

Sermon: The Bare Essentials
Text: Luke 1:46-55
Date: December 18, 2016
Context: WWPC
Third Sunday of Advent
By: Rev. Dr. Steve Runholt

And Mary said, 'My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.'

Luke 1:48

When she woke up on the morning of January 24, 1975, Vera Brandes had no idea that before the day was over, she would be party to a miracle. At the tender age of just seventeen, Vera was the youngest professional-level concert promoter in her homeland of what was then West Germany.

It wasn't her fault that everything went wrong on that remarkable night. That is, things did not go sideways just because Vera was young and inexperienced. It must also be said that she herself did not perform the miracle as such, but she did play a central role in the proceedings.

She had booked a concert in the legendary Opera Hall in Köln, Germany (that's Cologne in English), featuring the great improvisational pianist, Keith Jarrett.¹

Vera was inexperienced but she was conscientious and she thought she had done everything right. At Mr. Jarrett's request, she had selected a Bösendorfer 290 Imperial concert grand piano for the performance.

And that's where things went wrong. Evidently, the opera house staff found another Bösendorfer piano backstage – a much smaller baby grand than the one Keith Jarrett was expecting to play later that night.

1. This story can be found in multiple locations on the Web. I drew from the episode "Embrace the Chaos" on NPR's Hidden Brain podcast.

But it was a Bösendorfer and, so, assuming it was the one Vera had requested, the staff placed it on the stage. Unfortunately, they placed it there too late to correct the error and get a replacement piano delivered in time for the concert.

And that's when things went from bad to worse. Not only was this particular piano smaller than the one Keith Jarrett expected to play later that evening, it was in terrible condition. By any reasonable standard it was wholly unsuited for a concert performance and nearly unplayable altogether.

It was out of tune. The foot pedals were faulty and unreliable. The felt on the hammers on the keys in the upper register was almost completely worn away causing high notes to sound tinny and unpleasant. And the sound from the bass register was thin, so not really bass-like at all.

Under almost any other circumstances Mr. Jarrett would understandably have refused to play such an instrument before a live audience. And in fact he came within a whisker of canceling the concert.

But the venue was sold out and the expectations were high. Then he looked at Vera. When he saw the pained and pleading look on her face, he realized he could not do this to her. So he agreed to play.

Keith Jarrett swallowed his fears about what might happen, what probably would happen, and took the stage before an audience of 1,400 eager and highly sophisticated music patrons.

And here is a little taste of what happened: (Click on podcast version for audio selection from the concert.)

The performance lasted a little over an hour. When Mr. Jarrett was finished playing, the late-night crowd gave him a thunderous ovation that went on for several minutes.

Luckily, EMI, Mr. Jarrett's record label, recorded the concert, and a double album of the live performance was released later that fall.

The record was called, simply, *The Köln Concert* and it went on to become the best-selling solo album in jazz history, and the best-selling solo piano album of all-time, with sales of more than 3.5 million.

So to review, on the night of January 24, 1975, Keith Jarrett sat down at a piano he was not expecting to play, an instrument in such bad shape it was barely suitable for a kindergartener to play, and in front of a live audience of 1,400 highly sophisticated music patrons, he produced a live performance that made history and is universally considered to be an improvisational masterpiece without rival.

How did this happen?

Well, part of the answer, surely, is that Keith Jarrett is a musical genius. Plus he came prepared. He had put in the work and was the best improvisational pianist of his or any generation. But that would have been true regardless of the piano he happened to play that night.

The part of the story is that is most relevant to this sermon, that part that is relevant to the question of how miracles happen, is that Keith Jarrett's expectations for what was going to happen that night were completely disrupted.

Had Mr. Jarrett played the concert on the Bösendorfer concert grand piano he was expecting to play, I'm sure the recording would have been splendid, like any Keith Jarrett concert.

Instead something better happened. He was met with an unexpected challenge, one that required him to dramatically adjust his performance that night. He was forced to rely on different keys than he ordinarily would have played, and to use different techniques than he regularly used to get the most out of the limited range available to him.

In short, because Mr. Jarrett's expectations were completely blown, he had to go off script. He had to dig deep into a well of creativity that would otherwise have gone untapped. And because of that, he produced a musical miracle--a jazz masterpiece rendered on what was essentially an unplayable piano.

I happen to believe that miracles do still occur in our world. Each one is different and each one occurs in a specific context, under different conditions with unique particulars. But when you boil them all down to their basics, to their bare essentials, we may find two basic ingredients common to them all

And the Köln Concert highlights the first one: blown expectations.

If we're never forced outside of our comfort zones, never forced to dig deep and tap into our deepest reservoirs of resolve and determination and creativity, nothing will ever change. The only things we'll achieve are the same things that we've already achieved, the things we've seen before and done before and heard before.

The second essential component of miracles comes from the Christmas story itself, not the section I read, which we'll come back to in a moment, but from the opening scene as it comes to us in Luke's gospel.

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And the angel said to her, 'Fear not, Mary.'

Whether you're a world class pianist about to play a concert in one of the world's most prestigious concert halls on a broken down piano, or whether you're an unsuspecting young maiden living in the country, tapped to play a role in God's own arrival on the world's stage, for miracles to happen, you've got to transcend your fears.

And if you don't believe that, you should ask Rick Fox. I first heard his story on an NPR podcast called Invisibilia, which I commend to you highly. (The episode is called the New Norm.)

