

JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Do You Hear What I Hear?

Sunday, December 30, 2018

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Psalm 148

I find it really interesting that of all the holidays, religious and secular, there is no holiday that even holds a candle to Christmas in terms of the number of songs. I mean, you don't see popular recording artists releasing Easter albums or Arbor Day compilations. Yet, Christmas is full of song, and throughout Advent we've been considering some of the popular songs of Christmas. For those of you who were holding out for "I Want a Hippopotamus for Christmas," I'm sorry to disappoint.

There are some really bad Christmas songs. If I never hear Paul McCartney's "Wonderful Christmas Time" again, it'll be too soon. It was a long fall from the Beatles to that 1979 gem. Nothing says "Christmas" like a Casio keyboard synthesizer! And there are some really badly sung Christmas songs, too, like Christina Aguilera's version of "Oh Holy Night." I saw where one media critic wrote, "You know that one house on the block covered every inch from foundation to chimney in garish, glowing lights, with animatronic Santas and reindeers running up the roof and a nativity scene to boot? This is less subtle than that."

One of the things I've noticed in Christmas songs—the ones that have to do with Jesus, anyway—is that so many of them focus intensely on the manger scene. And you would expect that, right? They're all about coming to the manger, coming to Bethlehem. "The First Noël" spends 5,000 verses getting the wise men to Bethlehem. "Away in a Manger," of course, is all about the manger. "What Child is This?," "In the Bleak Midwinter," "Angels from the Realms of Glory," "O Come, All Ye Faithful"—all focused on Bethlehem, all focused on getting animals, people, gifts, and our praise to the bedside of the baby Jesus.

That all makes sense for a Christmas carol. After all, the prototypes for these songs, the original Christmas story in the gospels of Luke and Matthew, have Mary and Joseph, shepherds, magi, angels, the king of Judea, and

even the stars of heaven focusing their attention on Bethlehem.

A Different Kind of Carol

A few weeks ago, however, I was struck by the lyrics of another song that takes a surprising turn at the end. Jennine sang it just a few minutes ago: "Do You Hear What I Hear?" It starts familiarly enough out in the fields in an idyllic pastoral scene, then the night wind begins to stir, and it speaks to a lowly little lamb. "Do you see what I see? A star, a star dancing in the night, with a tail as big as a kite."

Now the lamb joins the movement. He speaks to a shepherd boy. "Do you hear what I hear? A song, a song, high above the trees with a voice as big as the sea."

And, right here is when you might expect that the lamb and the shepherd boy would go to the manger to worship the baby Jesus. But, that's not what happens, at least not in the song. The shepherd boy goes not to Bethlehem, but to the palace of a mighty king.

Now, in your mind you're thinking, "It's the wise men," right? Part of the tradition says they were kings. But, in the Christmas story the shepherds don't go to the wise men, so you sort of have to disengage your Christmas brain for a minute to realize that something truly unusual is going on. A lowly shepherd boy, tipped off by one of his lambs, has listened to some song (we have to assume it's the celestial song about the birth of Jesus), and the first place he goes is not to the baby's bed, but to the palace of a mighty king. When he gets there he brings to the king's attention the injustice of the situation: "Do you know what I know? A child, a child shivers in the cold (while you're all huddled up in your palace, warm). Let us bring him silver and gold."

This is a Christmas carol going off the rails, because what happens next is almost unthinkable for a Christmas carol. The king doesn't go to Bethlehem either! In the original Christmas story, we do have a king who hears

about the baby Jesus, and what does he do? He rounds up his goons and sends them to Bethlehem. Now, it's to kill the kid, but hey, at least he's focused on Bethlehem! But, not this carol, not this king! In this song, the king focuses not on Bethlehem, but turns his attention to literally everywhere else. He issues an edict to all his people, "Listen to what I say! Pray for peace, people everywhere! The child, the child sleeping in the night; he will bring us goodness and light."

The Meaning Behind the Carol

Pray for peace, people everywhere.

These words in this surprising carol were penned by the renowned songwriter Noël Regney. With a name like Noël, you'd think he'd have been destined to write Christmas songs, but interestingly, when he was once asked about the song, he said, "I had thought I'd never write a Christmas song. Christmas was just too commercial." So, what changed for him?

Born in Strasbourg, France, and a musical prodigy from an early age, Regney attended the Strasbourg Conservatory and the Paris Conservatory. But, before his musical career could gain traction, in 1940 and against his will, Regney was drafted into the German army when Germany invaded France. He soon became an operative for the French Underground and worked within the army to undermine German military operations.

