

Christmas Eve—Psalm 96
Church of the Good Shepherd
The Rev. W. Terry Miller
December 24, 2023

A Time for Singing

“Sing to the LORD a new song,” the psalmist intones. “Sing to the LORD, all the earth.”

Christmas is a time for singing—a midwinter’s season of joyful music. And the songs of Christmas are among the best-known in the world. “Away in a manger,” “The First Noel,” “Silent night”—everyone seems to know the words to these songs. We can all sing along—in fact it’s hard not to! Christmas wouldn’t be Christmas without music.

Indeed, one of the first signs of the approaching holiday each year is the arrival of Christmas songs—those incessantly happy jingles—playing in retail stores everywhere. You know, no other season has its own soundtrack as Christmas does, and we learn the songs early. When I was a child, I had a little portable cassette tape player that I used to play Disney Sing-along carols for weeks leading up to Christmas. I don’t know what it did, how it warped my musical sensibilities, that my first exposure to Christmas music came in the form of carols sung by Mickie and Minnie Mouse and Donald Duck! Still, I am convinced that the only true version of “The Twelve Days of Christmas” is the one that includes Goofy belting the refrain, “*Five onion rings!*” I mean, those are the *original* words for the fifth day of Christmas, right, not five *golden* rings, but five *onion* rings?

Over the years, of course, one begins to distinguish the serious, sacred songs from the holiday fluff, cherished classics from the contemporary ditties that festoon our Christmas frivolities—the “Holly Jolly Christmases,” “Deck the Halls,” and “Jingle Bell Rocks” of the season. There is a difference, we recognize, between songs that aspire to the transcendent and songs that so help you, if you hear them one more time, you swear you’ll go crazy!

Yet, even the traditional tunes can feel tired and threadbare after being overplayed for weeks. You *can* have too much of a good thing, especially if it inures us, numbs us to the joys of Christmas. That is in fact the reason last year I undertook to seek out new Christmas songs, to find some novel compositions that could renew our appreciation of the stories surrounding Jesus’ birth. And I found several fine songs, which I shared with you in our Advent and Christmas playlists on Spotify.

And some of these new songs may become classics in their own right someday, though they will never replace the beloved carols and hymns that have been handed down to us for generations. Many of which began as sacred folk tunes 3, 4, 500 years ago. A few, like “Of the Father’s Love Begotten” and “Come, Thou Redeemer of the Earth,” go back even further, to the 5th century! They have clearly stood the test of time.

In reality, singing carols is as old as Christmas itself. The story of Christmas and the birth of Jesus in the Bible are interwoven with song, songs by Mary, Zechariah, Simeon and angelic choir: “My soul magnifies the Lord,” “Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel,” and as you just

heard, “Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth.” Singing, it seems, has been an integral part of Christmas from the beginning, the natural response to the news of Christ’s birth.

Indeed, it strikes me that, after preaching on Christmas for 20 or so years, one can quickly run out of new things to say about Jesus’ birth. There’s only so much you can say about Christmas, that hasn’t already been said. The thing I’ve come to realize, though, is that Christmas is a story that is best not told, but sung, not simply spoken but most powerfully proclaimed through music.

Which is why singing is so central a part of our holiday traditions. I mean, it’s one thing to preach on Jesus’ birth, using words, but our songs, our hymns and carols, proclaim Christmas more fully because it does so through words *and* music, verse *and* tune, communicating both the meaning and the emotion, the message and the movement, truth but also feeling. Both aspects, both dimensions are important.

The words, the “lyrics,” they seek to articulate the *truth* of Christmas. This goes beyond the mere facts of Jesus’ birth. Indeed, the focus is on the *meaning* of Christmas, its significance and implications. And they express this meaning in the form of poetry, not prose. Reasonable, prosaic speech, the language of fact and history, is, you see, simply too thin, too weak to capture the reality of Christmas. For that, we must employ the language of metaphor and symbol, allusion and imagery, ways of speaking that reveal the essence of things, hidden from the literalist’s eye.

Now that might sound like rather grandiose rhetoric, and it is, but consider a few verses from our cherished hymns:

“veiled in flesh, the Godhead seen” “mild he lays his glory by”
“no more will sin and sorrows grow, nor thorns infest the ground”
“chains shall he break, for the slave is our brother,”
“born to raise us from the earth, born to give us second birth”

If we reflect on these verses for more than a second, we find they yield profound insights about the coming of Christ, insights that go beyond what can be conveyed in any merely historical account. They speak not of census taxes and barnyard birthings but of mystery and miracle and the promise Christmas brings: how Jesus’ birth overturns the ancient curse of the Fall, how it signals an end to our exploitation and dehumanization of others, how it gives us a new hope, a new purpose, a new destiny. “God became human,” said St Athanasius, “so that humans might become divine.” These are implications of Christmas that you cannot get from simply reciting the story of Jesus’ birth. But they are brought out in our songs, in poetry.

