

The Canticles of Christmas

*A sermon preached by Emily Hull McGee
on December 3, 2017 on Ephesians 5:8-14, 18-20
at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC*

"What sweeter music can we bring
Than a carol for to sing
The birth of this our heavenly king
Awake the voice! Awake the string!"

Thus began the 17th century poem written by Robert Herrick, speaking eloquently out of his own Christian faith about the coming Christ child. "The darling of the world is come," he proclaimed, "and fit it is, we find a room to welcome him." Herrick's words so captivated 20th century composer John Rutter, that Rutter couldn't help but set them to music. The words leap off the page into the melodious voice: "'tis he is borne, whose quickening birth gives life and luster, public mirth, to heaven and the under-earth." Rutter's setting called "What Sweeter Music" became instantly beloved by choral singers everywhere, myself included.¹

In the midst of the glorious melodies, however, dissonance appears when one encounters Herrick and Rutter's beautiful composition in the context of a Volvo commercial, released some years ago to evoke the safety of their vehicles. Gauzy, sunlit shots of men and women, boys and

¹ I found interesting words about this poem and its setting in a variety of spots: <http://masterchoruseastside.blogspot.com/2013/12/what-sweeter-music-than-carol.html> , the Wikipedia pages of both Robert Herrick and John Rutter,

girls delighting in one another on beaches and in fields, their names flashing across the screen, culminate in the reminder at the end of the commercial that said this: "The people you've been looking at all share a common belief — that a car saved their lives." "Volvo: Drive Safely" flashes across the screen as the final strains of Rutter's music and Herrick's poem ring out.² Now of course, the birth of Jesus is full of light and life, of hope, peace, joy, and love. But it leaves me to wonder: **why are we looking to a car to save our lives? And what, pray tell, is safe about the coming of the Messiah?**

That dissonance is precisely the place we find ourselves in during the season of Advent. For into the darkness of despair, where relationships languish in broken places and isolation settles into the very marrow of our bones, we proclaim a God who tears open the heavens to come down, and we sing out this season about the Hope of the World.

Into the darkness of war, where violence sacrifices communities on the altar of freedom, we proclaim a God through whose light all things become visible, and we sing out this season to the Prince of Peace.

Into the darkness of sadness, where deep and abiding gladness seems too much like either a distant memory or a pipe dream, we proclaim a God who turns our mourning into dancing, and we sing out this season to the Bringer of Joy.

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=34oJmFVAVFY>

And into the darkness of hatred, where brother and sister fall victim to the most elemental wound of fear, we proclaim a God whose messengers repeatedly say “do not be afraid!,” and we sing out this season to Love made flesh, perfect Love that casts out all fear.

A second question surfaces for me as I read the early birth narratives in the Gospel of Luke. Four songs (or canticles, as they’re called) emerge on the lips of these Christmas characters — some who are beloved staples in our annual celebrations, others who linger in the pages of our Bibles until we lift them out. From the moment the angel Gabriel proclaims favor on Mary of Nazareth until the first temple trip from Mary and Joseph and their young baby boy (not even two chapters in the text, mind you!), *four times* do we hear songs and hymns about the Christ child, four times we’re reminded of God’s goodness and promises of fulfillment, four times we learn that Christ will pierce the darkness, four times that these faithful messengers bear witness to the character of Christ — one who looks out for the overlooked, who guides our feet in the way of peace, who reveals God’s inherent glory, and who offers salvation for all people. And I wonder: **what is it about the incarnation that stirs a song within us all?**

