

December 4, 2016

“The Traditions of Christmas: Music and Song”

Luke 2:8-14

FCF: Celebration without reflection > music

PROPOSITION: (anchor) Christmas is a celebration of the coming of Jesus.

(magnet) We should then sing and make music.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

Christmas brings gifts. Gifts mean gadgets. And gadgets mean automation. Meaning we don't have to think about doing “this” so now we can give more attention to “that”. The truth is that Christmas itself can often become automated. We've seen it so much or done it so much that we don't really need to think. Just push the button. It becomes a celebration without reflection.

And that's a problem. For example, why the music? Why the carols and concerts? It's often just due to warm feelings without deep meaning, an annual habit without heartfelt worship. I want to propose that we need to take a few minutes this Advent to reflect on this together.

SCRIPTURE READING: [Luke 2:8-14](#)

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON INTRODUCTION:

We're getting more news of the planned appointments by our President-elect to high level positions. Which, of course, is a reminder of a coming inauguration, a change in administrations, and a shift in formal recognition. “Hail to the Chief” is part of that. It's the official anthem of the President of the United States, played to accompany his entrance during public appearances. Such a song is right and appropriate to the office. There is fanfare expected at his arrival.

Which brings me to the music and songs of Christmas. That too is right and appropriate at the celebration of the arrival of Jesus Christ - the Chief of Executives, the Commander of Chiefs, the Leader of the whole world, the King of kings, and the Lord of lords. Put another way, Christmas is a celebration of the coming of Jesus. We should then sing and make music.

That makes sense even at a logical level. Perhaps there's even something instinctive to it. But why? What is it that makes it right and appropriate? We're going to consider that from three angles. First, the power of music. Second, the pattern before us. And, third, the praise of the Lord. And, as we do so, we'll discover that we have reason to sing and make music all the more.

I. THE POWER OF MUSIC

First, let's consider the power of music. That is how and why it works upon us so.

A) Some Observations

1. A universal gift

Now along those lines, some observations. Music is a universal gift. Nearly all cultures have their own musical traditions, each expressed in a variety of life contexts. In fact, music is present

at a range of celebrations. Beyond that, it can bring healing and comfort. Think of David's ministry to Saul. And research has borne out the therapeutic value of music in many ways.

2. A deep resonance

So music is a universal gift. And it has a deep resonance for us. It can take us to another world. Or point us to one. Music connects us to beauty. It can help us see richness to life. It can even provoke a longing for our eternal home, stirring a sweet dissatisfaction, a holy discontentment.

B) The Explanation

1. The God who is there

How? Why? Let's move from some observations to the explanation. It has to do with the God who is there. (READ Psalm 98:1, 4-6, 8) Lewis Roff notes in Let Us Sing (READ pp.19-20):

As the greatest music lover in the universe, God has surrounded himself with song. In eternity past, "the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy" (Job 38:7). In eternity future, a great multitude will sing around the throne, "Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns" (Revelation 19:6). At the center of human history, the Son of God himself sang with the disciples in the upper room (Mark 14:26).

Part of the reason for the resonance we feel has to do with the very fabric of the universe.

2. The image we bear

That is, the God who is there. And then, related to that, the image we bear. We have been made in His likeness. And so we have been made to enjoy music and to express it - made to sing.

So, naturally, there is a power to music. And this is something true not just for certain people groups or personalities. This is something deeply human that comes out in many ways.

Application:

That's why music resonates with us. It's why the best of our carols provoke something within us. It's beyond tradition, nostalgia, or sentimentality. It may include that but it's more.

The power of music is real. Which then opens up opportunity for conversation with most anyone. "What is it about this that appeals to you?" "Why do you think music moves us so?"

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II. THE PATTERN BEFORE US

Partly because of this power. But also, secondly, because of the pattern set before us.

A) The Identity of the Messengers

1. An angel of the Lord

Consider the identity of the messengers who came to the shepherds. (READ Luke 2:9) Angels are creatures, intelligent moral agents, not embodied, and usually invisible. In heaven they worship God and from heaven they are sent to do His bidding. Their appearing and activity is seen especially at great turning points in the plan of salvation. And this is obviously a key point.

