

Epworth Chapel on the Green
December 24, 2012
Christmas Eve
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 9:2-7
Psalm 96
Titus 2:11-14
Luke 2:1-20

The great classical cellist Pablo Casals, in his life story entitled *Joys and Sorrows*, tells the story of his first memory of attending worship on Christmas Eve. He was just five years old, and he walked hand-in-hand with his father to a church in a small village in Spain, where his father was the church organist.

Casals notes that as he walked with his father, he shivered. The shivering was not so much because the night was cold, though it was quite cold that evening. Pablo was shivering because the atmosphere and spirit that evening was (in his words) "electric," and "mysterious."

Casals notes, "I felt that night that something wonderful was about to happen. High overhead, the heavens were full of stars, and as my father and I walked in silence I held tightly to my father's hand. In the dark, narrow streets there were moving figures, shadowy and spectral and silent, moving quickly and silently into the church. My father played the organ, and when I sang, it wasn't so much me, but it was really my heart that was singing. I poured out everything that was within me."

I've been thinking about Casals' experience today. I am especially drawn to his statement where he says, "when I sang, it was really my heart that was singing." Casals was only a small child. And Mary, when she sang her *Magnificat* that we looked at yesterday, was also a very young girl.

It seems to me that when we are young, our hearts are more free, more open. But as we grow older and we live and move and have our being and we make our way in the world, it can become easy for the joy -- *the joy deep in our hearts* -- to slip away, to erode slowly under the weight of disappointment, disease, death, and the cares of life.

It's one thing to sing from deep within your heart when you are five years old like Pablo Casals. It's another thing altogether when you are thirty, or forty, or fifty, or beyond.

But part of the message of this night is that the joy that erupted from that little five year old boy's heart in a small village in Spain -- that same joy can pour out of our hearts as well, no matter our age.

I'd like to think that this is what happened to the shepherds who were out tending their flocks in the cold night air so long ago. Luke tells us that these men returned to their flocks, "praising and glorifying God for all they had seen and heard."

I'd like to think that the praise and glory that arose on that night was not just the shepherds singing, but their *hearts* that were singing. I'd like to think that, like

little Pablo Casals, *everything within those shepherds poured out of them that night.*

This joy that Pablo Casals describes, as wonderful as it is, cannot be contrived or forced or summoned at will. It is, it seems to me, a gift of grace.

And so on this Christmas Eve, and during this Christmas season, my prayer is that God will draw near to us, as he did to the shepherds and to Pablo Casals. May He draw so near to us that we cannot help but sing. And when we sing, may *it really be our hearts* that are singing. For when we sing, here is what we proclaim:

Do not be afraid, for I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all people. Today in the city of David a Savior has been born to you, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:10-11).

May the peace of Christ be with you all and dwell in your hearts tonight and always.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.