

MEDITATIONS ON THE MUSIC OF CHRISTMAS
“THE MANGER: PLACE OF FRIENDSHIP, JOY, AND PROMISE”

John 1:1-5, 14
December 29, 2019
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Scripture: Luke 2:7

Carol: “Gentle Mary Laid Her Child”

*Gentle Mary laid her child Lowly in a manger;
There he lay, the undefiled, To the world a stranger.
Such a babe in such a place, Can He be the Savior?
Ask the saved of all the race Who have found his favor.*

*Angels sang about His birth, Wise men sought and found Him;
Heaven’s star shone brightly forth, Glory all around Him.
Shepherds saw the wondrous sight, Heard the angels singing;
All the plains were lit that night, All the hills were ringing.*

*Gentle Mary laid her child Lowly in a manger;
He is still the undefiled, But no more a stranger,
Son of God, of humble birth, Beautiful the story;
Praise His name in all the earth, Hail the King of glory!*

The Manger: Place of Friendship

It’s not one of the old standard Christmas carols, but it probably sounds familiar because Ernest MacMillan used the melody from *Good King Wenceslas* in his arrangement of the tune. MacMillan had a long and distinguished career as an organist, music director, and dean of the music faculty at the University of Toronto. Born in Canada, he spent time studying in England and Paris. He received a doctorate from Oxford for composing music for poet Swinburne’s *Ode to England*. He was absent for the awarding of the degree because he was in the Ruhleben prison camp for four years after being detained during World War I while studying in Paris. Most notably, he was the first person outside the British Isles to be knighted. I should also mention that he was a life-long Presbyterian. I assume, he knew the lyricist, Joseph Simpson Cook who was born in England, but spent most of his academic career in Montreal and Toronto. As much as I love this tune, it’s really the lyrics that move me most. His words evoke the image of Mary laying her child in the manger. We are drawn into the story by Mary’s gentleness, by the humble nature of this birth, by the presence of the shepherds and the singing of the angels. There is an implied intimacy that welcomes us to the manger.

The informal feel of the text in no way reduces the sense of awe. The star still shines brightly, the plains are lit up. The angels’ voices ringing through the hills, and the closing call to “praise His name” and “hail the King” remind us of the majesty of the moment. There’s no question that the manger is a scene calling forth worship.

But the lines are simple enough to be understood by children and the mood created is warm. The substance of the carol is captured for me in two phrases. Verse one tells us that this child is “to the world a stranger.” But the imagery, tone, and words move us to the realization that this child is “no more a stranger.” The manger is a place of friendship, a place where we are brought near to God; not to the God who frightens us, but the God who embraces us, the God who becomes one of us, the God who loves us and befriends us.

I could stop there and move to the next carol. I’ve told you all the important things I think about this Christmas carol which is what we try to do when we do these short reflections on the music of Christmas. But I haven’t said why it’s important to me, why I love it. Oh, it’s there in the thoughts, but we don’t sing these carols for the thoughts they evoke. We sing them because they make us feel something.

I don’t just hear the words, “no more a stranger,” and see this carol as expressing a central part of my theology, that God befriends us. I hear words that move me because I’ve never been great at making friends. Kindergarten took me two years partly because I had a lot of illness at the time, but probably more because I wasn’t learning to socialize more. I hadn’t made any friends.

As with many boys, there were certain feelings that it wasn’t cool to share. “Intimate” was a word we giggled over at first and later heard as criticism. Feelings, for a while, were an embarrassment, something to be kept inside and suppressed. I assumed that this was just part of my personality, but it’s not natural. Human beings are by nature thinkers and feelers. We don’t just try to understand our world, we try to connect to it. We are moved by it.

“Gentle Mary laid her child, lowly in a manger,” isn’t just an abstract expression of God’s friendship to us; it is to see in the manger a place where friendship is nurtured and built up. Singing it makes me feel God’s friendship and love, especially as I sing it together with my friends in Christ. Look at that last verse again. See if it moves you as well.

*Gentle Mary laid her child Lowly in a manger;
He is still the undefiled, But no more a stranger,
Son of God, of humble birth, Beautiful the story;
Praise His name in all the earth, Hail the King of glory!*

But there is more to the manger than a declaration of friendship. Angels announce news of great joy to the shepherds.

Scripture: Luke 2:10-14

Carol: “God Christian Friends, Rejoice”

*Good Christians friends, rejoice With heart, and soul, and voice;
Give ye heed to what we say: Jesus Christ is born today;
Ox and ass before Him bow, And he is in the manger now.
Christ is born today! Christ is born today!*

*Good Christian friends, rejoice With heart and soul and voice;
Now ye hear of endless bliss: Jesus Christ was born for this!
He hath opened heaven's door, And we are blest forevermore.
Christ was born for this! Christ was born for this!*

*God Christian friends, rejoice With heart, and soul, and voice;
Now ye need not fear the grave: Jesus Christ was born to save!
Calls you one and calls you all To gain the everlasting hall.
Christ was born to save! Christ was born to save!*

The Manger: Place of Joy

This medieval carol dates from the fourteenth century and is sometimes attributed to Peter of Dresden, but its author is really unknown and most scholars believe the carol was written earlier than that. The tune is a German folk tune from the fourteenth century. Of course the original is not in English. John Mason Neale, who lived in the nineteenth century translated this and many of the hymns we sing from medieval times. My source says that he is unsurpassed in maintaining the sense of the original while also creating “a wonderful English poem.” If the intent was to convey the immense joy behind the birth of Jesus, then he certainly accomplished his purpose.

