

MEDITATIONS ON THE MUSIC OF CHRISTMAS:

“Welcoming Jesus”

Luke 2:8-14, Luke 2:25-38; John 1:1-5, 10-14

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Read Luke 2:8-14

“Hark the Herald Angels Sing”

***Hark! The herald angels sing, "Glory to the newborn King.
Peace on earth, and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled!"
Joyful, all ye nations, rise, join the triumph of the skies;
With th'angelic host proclaim, "Christ is born in Bethlehem!"
Hark! The herald angels sing, "Glory to the newborn King!"***

***Christ, by highest heaven adored, Christ the ever-lasting Lord!
Late in time behold him come, offspring of the virgin's womb.
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see; hail th' incarnate Deity,
Pleased in flesh with us to dwell, Jesus our Emmanuel.
Hark! The herald angels sing, "Glory to the newborn King!"***

***Hail the heav'n-born Prince of Peace! Hail the sun of righteousness!
Light and life to all he brings, risen with healing in His wings.
Mild he lays his glory by, Born that we no more may die,
Born to raise us from the earth, born to give us second birth.
Hark! The herald angels sing, "Glory to the newborn King."***

If only one could hire out angel choirs for birthdays. Luke makes the singing telegram or the barbershop quartet seem tame by comparison. One wonders how we ever get to “Silent Night” when we start the evening with “Hark the Herald Angels Sing.” Trumpets would not be out of line with this bold, loud, enthusiastic celebration of Jesus’ birth. What a way to say, “Welcome, we are so glad you’re here!”

This is what all our Christmas carols do: welcome Jesus to our world. But they’re so much more than “Happy Birthday.” They’re expressions of heartfelt joy infused with theological affirmations. They say what it is we’re celebrating. The carols cover a wide range of moods and metaphors from the trumpet blast of angels to the solemn peace of the stable. Taken together they offer a rather thorough look into what we can expect as we follow him in his ministry.

The dominant image in this carol is the “new-born king.” It’s as though the angels are the opening act for a coronation. Their song tells us what this king will be noted for. We may not be much for monarchs in our context, but who doesn’t long for peace? Who wouldn’t like to see mercy win out over vengeance? Who wouldn’t embrace the reconciliation between “God and sinners?” The nations will rise up together to join the song of the angels.

Verse two tells us that this is no ordinary king, but the “incarnate Deity,” Emmanuel, God veiled in human flesh. Volumes of theology have flowed from these phrases. Ambitious descriptions and hard to believe and yet fitting for the task in mind.

“Light and life to all he brings” sing the angels, sing us, in verse three. “Born that we no more may die... born to raise us from the earth... born to give us second birth.” We need second chances. You can’t look at our world and not believe that, as a species, human beings have blown it. So much war, so much violence, so much devastation and destruction.

Something to celebrate, worth the expense of an angel choir, if one could be hired. There’s reason for all the noise and fanfare, but the line that really moves is softer, more subtle from verse two: “Pleased in flesh with us to dwell.” What makes me want to welcome Jesus most is this notion that God “is pleased” to share our life. This isn’t some last ditch effort to save a broken humanity, but a declaration, a proclamation that God actually likes us, that God want to be with us, that God, of course loves us.

So we have to move on from the angels. The mood shifts from a loud celebration to a softer contemplation. Not less joyous, but perhaps deeper, and certainly more personal. Simeon and Anna have been waiting a long time for this child.

Read Luke 2:25-38

Luke doesn’t say that Simeon was old, but he seems weary with life. He must have been wondering about his death when God told him that he wouldn’t die until he’d seen the Christ. And upon seeing Jesus, he seems content to die. His dream for Israel and the world will be realized in Jesus. Or so he believes. His dream, apparently doesn’t include the restoration of Israel, but Jesus will bring honor to the people and be a light to the nations. He is not unaware that there will be a cost to this, specifically in the rejection of the child before him and the piercing of Mary’s heart. Simeon’s experience reflects the closing of the refrain from our next carol: “The child of peace and sacrifice is waiting to be found.” Peace for Simeon. Sacrifice for Mary and Jesus.

The birth of Jesus is personal for Simeon and for Anna, both old, both waiting a long time for this moment, both changed. Simeon, at last content to depart the world and Anna, who can’t stop talking about the child.

“In Bethlehem a Babe was Born” is more intimate than “Hark the Herald Angels Sing.” The same story, but told as if you, alone, were being addressed. Told as if the thing that mattered most was what it meant for you. “Come, Come, Christ is born! Come, come, world forlorn.” One hears echoes of Jesus saying, “Come unto me, all you who are weary and heavy laden.” Or “Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of people.”

