, tell it on the mountain” provides the opportunity to tell the story of how singing African American spirituals saved a university.

The Fisk Jubilee Singers (drawing their name from Leviticus 25—the year of jubilee) were founded as a ten-member touring ensemble to raise funds for debt-ridden Fisk University. Taking the entire contents of the University treasury with them for travel expenses, they departed on October 6, 1871, from Nashville on their difficult, but ultimately successful eighteen-month tour, a triumph that is still celebrated annually as Jubilee Day on the campus. Though not the original repertoire of the group, by the time they reached New York in December of that year, their concerts grew to include more and more spirituals, until their program consisted primarily of

¹ Bill and Gloria Gaither, *The Gaither Homecoming Bible* (Thomas Nelson, 2012).

choral arrangements of spirituals or, according to African American scholars C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya, “anthemized spirituals.”

They have been credited with keeping the Negro spiritual alive. Spirituals scholar Sandra Jean Graham places this development in context: “The students were at first reluctant ambassadors for the songs of their ancestors. As [Jubilee] singer Ella Sheppard recalled, ‘The slave songs were never used by us then in public. They were associated with slavery and the dark past and represented the things to be forgotten. Then, too, they were sacred to our parents, who used them in their religious worship . . . It was only through persuasion that the students sang their spirituals privately for [the University’s treasurer, George L.] White [who was a white man], and through White’s coercion that they sang them in concert.”

Taking the spiritual to white and black audiences in the United States and Europe earned the school and the spiritual an international reputation. The small ensemble of two quartets and a pianist grew to a full choral ensemble. Other historically black colleges eventually followed the same pattern, including Howard University (Washington, D.C.) and Tuskegee Institute (now University, Tuskegee, Alabama).

The earliest version of the spiritual appeared in in *Religious Folk Songs of The Negro, as Sung on The Plantations*, new edition (1909) with the heading “Christmas Plantation Song” with different stanzas and in slave dialect:

*When I was a seeker
I sought both night and day.
I ask de Lord to help me,
An’ He show me de way.*

*He made me a watchman
Upon the city wall, [a reference to Isaiah 21:11-12]
An’ if I am a Christian
I am the least of all.*

*Chorus:
Go tell it on de mountain,
Over de hills and everywhere.
Go tell it on de mountain,
Dat Jesus Christ is born.*

A few smaller and less broadly circulated versions use these stanzas or a variation, for example, “When I was a sinner . . .”

African Canadian composer R. Nathaniel Dett (1882-1943) added another harmonization and stanza in the volume he edited, *Religious Folk-Songs of the Negro As Sung At Hampton Institute* (1927). His stanza follows:

*If you cannot sing like Angels,
If you cannot pray like Paul,
You can tell the love of Jesus,
You can say he died for all.*

Dett’s stanza, or some version of it, is now most commonly associated with the spiritual, “There is a balm in Gilead.”

John Wesley Work, Jr. (1872?-1925), along with his brother Frederick Jerome Work (1878?-1942), led the Fisk Jubilee Singers from 1898-1904. Baptist hymnologist William J. Reynolds cites recollections by John Wesley Work, Jr.’s son about the role of “Go, tell it” on the campus: “[John Wesley Work, III] took pleasure in recalling his early days as a child on the campus of Fisk University where his father was a teacher. Very early on Christmas morning, long before sunrise, it was then the custom for students to gather and walk together from building to building singing [“Go, tell it on the mountain].”

Concert arrangements of spirituals were published in Frederick Work's New Jubilee Songs, as Sung by the Fisk Jubilee Singers (1902), a collection that may have been co-edited by John Wesley Work, though his name does not appear in this collection. "Go, tell it" appears in another collection for solo voice and four-part choir edited by John Wesley Work, III (Work, Jr.'s son) in American Negro Songs and Spirituals: a Comprehensive Collection of 230 Folk Songs, Religious and Secular (1940).

