I love Christmas carols. I really love them. I love them so much that I won't listen to them before December. That means I avoid those radio stations that, as soon as Halloween is over, start to play Christmas music 24 hours a day. And I know that if I listened to Christmas carols all through November, that by the time Christmas Day rolled around, I would be so sick of Christmas music that I would grow to hate the carols that I love. But I still love Christmas carols.

But there's a problem with some of the carols. Those of you who have been to the church Christmas program the last two years have seen the results of the kids learning about Christmas. About the real Christmas. They've learned that Jesus wasn't born in the year 1, but according to our calendar, about 4 B.C. And they've learned that Mary didn't ride a donkey on her journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, at least not that the Bible ever mentions. And they've learned that we don't really know how many wise men there were, that the scripture never mentions how many wise showed up to visit Jesus. And when they did come, they didn't come to a manger, but they visited him in a house. There's lots of assumptions we make about the Christmas story that are just not supported by the accounts in the Bible. Some of them might come from the Christmas carols that we sing. One of my favorites is "Angels We have heard on high, sweetly singing o'er the plains." Right? No, not really. The Bible says that there was a heavenly host—which means an army, not a choir, who praised God, saying. It never says that they sang. And "Away in a Manger" The little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes. I don't believe that one for a minute. If he was a real, human baby, which we proclaim that he was, then he cried. You'd better believe that he cried. And look at what they say about Mary. Jill Duffield, in an article in Presbyterian Outlook this week writes: "Silent Night, Holy Night!" - one of the most popular Christmas carols - describes Mary as "yon virgin." Another, "Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming" calls her "the virgin mother kind." And "Once in Royal David's City" tells us "Mary was that mother mild." Then, "In the
Bleak Midwinter" has Mary "in her maiden bliss" worshipping Jesus "with a kiss." Finally, "Gentle Mary Laid Her Child" reveals in the title the assessment of Mary's demeanor: gentle. It is no wonder then, when we envision Mary, we picture meek, mild, gentle, young and vulnerable. Artists through the ages depict Mary as either the maiden terrified by the angel at the annunciation or the new mother cradling her baby in bliss. But we just read Mary's song, the Magnificat, and that doesn't sound meek and mild to me. Women blessed by God tend toward the bold and audacious, the brave and risk taking. When God calls upon them to participate in the salvation of their people, they do not just acquiesce, they take charge. Hannah, Jael, Judith and Mary, all most blessed among women, through the calling of God are not bound by cultural constraints, nor are they merely passive vessels through whom the Spirit works. Mary's souls magnifies the Lord as she sings about the coming great reversal where God scatters the proud and brings down the mighty. The world is about to turn and Mary, like Hannah and Jael and Judith before her, helps it pivot.

The women that God uses throughout history to bring about his purposes, tells us something about the way our God works. A few years ago, Erin and I had the chance to visit Bethlehem. We were there in January which meant we were still there during the Christmas season because the Orthodox Church celebrates Christmas on January 6, not on December 25th. I remember walking from our hotel up to Manger Square, the site of the Church of the Nativity, marking the place of the stable where Jesus was born. And as we were walking with many other pilgrims from many other countries and we walked through the winding streets with lots of people out in the market place, about half Muslims and half Christians, and I thought of the line from one of my favorite carols, "O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie." Not really. This was a bustling place. But a century and a half ago it really wasn't like that. On Christmas Eve of 1865, a young Episcopal priest named Phillips Brooks was visiting the Holy Land and approached Bethlehem on horseback. He arrived in time to attend worship at the ancient Church of the Nativity. The simplicity and beauty of the service made a lasting

2 Duffield.
impression on him. Three years later, Brooks was the rector of Holy Trinity Church in Philadelphia. Knowing that Brooks liked to write poetry, the children of the church asked him to write a new Christmas song for them. The memory of his Christmas Eve in Bethlehem came rushing back, and he penned the words in a single evening. Then on Christmas morning of 1868 the little children of Holy Trinity first sang the song, “O Little Town of Bethlehem.” In the years after that, Phillips Brooks became one of the great preachers of the nineteenth century. He became known as the Prince of the Pulpit. After he was in Philadelphia, he became the pastor of Trinity Church in Boston and then bishop of Massachusetts. He published many sermons and his first collection of sermons that was published in 1878 sold more than 200,000 copies. Have you ever read any of them? Me neither. But every year we sing his word in that well beloved carol. The words he wrote for the little children of his church in Philadelphia outlasted any of the other words he wrote. And I think that may be Micah's point as well. The coming of the Messiah happens not in Jerusalem, not in the world capitals, not among the rich and famous, but God's kingdom comes into this world in the little places, in the lives of the meek and the poor. How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given. So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven. And maybe it's that way with us as well. Maybe it's the things no one really notices. Maybe it's what we do for the children. Maybe it is something you will do today. Nothing big, because the kingdom comes in little towns, in little ways. In the encouraging word that you give. In the forgiveness that begins today in your heart. In the little gift you give to the Salvation Army or the Red Cross or the church. In the time that you just decide to show up—for that meeting, for worship, at that funeral, to visit that person. You don't have to, but you show up. And maybe no one knows it but you. Because how silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given. Even when you give yourself.

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3 Taylor, Nancy. *Feasting on the Word. Year C Volume 1*, p. 78.