The first verse places us at the manger within the stable, the same setting as *Gentle Mary Laid her Child*, but less attention is paid to the details and other characters in the story. Instead, this carol focuses on the experience of joy. Rejoice, we are told, with heart and soul and voice. We are to put our whole selves into celebrating this event. Rejoice... because Jesus Christ is born today.

The Lutherans were the first to replace “Good Christian men” with “God Christian friends,” and as you can imagine, I love the change not just because the new language is more inclusive, but also because it says more about the relationship between the carolers. We are friends... rejoice!

Joy is a difficult thing for some people. As with many feelings, its expression is sometimes restricted to certain times and places. As with Eric Liddle in *Chariots of Fire*, I have felt it as “God’s pleasure” when I would run in my youth. I experience it today when a favorite food pleases my palate, in the feeling of sunshine after a series of gray days, when I listen to Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony. I feel joy in friendships, old and new, in a warm handshake and a heart-felt embrace. I rejoice in love for Janet and for my children.

It is not the same as happiness. It is both deeper and stronger. It can be present even in the midst of great sorrow, fear, and even failure. It is not what comes from a mere intellectual acceptance of a place in heaven based in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. It is more profound than that. When the carol tells us that “Jesus Christ was born to save,” it is not talking about a factual transaction, but the experience of reconnecting us to very presence of God. Joy speaks not just to our status, but to our whole selves.

The carol tells us that this kind of joy belongs to the birth of Jesus, that the manger is a place of joy. of reconnecting us to very presence of God. Joy speaks not just to our status, but to our whole selves.

The carol tells us that this kind of joy belongs to the birth of Jesus, that the manger is a place of joy. Isaiah, the prophet, suggests that such good news might be something we want to talk about.

Scripture: Isaiah 52:7-10

Carol: "Go, Tell It on the Mountain"

*Go, tell it on the mountain Over the hills and everywhere;
Go, tell it on the mountain That Jesus Christ is born!*

*While shepherds kept their watching O'er silent flocks by night,
Behold throughout the heavens There shone a holy light.*

*The shepherds feared and trembled When lo, above the earth,
Rang out the angel chorus That hailed our Savior's birth.*

*Down in a lowly manger The humble Christ was born,
And God sent us salvation That blessed Christmas morn.*

The Manger: Place of Promise

John Wesley Work, II wrote the verses after coming across the refrain based on an African American spiritual. He was well known for his study of spirituals as well as collecting and publishing many of them in anthologies. The tune was arranged by his son and the harmonization composed by Melva Costen who chaired the committee that produced the *Presbyterian Hymnal*.

The carol doesn't explicitly speak of a promise, but spirituals almost always address the future. They are hope expressed in the context of slavery. The verses capture the scene of Jesus' birth as recorded in Luke and put to music in the previous two carols. It is intimate and joyous. One senses the experience of friendship and joy behind the event. There remains but one thing to do: talk about it! Go, tell it because something amazing has just happened.

We are not inclined to talk about our faith out there. We are a lot shyer than this Christmas carol allows for. But it is not a part of human nature to be silent about events that have moved us greatly. When something impacts us in a profound way, we talk about it.

We talk about the teacher who helped us discover our vocation in life, the doctor who guided us through a treatment plan, the hospice chaplain who got us through a parent's death. We talk about the school that educated us, the counselor who saw us through divorce, the person who changed our mind about gay persons. We talk about the major persons and events that shaped our lives. There is little doubt that most of us are able to talk about the things that have deeply moved us.

So why is it so hard to talk about our faith, about the birth of this child who befriends us and causes a deep joy to spring up within us. Could it be that we are less moved than we claim? Could we sing with our lips words that have not quite so deeply touched our hearts?

I don't ask these questions to raise the specter of guilt, but to remind us that we have not arrived yet, that we do not yet fully understand the power of God's friendship as expressed through the manger, that we have not fully comprehended the joy contained in this birth. We are not yet transformed into the people God intends us to become.

Part of the reasons we sing these Christmas carols is to move deeper into the event, to comprehend more fully this "news of great joy that shall be for all people." We are children of the promise. We are slaves to old values, bound by our past; but always looking to the future, living into the promise, free and looking too become free.

We sing this Christmas carol in the hopes that it will inspire us to share the good news that we have already experienced. For the sake of the promise of salvation, we go and tell it on the mountains. Consider that refrain one more time:

*Go, tell it on the mountain Over the hills and everywhere;
Go, tell it on the mountain That Jesus Christ is born!*

Resources:

The Presbyterian Hymnal Companion. McKim, LindaJo H. Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville:KY, 1993.