In one of the incidents that shaped him most profoundly, he knowingly led his unit into an ambush of French Resistance fighters. Regney's unit took heavy losses that day, and Regney was shot, too. Soon after he recovered, he deserted the army and joined the French Resistance. After the war, he emigrated to the United States where he met and married famed pianist Gloria Shayne. They ended up writing together dozens of popular songs including "Do You Hear What I Hear?"

They wrote it in October 1962. Those of you who were of age at that time will remember that terrifying period. The United States and the Soviet Union were locked in a standoff over missiles the Soviets had installed in Cuba. As we know now, we came very near to obliterating each other. But, even then, even though no one knew the full story, everyone was afraid of nuclear war.

It was that same October when a record producer sat Regney down in his office and asked him to write a Christmas song. Regney said the producer had had the radio in his office tuned to the news. Before the meeting,

he was literally listening to see if North America was going to be obliterated—and he wanted a Christmas song! Regney had been to war, he had seen widespread destruction, he had come very near to death himself, so tinsel and jingle bells were the last things on his mind, and the last things on the minds of anyone else!

Regney said that as he walked home there was nothing but gloom in the air. No one was smiling. Everyone exuded this sense of foreboding. He couldn't imagine writing a song about holiday cheer in the middle of all of that! But he said, "En route to my home, I saw two mothers with their babies in strollers. The little angels were looking at each other and smiling. All of a sudden, my mood was extraordinary."

You see, it was as if those kids knew something all the rest of the world didn't. He said the little ones made him think of newborn lambs. Thus, the song began, "Said the night wind to the little lamb, 'Do you see what I see?'"

What Regney saw was a world on the brink of self-destruction, a world full of people terribly afraid for their futures, a world oblivious to the possibility of peace and joy, goodness and light. But there is often more going on in this world than we ever notice. That day, from out of nowhere a whisper, a nudge, turned his attention—if only briefly—to a different reality, a reality of selflessness, generosity, humility, and grace; a reality of innocence and peace, love and mercy. As the lives of millions and millions of people were just a button press away from ending, his attention was turned, just for a moment, to Bethlehem. And, in that moment, he knew that the only hope for the whole world was for people not just to go to the manger, but for the child of the manger to be out and about in the world changing people's lives.

Bethlehem Was Just a Starting Point

Getting Jesus out of the manger. There was an article in the *New York Times* last week that caught my eye. The title was "How do You Keep Baby Jesus in the Manger? Bolts, Cameras and Tethers." The article (with a dateline from Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, appropriately enough) begins, "Away in a manger on Bethlehem's public square, a woman approached a statue of the baby Jesus one dark, December night. Then she stole it. ... Such manger larceny, in glaring violation of the Eighth Commandment, is also a part of a sad national trend." The article goes on to catalog half a dozen incidents of theft, from the baby Jesus to donkeys to the Virgin

Mary. It says that many of the people who manage these displays have taken to tethering the figurines to the ground.

It is sad, but I love how the article ends. It ends with a pastor whose own West Virginia church was the victim of manger theft. When it happened, he didn't even file a police report; he just quietly replaced the baby Jesus. He said, "If they steal that one, we'll keep putting it out. I can't think of a better way to get the message of Christmas out than for people to keep taking Jesus home."

The remarkable thing that happened on that first Christmas is that God humbled himself to be born as one of us. Note well that God didn't come into the world so we would coo and leer at him in a stable. He came into this world to change the world. But, the only way Bethlehem changes anything is if that baby and his love break out of the stable, out of Bethlehem, and into the hearts of lowly shepherd boys and mighty kings alike who join in a unison prayer for peace, whose own lives become strains in the chorus of that song of love and redemption that rings out high above the trees.

Bethlehem was just the starting point. Unfortunately, many people will skip straight from this starting point to the ending point. I know if you're here on this Sunday between Christmas and New Year's Day, you probably don't need to be reminded that there are Sundays in between Christmas and Easter, which is not to say that being here is the only thing that matters, though it matters a great deal. I mean to say that there is a life to be lived and a relationship to be had with a Jesus who is more than a baby and more than a victim, which is how you might imagine Jesus if you hear only the Christmas and Easter stories. If your only encounter with Jesus is Christmas and Easter, you might very well imagine that God's salvation of the world is a passive spectator sport, or that it happens in an instant, but there's more to the Jesus story than that.

