

CHRISTMAS EVE
2009
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Christmas Carols.

They are ubiquitous this time of year, aren't they? "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing" heard in the produce section of the grocery store. "Rudolph, the Red Nose Reindeer" in the plumbing department of Home Depot. "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear" in the Petco store. "Silent Night" eating burgers at McDonald's. There is no escaping them. It all washes together in one phantasmagoric blur.

So what if we could find one that, above all the others, captures what it is we celebrate this evening?

Let's try.

Yes, we're fond of them but can we eliminate "Rudolph, the Red Nose Reindeer" and "Frosty the Snowman"? "I Saw Mama Kissing Santa Claus" and "Here Comes Santa Claus"? All of the chip monk songs. All right, "Santa Claus Is Coming to Town", as well?

This might hurt a bit but can we agree to let go of "Jingle Bells", "I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas". "Walking in a Winter Wonderland"? Since we have gotten to the romantic songs let's go ahead and cut "Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire" and "Let it Snow."

All it takes is to name the carols to start them going in our heads doesn't it? "Oh, the weather outside is frightful, but the fire is so delightful...".

And then there are those wonderful songs on the periphery, "I Saw Three Ships Come Sailing In," "The Holly and the Ivy", "The Twelve Days of Christmas", "God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen", "What Child is This?" They put us in the mind of

Christmases in jolly, old England.

And what if we now turn to the carols that we have in our hymnals? Does one of those rise to the top as the one above all others that contains all that needs to be said about the marvelous event of Jesus's birth?

This might get painful.

But remember, we're not letting them go. We're on a journey to find the one which is the ultimate Christmas carol.

What a wealth of material here. "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing", "The First Noel", "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear", "While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks by Night", "Angels from the Realms of Glory," "O Come All Ye Faithful", "In the Bleak Midwinter". "O Little Town of Bethlehem",

I would guess that if we asked for the favorites "Away in a Manger" would be near the top and at the top would be "Silent Night."

Shall we leave it there, then? "Silent Night" captures it all.

"Silent night, holy night, Son of God, love's pure light; radiant beams from thy holy face with the dawn of redeeming grace, Jesus at thy birth, Jesus at thy birth."

I want to suggest that another carol captures better than any of these, the meaning of what it is we celebrate this evening. It was sung by a teenager in a time long before any of those that we've mentioned were written. She was visiting her cousin. Her cousin gave her a blessing and she poured out a song.

Remember how it goes?

"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. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm....."

Uh, oh. Now it takes a turn. This is not about a God who sends Jesus to grow up as an obedient son to his earthly parents, to study hard and to go into the carpentry business with his father or to open his own business, get married, raise

a family, die in his bed at a ripe old age.

Listen.

"He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly...."

This is incendiary, seditious. A direct threat to power. Herod sat on the throne. John Ortberg writes of Herod, "Herod knew how power worked. He hitched his wagon to Julius Caesar until Caesar was assassinated, then convinced Mark Anthony that he was on Anthony's side. When Caesar Augustus overthrew Mark Anthony, Herod said he'd really been a Caesar Augustus guy all along.

Herod built huge buildings. One reason the temple became controversial in Jesus' day was that it was built from the taxes paid by the poor as they lost their land --so that Herod could be Herod the Great."

Herod grew wealthy off the poverty of common folk, folk like Mary, Joseph, Jesus.

And Herod knew very well how people felt about him. No one was going to mourn him when he died. That's why he designated 70 of the most revered leaders to be killed upon his death so that people would mourn.

Mary sings: "he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty."

This is not a song you will find on a Hallmark card, not a song piped into the aisles of Nieman Marcus or Macy's.

In the 1980s this song was banned by the government of Guatemala. It couldn't be recited in any form lest it give those sorely oppressed by the government ideas about overthrowing their government. No, this is not a lullaby.

Ever since Pam and her brother, Mark, were small we have used an Advent Wreath in our home to mark the days leading up to Christmas. Sue and I still continue that and for the last few years we have used as the basis of our Advent devotions, a little book put out each year by Austin Seminary and written by the students and faculty at the seminary.

A few days ago we read one which starts with the words, "Wake Up". It spoke of how difficult it is, at times, to rouse ourselves from sleep. And it ended suggesting that nothing

can spell the end of sleep quite like a new baby in the house. What a great thought when applied to the birth of this child. Wake Up! To the shepherds in the fields, "Wake Up!" We attended a Christmas drama a few years ago in which there was a song prodding one of the shepherds slow to rise. It had a recurring line, "You, no-good, lazy, shepherd boy."

The lines in Mary's song soon caused Herod to "wake up."

"Come back by here and tell me when you find this child so that I may go and worship him," he says to the men from the East who have come in search of Jesus.

Foiled again. I'll take care of that. Go out and kill all the first born among the Jews. That will end that."

I like Christmas. It's a completely, crazy, celebration each year. But I don't think the way we do it has much to do with Jesus. Mary's song does not suggest that God is about take on human form so that our economy can get a much needed shot in the arm. It does not foresee an opportunity for the Chinese to have jobs making every kind of possible Christmas decoration and gee-gaw. The birth, of which she sings, is not about office parties, mistletoe, punch, hors d'oeuvres and sweets.

And there's nothing inherently wrong with any of that. It's just that it doesn't have anything to do with what we celebrate here, this evening.

We celebrate what Mary sang about. That in the midst of the insanity of this world where political and military power rules; where money rules, In the midst of a world where there exists genocide, enmity, hatred; where there is a willingness to see a great many of the poor as simply a burden; where it seems people are as disposable as paper towels; in such a world comes one whose very presence speaks of a God who turns all of that upside down; a God who brings justice, mercy, charity, love, peace!

Brandon, wake up!

Janice, wake up!

Blake, wake up!

Don, wake up!

Katie, wake up!

Curtis, wake up!

Mark, wake up!
Christians, wake up!
It's time!
He's here!

(With thanks to John Ortberg for the idea for this sermon.

With apologies to John Ortberg for what I did with the idea.)