2. A multitude of the heavenly host

Well, who else appears? (READ Luke 2:13) A host refers to soldiers. This is an angelic army.

B) The Form of Their Message

1. A birth announcement

That's who has come with a message. In what form does that message come? First, as a birth announcement. This is who has come (**READ Luke 2:11**). This is who has come. And, lest you miss it, this is where you will find Him (**READ Luke 2:12**). That's the birth announcement.

2. A Christmas cantata

That is followed with the first Christmas cantata. Well, we don't read of instruments so it was likely a cappella. And, actually, we're not told that they sung. But it is recorded for us in poetic form and commonly described by commentators as a song. Which seems right since angels are referred to as singing praises to God in so many other contexts. So this is a Christmas carol.

The point being that this is the pattern set before us. Singing carols comes not just from the traditions surrounding Christmas but the historical events surrounding the Incarnation itself.

Application:

So, before we dismiss this, before we allow the cynicism of Scrooge or the thievery of the Grinch to silence our songs, we have something to consider. The angels are finite but unfallen. They enjoy a perspective on the unfolding of history beyond what all the libraries in this world can hold. They have seen the unfolding of God's plan through the ages. They then recognize what is happening there in Bethlehem and so they erupt in song. How much more should we?

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III. THE PRAISE OF THE LORD

For we see the power of music and the pattern before us. And then, flowing from all of that, we have this thing that stirs the song and moves the music - the praise of the Lord.

A) The Advent of Peace

1. Peace with God

The angels sing of the advent of peace (**READ Luke 2:14**). Peace with God. As the irreligious turn from rebellion and self-determination, as the religious turn from self-righteousness and the idol of control, as any and all of us turn to and rest in the finished work of Jesus, there is peace.

2. Peace on earth

Peace with God. And then peace on earth. For as we take to heart the necessity of His work, something begins to happen within us. Our pride and boasting is crushed. Humility grows and flourishes. Humble people tend to get along. And become agents of peace with others.

B) The End of Fear

This news is of the advent of peace. And, with it, the end of fear (**READ Luke 2:9-10**).

1. Astonishing command

This is an astonishing command. The KJV tells us they were "sore afraid". They were terrified, not just because of shock and awe. But because, ever since the events of the Fall recorded in Genesis 3, there has been passed down to us an instinctive fear and distrust of the living God.

2. Beautiful promise

So this is at the deepest level an astonishing command. But it is made possible because of a beautiful promise. “You don’t need to fear anymore. For I bring you good news of great joy.”

And that, my friends, is grounds for us to join in song in praise of the Lord.

Application:

Unto us has been born a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And so we have no need to be anxious of our future. We have no need to be afraid of what others think or to try and solve our problems on our own. There is no cause to worry if God will provide. Or pardon and forgive. This is the advent of peace and the end of fear. We are finally free to trust Him. As we should.

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CONCLUSION:

We get a glimpse into the “fittedness” of all this by noting how early in church history we see such a response. As far back as 129 A.D., a Roman bishop asked that a carol called “Angel’s Hymn” be sung at a Christmas service in Rome. A year later, Pope Telesphorus decreed that all churches should sing “Gloria in Excelsis Deo” during services recognizing the birth of Jesus.

Or consider “Phos Hilaron,” the earliest known hymn recorded outside the Bible that is still in use today. It was written in Greek for evening prayer, likely in the 3rd century. In fact, we know that by the mid 4th century, it was regarded as quite old and a cherished tradition. This is the first stanza, as translated by Robert Bridges in 1899 ([READ Proclaiming, p.18](#)):

O gladsome light, O grace
Of our Creator’s face
The eternal splendor wearing:
Celestial, holy, blest,
Our savior Jesus Christ,
Joyful in your appearing

Don’t misunderstand. I’m not saying our spiritual predecessors did everything perfectly. No more so than we do. But this ancient pattern is surely instructive. And deeply encouraging. It tells us that our instincts to sing these carols are right. And that the tradition is true.

Looking back over Luke 2, we see that we were made to sing. The angels are showing us the way. And the wonder of the gospel impels us to join with them in lifting our voices to God.

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