Here's a little part of the story:

In 1997, Shell Oil company began construction on what was then (and may still be for all I know) the most complex off shore oil rig in the world. The rig was called Ursa, and it was located in such deep water as to boggle the mind. When complete, the oil would be pumped up from the ocean floor, some 4000 feet below the surface.

At the time, deep water oil rigs were even more dangerous than they are now, and they are still plenty dangerous. There were just so many moving parts, so many variables, so many things that could go wrong, that accidents were common, including fatal accidents. And this was the most complex rig of all.

Now enter Rick Fox. Shell tapped the veteran oil man to be bring Ursa online. Not surprisingly Mr. Fox was a highly experienced, high capable leader. I imagine that, ordinarily, he was one of those men who radiate competence and confidence.

But when it came to Ursa he focused on the negatives: the engineering challenges posed by the extreme conditions, the technical complexities of the project in general.

As he put it, “Something needed to change if Ursa was going to be built and operated safely.”

What Rick Fox didn’t know at the time is that the something in question was him.

In part because of Rick’s skepticism, progress on Ursa was slow. So slow in fact that Shell brought in a consultant to see if she could break through the negativity and get the project on track.

Her name was Claire Nuer. Claire was a Holocaust survivor who grew up in Paris. She was a diminutive woman who’d lost an eye to cancer. She also believed she could literally move clouds with her mind. So, sort of like Yoda, if Yoda was a tiny, one-eyed Jewish woman from France.

The two met, Claire and Rick. When Rick started talking about technical problems like drilling schedules, Claire quickly realized he was not dealing with his real problem, and she told him so.

Oh yeah, what’s that?

The real problem is your fear.

In Claire’s opinion, if the Ursa project was going to succeed, Rick Fox needed to transcend his fear that he was not up to the task ahead of him.

But that was a big ask, so Claire started smaller. She started with his relationship with his son, Roger. Like many fathers and sons, Rick and Roger had slowly become estranged.

The two men were so different they simply could not understand one another. Through hard experience they had become afraid that ordinary conversations would blow up into something else, something more lasting and more damaging.

Still, Claire insisted that they sit down and face their fears, literally. They took up seats across from one another. And there they sat in stony silence until, finally, Roger spoke the truth he'd always been too afraid to say to his dad: *You are intolerant of weakness and that makes me afraid of you.*

Rick knew it was true the instant he heard it. *Yeah, that would be me,* he replied.

That simple conversation transformed Rick's relationship with his son. And that's when the light went on. He realized that if one honest conversation could cut through eighteen years of family tension, buried under and protected by a thick layer of fear, then that might be just what was needed for the Ursa project to succeed.

For it turns out Rick wasn't alone in his fear that he was not up to the challenge before him. His whole team felt the same way.

So, under Claire's guidance, Rick and his team sat down and began to face their fears.

These were hard men, oil men. They weren't accustomed to sharing their feelings. But once one man did it, others followed suit.

They told stories of failed relationships and alcoholic parents. They talked about how they were hungry as children. "It felt vulnerable," one person said. "You put your personal life out there for everybody to hear and everybody to see."

Clearly this was uncomfortable work for these men. But they persisted, and, yes, they drilled deeper still, down beneath their fears into an untapped reservoir of honesty and trust.

Tommy Chreene, a tough man with a tougher reputation, broke down and wept before the group as he talked about his son's terminal illness. "I was weeping like a baby," he said. "And nobody ever come to me and said, 'Aw, you big crybaby.' "

Not everyone was convinced. Skeptics claimed the men were becoming more like women, talking about their feelings. But they hadn't become more feminine. They had become more themselves.

That was the real miracle, the first miracle. And, yes, the openness and honesty the team had achieved unlocked their ability to finish the work on Ursa and bring the rig online.

Before, these men spent a huge part of their emotional energy, a huge part of their professional energy, on protecting themselves: protecting who they'd always known themselves to be, protecting the way they had always done things.

But Claire changed all that. Now they weren't just sharing feelings, they were cultivating a new way to operate. They were exchanging technical information, some of it garnered by the kind of failure that took courage to admit. *Hey that doesn't work. I know because I tried that and almost lost a finger. I almost lost my job.*

I share these stories because preparing for Christmas can feel a little bit like building a deep water oil rig. There's all sorts of engineering challenges and technical obstacles to overcome. The lights, the food, the presents, the tree, the cards, the in-laws. It's hard work and you may feel like you're not up to the challenge.

And because perhaps this year especially you may also be dealing with a host of blown expectations--for what the future looks like: your own or this country's. Or what Christmas was supposed to look like, with sudden illness (perhaps yours), or your daughter's work obligations derailing your plans to celebrate this joyous holiday together with your loved ones.

So instead you're spending your energy keeping your grief or your fear at bay. Smiling and pretending to be happy when joy feels like it's four thousand feet below the surface, way down at the bottom of your personal ocean.

If that's so, take heart, friends! Maybe those are precisely the conditions necessary to experience a Christmas miracle.

A young maiden is quietly going about her business out in her little village when she receives news that will fundamentally change her life, news that terrifies her and blows her expectations for her future to smithereens.

But she swallows her fears, adjusts her expectations. She rises to the challenge and takes the stage. And this is what it sounds like:

*My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.*

*Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.*