Singing is, of course, deeply linked with the celebration of Advent and Christmas. In worship, we sing new hymns and old favorites that give space for our experience of the season. In shopping malls and on car radios, we hear tunes of ruddy reindeer and silver bells and chestnuts ablaze. And if you think about it, no other regularly-observed holiday has

this kind of musical tradition. As fun as it might be, we don't listen to Flag Day carols every June. Nor do we gather 'round a piano and all chime in together with our favorite Halloween songs.³ No, it's Christmas that evokes this long tradition of singing, a tradition that can be as nostalgic and desensitizing as the Bing Crosby record, or Amy Grant cassette, or Charlie Brown CD we lift off our shelves each year. But this seasonal music-making can also be awakening, where we proclaim a God-sized vulnerability in the face of a baby, a willingness to risk something big for something good, a bold and unexpected courage, and good news for all people that stirs and whispers through the heavens. For as our friend Bill Leonard who reminded us at our hymn festival just a short month ago: "A religion you can't sing isn't much religion at all. If we don't cry out, perhaps the rocks will sing out for us."⁴

Over these weeks of Advent, we will cry out with Mary, catching a glimpse of her beautiful soul chosen by God to magnify the Lord. From her great hymn of praise that is commonly called the *Magnificat*, we'll hear what carrying the Christ child shows her about God — a God who scatters the proud, brings down the powerful, lifts up the lowly, fills the hungry, sends away the rich.

³ Great article about why we sing Christmas carols can be found here: http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/assessment/2011/11/the_long_strange_history_of_christmas_carols.html

⁴ As quoted in Dr. Bill Leonard's keynote address during the "Let Justice Roll Down" hymn festival hosted by First Baptist Church on Fifth, November 5-6, 2017.

We'll sing with Zechariah, our lips and our lives unleashed as his was to proclaim blessing to the Lord God of Israel. His *Benedictus* tells of the forthcoming birth of his son, John, in whose life we Baptists trace our lineage. Through the redeeming, reconciling work of God, this prophet of the most high will call us all to preparation, readiness for the coming of the Messiah.

Our voices will cry out with the angels, reminding one another that God's good news is not to be feared. As they sing *Gloria*, we will remember the God who sent his Son, the bringer of peace to all the earth. And we will fight the urge to be terrified along with the shepherds, because the God we love and serve is the one who does tear open the heavens and come down, to which we cannot help but proclaim glory!

We will sing with Simeon, that great old prophet who longed to see God's salvation in the flesh. As the season of waiting draws to a close, like Simeon, we will be dismissed to take all that we have seen and heard and proclaim it.

This Advent season, we will sing and our songs will cry out — with Mary, with Zechariah, with the angels, with Simeon — and as we do, we will experience the God who fulfilled promises to the people of Israel, God who pierces the darkness with light, God whose good news is as real as flesh and blood. For as the writer of Ephesians claims, there is a real connection between singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs among

ourselves that enables us to awake from our slumber and live as children of the light!

If you were to think about the music of the 1980s, you'd probably have visions of hair bands and electronics dancing in your heads. But perhaps we all should remember the strains from Leipzig, Germany heard in 1989. You see, that was the era of communist rule prior to the fall of the Berlin Wall. Even as the darkness of repression and persecution surrounded them, citizens of Leipzig gathered each Monday evening by candlelight around the St. Nicholas Church, the church made famous by its 18th-century music director Johann Sebastian Bach. These Monday demonstrations were laced with song, where each passing week saw the addition of thousands to the protestors. Soon more than 300,000 filled the streets — more than half the citizens of Leipzig — and their songs of hope and justice and protest "shook the powers of their nation and changed the world." As legend tells us: "later, when someone asked one of the officers of the Stasi, the East German secret police, why they did not crush this protest like they had so many others, the officer replied, "We had no contingency plan for song!"⁵

You may feel the tug to approach this season with a song of safety in our hearts — humming the familiar carols while longing for the days of yesteryear, longing for safety this season and wishing that things were just

⁵ <http://www.davidlose.net/2015/12/advent-4-c-singing-as-an-act-of-resistance/>

as they used to be. But might we take our cue from these bold and faithful canticles and let the songs of Christmas spur us onto a full-throated concert of hope, peace, joy, and love? For God's lyric of the incarnation melody is clear: "There's no contingency plan needed! So do not be afraid!" What sweeter music, indeed. Amen!