Drawing on an adaptation of the Work brothers' setting, The Pilgrim Hymnal (1958), edited by Hugh Porter (1897-1960), professor in the Sacred Music Department at Union Seminary (New York), was the first mainline hymnal to include the spiritual. John Wesley Work's stanzas based on Luke 2:8-20 have become the standard versions in hymnals:

*While shepherds kept their watching . . .
The shepherds feared and trembled . . .
Down in a lowly manger . . .*

From this hymnal, versions of "Go, tell it" have spread to the point that it has become one of a "canon" of spirituals found in virtually every hymnal today.

John Wesley Work, Jr. (sometimes designated John Wesley Work II to distinguish him from his son) received his master's degree from Fisk University, and after further study at Harvard, began teaching Latin and Greek at the University in 1898. He trained the Jubilee Singers and was a leader in preserving and performing African American spirituals. He taught at Fisk University until 1923 when he was relieved of his duties due to changing attitudes toward the spiritual. He then went on to be President of Roger Williams University in Nashville until his death in 1925.

UM Hymnal editor Carlton R. Young notes African American theologian James H. Cone's interpretation of this spiritual. Dr. Cone states that "the conquering King, and the crucified Lord . . . has come to bring peace and justice to the dispossessed of the land. That is why the slave wanted to 'go tell it on de mountain.'"

William Farley Smith (1941-1997), who provided arrangements for most of the spirituals in The United Methodist Hymnal (1989), adapts Work's arrangements and, according to Dr. Carlton Young, "tastefully embellishes the chorus and the end of the verses with the blue note, chromatic turns, and the turn-of-the-century male quartet textures and voice leadings. It improves but does not abandon [Hugh] Porter's European setting."

Other versions of this spiritual have been adapted to fit specific situations. For example, during the Civil Rights movement, the following was sung in Alabama:

*I wouldn't be Governor Wallace,
I'll tell you the reason why,
I'd be afraid He might call me
And I wouldn't be ready to die.*

The spiritual has inspired works in other media. Author James Baldwin's (1924-1987) first major work and semi-autobiographical novel was titled *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953). The novel discusses the role of the paradoxical church as experienced by African Americans, both as the incubator for repression and hypocrisy and as a foundation for hope, identity, and community. The ABC network produced a movie using this title in 1984.

Regardless of which version that is sung, "Go, tell it on the mountain" has become a truly American contribution to the telling of the Christmas story that is now sung around the world.²

The Christmas carol sojourns in a strange land. I say this because we hear the holy refrains of the Gospel in malls, on sidewalks, and from media outlets during the Advent season. Merchants know that getting people in

² <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-go-tell-it-on-the-mountain>

“the Christmas spirit” requires the familiarity of traditional forms and rituals. We may still snuggle in the arms of modernity, but our lullabies remain the voices told on the mountain, at the manger, along the hillside, taking our company with the imaginative scenes of shepherds, magi, angels, innkeepers, and the holy family. No matter the paradox of the carol and the commercialism, the message still “goes out to all the earth, the ends of the world.” God must have a sense of humor to bless the ironies of our Christmas business. He clearly spares no energy on us in “getting the Gospel said” so that everybody hears it. *He desires to make the story known*, through us, the pilgrims of a storied life which we share with those who first sang “Go tell it on the mountain.” They became the faithful messengers of the older traditions of angels and shepherds and magi, of Joseph and Mary, of Zachariah and Elizabeth, of John and Jesus, of Peter and Paul. Like them, our situation makes possible a fresh proclamation through a strange message of self-less love and redeeming grace for Adam’s race. The world make seem to grow numb to the promise of more good news, made known by that odd little community called Christians. Yet the prophets and bards of the Jesus story continue to remind us that making the good news known is the work of a lifetime, a century, a millennium, well into eternity. For the word keeps being given and being heard, for there will always be messengers with beautiful feet who make it known. May we this Advent, this Christmas, join their tribe and make the word known. Ours is still *the gospel for everyone*, for “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

To God Be the Glory! Amen!