Still, poetry can only get us so far. Music conveys what mere words cannot, namely the emotion, the feeling, the impact that Christ’s birth has on us personally. Music, you see, has the ability to express emotion, but also to provoke it in us, to incite in us the experience of that feeling. Think of how in singing you come to feel the elation of “Joy to the World,” or the serenity of “Silent Night,” the excitement of “For unto us a child is born,” and the urgency of “Go tell it on a mountain.” My favorite Christmas hymns, “O Holy Night” and “Let All Mortal Flesh keep Silence,” are favorites because they call forth feelings of reverence and humility. These emotions not usually associated with Christmas. But they are feelings Christ’s birth rightly evokes,

alongside peace and joy and excitement. What music does is helps us to experience these “many moods of Christmas,” to *feel* the mystery and to be *moved* by the miracle.

A story is told of the renowned conductor Adolf Reichel who was leading a great orchestra and choir in the final rehearsal of Handel’s *Messiah*. They had come to that point where the soprano soloist takes up the refrain, “I know that my Redeemer liveth.” With the chorus quiet, her elegant voice rang out. It was marked by perfect technique in breathing and enunciation. She sang every note just as it was written. As the final note faded into silence, the entire orchestra looked for Reichel’s nod of approval. But instead, he stepped down from the podium and made his way to the singer. With a look of sorrow, he said, “My daughter, you do not really know that your Redeemer lives, do you?” “Why, yes,” she blushing replied. “Then sing it!” cried Reichel. “Tell it to me so that I will know, and all who hear you will know that you know the joy and power of it!” Turning to the orchestra, he motioned to begin again. This time the soloist forgot about musical technicalities and sang the truth as she knew it in her own soul. The *Messiah* became for her more than a musical piece, it became a declaration of personal faith and experience.

What this says to us is it’s not enough to believe in Christmas, if we aren’t also moved by it. Nor is it enough to feel the warmth and wonder of the season without knowing the reason for those feelings. For, without appreciating Christ’s birth, our holiday cheer collapses into sentimentalism. Conversely, if we cannot join the singing of Christmas songs, Jesus’ birth remains just part of the past, an event in history that has no consequence to us today. We need *both* to fully appreciate Christmas, both the truth and also the feeling, both an understanding of the meaning of the miracle and music to connect our hearts to history.

This is important, because Christmas is not just feeling nor is it just about the past, what happened centuries ago in Bethlehem or what happened decades ago in our own childhood. Christmas is an event that is consequential, immensely consequential for us today, indeed for all of time.

For Christmas is unlike anything that ever occurred before. God’s Incarnation, the Creator of the universe entering his creation, the Infinite constraining itself to finite flesh, divinity uniting itself to humanity. Nothing like this has ever happened before or since. In terms of what it means for the world, Christmas is equivalent in scale to the Big Bang, a tiny point in space and time that exploded, sending ripples forward and backward, forever marking time on either side as “before Christ” (BC) or after Christ, anno domini (AD).

The analogy of a Big Bang is fitting, because the only thing we could possibly compare to Christmas in its momentousness is the event of creation itself, when God created the world, humanity and everything else. What is interesting is that, like the New Creation of Christmas, the first Creation was also accompanied by song, at least if we are to follow CS Lewis’ account. In Lewis’ beloved Narnia series, the lion Aslan (the Jesus-figure of the books) *sings* the world and all its beautiful intricacies into existence:

“A voice had begun to sing. It was very far away and Digory found it hard to decide from what direction it was coming. Sometimes it seemed to come from all directions at once. Sometimes he

almost thought it was coming out of the earth beneath them. Its lower notes were deep enough to be the voice of the earth herself. There were no words. It was hardly a tune. But it was beyond comparison, the most beautiful sound he had ever heard.... Then two wonders happened at the same moment. One was that the voice was suddenly joined by other voices; more voices than you could possibly count. They were in harmony with it, but far higher up the scale: cold, tingling, silvery voices. The second wonder was that the blackness overhead, all at once, was blazing with stars....One moment there had been nothing but darkness; next moment a thousand, thousand points of light leaped out – single stars, constellations, and planets, brighter and bigger than any in our world.” The creation continues, with Aslan singing forth the earth, the hills and grasslands, trees and flowers, then animals which bubble up from the ground, as one great chorus of voices.

I know this is fiction, and not the Bible, but it presents an intriguing perspective—that Creation came to be, not by God simply snapping his fingers or commanding it be done, but through the singing of song, by hymning the heavens and earth into being. If this is how Creation came to be, might we not then suppose that the *New* Creation happened the same way? John speaks of the *Word* of God, but is it too far to say that it was a song, and not simply a word, that became flesh and dwelt among us? A song that grew in Mary’s belly, until she could no longer contain it and it irrupted Christmas night in a cry of joy? And when the chorus of angels sang their refrain, was it not an echo of the same song, the Song of God that was just then taking his first breaths? Was it not this song that Jesus later taught his followers to sing and share, a song of Good News and great joy, truth and also love? And are we not in our hymns and carols adding our own voices to that ancient chorus, singing with all creation in praise to our Creator, tuning our hearts to the song that resounded throughout the world that first Christmas? I believe it is.

So, then “Good Christian friends, rejoice and sing,” “let us our every song employ.” “For Christ is born of Mary.” In him, “the hopes and fears of all the years are met.” In him, our cry to “come, O come, Emmanuel” is answered. In him, “comfort, comfort” is given to those who “mourn in lonely exile here.” Though “long lay the world in sin and error pining,” Christ is “born on earth to save us,” “born to set his people free.” And, while nations rage and kingdoms fail, “he rules the world with truth and grace.” So with that in mind, “come, let us adore him.” Amen.