Verse three brings the appeal directly to us. After telling the summary of the story, the song tells us, “miracle of miracles, the Baby lives today in each new heart that hears love coming through the years.” In each new heart... in your heart. “Love never ends,” wrote Paul.

Nearly all the Christmas carols center in the love of God. This is a story that bears love to each new generation, to you personally, and to a world seemingly unloved.

It's one thing to be at the party, to hear the trumpets blast and the angels sing. There is a place for this in our Christmas celebrations. We echo this mood of the angels when we sing "Joy to the World" along with many other carols. But this intimate ones, "Silent Night" and "In Bethlehem a Babe was Born" invite us to step into the story to be touched and changed by it and... to carry it with us back into our world, to see that child born today, born in us.

This quiet, meditative carol challenges us to hear "the love coming through the ages, to welcome the child to our world.

"In Bethlehem a Babe was Born"

In Bethlehem a babe was born with love enough for all.

While kingdoms slept, the Lord came down to grace a manger stall.

And with a glorious light angels appeared that night,

Refrain: Singing, "Come, come, Christ is born! Come, come, world forlorn.

The Child of peace and sacrifice is waiting to be found.

Royalty and shepherds came to worship, from afar,

Guided through the long cold night by one persistent star.

As each beheld the Son, strangers became as one,

Refrain

The mystery of Bethlehem was long ago they say.

But miracle of miracles, the Baby lives today

In each new heart that hears love coming through the years, *Refrain*

Read John 1:1-5; 10-14

John's "Christmas story," if you can call it that, is entirely different from Luke's. The first impression it makes is of an abstract, big-picture, almost cosmic perspective. In John's view, the story begins at the beginning of time, when the Word God speaks brings the world into being. Jesus is that very Word come into the world. That's not easy to get our minds around, but the idea is that God's Word has a reality unlike human words that may be gone and forgotten almost as soon as they're spoken. God's Word has agency, power, follow-through.

John sets the tone and lays the groundwork for his whole gospel right here, as he identifies Jesus with the eternal, creative, authoritative Word of God ... which is part of God, even as it has its own existence and ability to act. John is offering up here a theology that has mystery at its core. We are not the first Christians to find it as puzzling as it is profoundly beautiful. One thing is crystal clear, though: the picture of Jesus John will paint in his gospel will not be of a person who is simply a great moral teacher. John's Jesus is divine.

But somehow here John's cosmic, big picture theology becomes something else: "The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood." (v. 14) That is not

what the first few sentence of the book would have us expecting! From “beginning,” “being,” “Word,” “light” ... suddenly we are reading about “flesh and blood” and “the neighborhood.” I read from *The Message* because it brings home the significance of that bit of theology we refer to as “the Incarnation” – which literally means “made flesh.” We have often casually affirmed the doctrine that Jesus is in some way we can’t explain both divine and human, but we don’t often stop to ponder what that means, what it meant.

The song “Welcome to our World” brings this home to me in a similarly powerful way. The line about the “tiny heart whose blood will save us” gets me every time we sing it. The Jesus we have been singing about isn’t the pretty little smiling-but-immobile figure from the nativity set. He’s not just an idea or a doctrine; nor is he an invincible hero who just *looks* like a human child. He’s a real human baby who will live a fully human life and die a human death.

This song echoes the affirmation of Jesus as “incarnate Deity” from “Hark the Herald Angels Sing” - but from a different point of view. I don’t know another Christmas song that so acknowledges the physical bodily humanness and messiness and vulnerability that the story entails, the tears, our broken hearts, all that we hunger for, the prayers that seem to go unanswered. This is what we live with, also of us, and the reason, as the song begins, that we need to hear from God. Not from a distant, impassive, unassailable God, but a God who is willing to live with all of that, as we do, to be one of us AND is able to make that very humanness into healing, holiness, hope. This is the Holy Stranger we welcome, who turns out to be not only the Word breaking heaven’s silence but the Human One who is, amazingly, at home with us.

“Welcome to Our World”

***Tears are falling, hearts are breaking, how we need to hear from God
You've been promised, we've been waiting; welcome Holy Child;
Welcome, Holy Child.***

***Hope that you don't mind our manger, how I wish we could have known
But long-awaited Holy Stranger, make yourself at home;
Please make yourself at home.***

***Bring your peace into our violence, bid our hungry souls be filled.
Word now breaking heaven's silence, welcome to our world;
Welcome to our world.***

***Fragile finger sent to heal us, tender brow prepared for thorn,
Tiny heart whose blood will save us unto us is born; unto us is born.***

***So wrap our injured flesh around you, breathe our air and walk our sod.
Rob our sin and make us holy, perfect Son of God; perfect Son of God.
Welcome to our world.***