Did you know that Jesus actually does leave Bethlehem? He does! The Jesus who leaves Bethlehem is the one who models humility and grace in the face of his enemies, who reaches out to strangers and outcasts with an embrace, who dines at the table with sinners and n'er-do-wells, who actively challenges and undermines systems of racism, injustice, and oppression, who calls for and demonstrates generosity and selflessness, who deliberately cultivates a life of prayer and devotion, who heals and restores broken and hurting people, and who

calls disciples to learn from him these ways of peace and to follow him in them.

The angels sang that first Christmas of peace. Well, the peace of Christmas isn't just something that happens to us; it's something that happens within us and within the world around us as we bend our lives toward the ways of Christ. True peace happens when men and women of goodwill begin to live the life of heaven here on earth. Bethlehem was just the starting point.

In one of his Christmas messages, St. John Chrysostom said, "Bethlehem this day resembles heaven." That's true. Bethlehem was about as close to heaven as anything could be. However, I think the point of Christmas is that every day after, more and more of the world around Bethlehem ought to resemble heaven. What was it Jesus said when he began his ministry 30 years later? "The kingdom of heaven has come near to you." This is the singular mission of God in the world, to draw us into the life of heaven. Jesus knows it's closer than we ever imagined! God is already working on it! The first thing for us to do to inherit this gift is to just pay attention to what God is already doing.

In the Psalm we read earlier, Psalm 148, the psalmist spends a dozen verses rousing the attention and the praises of all creation for the marvelous works of the Lord. Finally, he drills down to us: "Young men and women alike, old and young together! Let them praise the name of the Lord, ... for he has raised up a horn for his people." A horn: in those days, a sign of strength, a symbol of authority, and a tool of power. The psalmist says God has raised up a horn! God has already done it! Heaven is coming near! All we have to do is join the song!

But first, we have to pay attention to the voices telling us that God is at work. It's easy to miss. Just look at Christmas. It happened in a stable, in the hay, in the dirt and grime surrounded by animals and shepherds in an off-the-map town tucked away in the hills of Judea. In that unlikeliest of places God raised up a horn—power incarnate in humility. And he did it so that we—you and I—might be redeemed from our misery, restored to fellowship with our creator, and caught up once again in the song of praise.

That last part is the only way that what Jesus has done becomes cemented into our lives: if our lives become the locus of praise, of peace, and of heaven's glory. This gift

of God must not stay in the manger. Heaven must not be confined to Bethlehem.

Allowing Our Lives to Join the Song

When you think about the rest of the New Testament, that's really its point. The song sung first by the heavenly host reverberates through shepherds and wise men, in the lives of disciples and apostles, and eventually in the lives of churches throughout the Mediterranean. As we stand on the cusp of a new year, the real question is whether it will reverberate in us, whether our lives will join with the lives of so many generations before us and even creation itself to live lives that praise the Lord.

You know what I think? I think the world itself is begging us to join in. Paul put it this way: "The whole creation is groaning in travail for the revelation of the sons and daughters of God." This world full of troubles and pain and heartache, where nations point nuclear missiles at each other, and where most kings are blithely dismissive of children around them shivering in the cold—this world is ready for us to pick up the tune that is already echoing all around us.

When the psalmist speaks to us, he says, "Let them praise." I find it remarkable that the psalmist has to call us to praise at all! But, I suppose we have to choose to join the chorus. We have to choose to open our mouths. We have to choose to give our lives. We have to choose to be people of peace who not only come to the manger, but also leave with the Lord who is already out and about in our world trying desperately to bring us goodness and light.

The night winds, the stars, the trees, sheep, and shepherds are already singing! Wise men joined in; disciples, too; the apostles and the martyrs continued the song. But, again, the only way the gift of Bethlehem ultimately makes any difference for you and me is if we pay attention to the chorus of praise echoing all about us, humble ourselves to the child who alone can bring us goodness and light, and join our own voices, our own lives in service to the Lord who is making all things new.

On this last Sunday of the year, standing at the border between whatever has been and whatever will be, that's the question: What shall we do? Will we sing? If we do, at first the sound may be squeaky and slightly off-key like children often are when learning to sing beloved carols, but eventually we'll find the notes; eventually we'll find the rhythm; and eventually our lives will become echoes of praise beckoning a growing chorus of others to join the song, to proclaim in awe and wonder that heaven has broken forth in a manger. This will happen if only we choose to stop singing our own songs and choose to utter the song of Bethlehem.

Let us not fail to join in the song.



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