

Bruton Parish Episcopal Church  
The Rev'd Dr. Daniel W. McClain, Associate Rector & College Chaplain  
Christmas Eve  
December 24, 2018

Many of you know that music plays an important role in my life. This is no less true this time of year.

I'm particularly fond of Nat King Cole's Christmas LP. Pretty much any song on that album captures that holiday ethos for me. I Love the warmth of it, the nostalgia it evokes, the good will and good feeling of tunes like the Christmas Song.

"Everybody knows a turkey and some mistletoe  
Help to make the season bright  
Tiny tots with their eyes all aglow  
Will find it hard to sleep tonight"

A song that embodies for some the joyful anticipation of our many traditions around Christmas, mostly the eating and gifting traditions.

Or consider the Christmas Waltz.

"Santa's on his way, he's filled his sleigh with things  
Things for you and for me..."

It's that time of year when the world falls in love  
Ev'ry song you hear seems to say 'Merry Christmas,  
May your New Year dreams come true'"

Both of these tunes rejoice in a Christmas of fulfillment (of a certain kind), a holiday in which we gather around giving and getting.

Now as much as I love these tunes, I also know that their vision of the season's brightness, of the sleeplessness of our children, doesn't quite grasp the fullness of this evening.

What is it that we celebrate when we observe Christmas? What could be left out, and we'd still have this bedrock of our faith?

As I reflected on this, I couldn't help but think about a different musical repertoire, the Advent and Christmas hymns we find in that blue book in your pews.

The sacred music of this season is one of the many things that the Anglican tradition does with excellence. It's not just the gorgeous tunes – the lyrics themselves are a priceless source of theological and spiritual formation.

These lyrics are so unlike those of our pop culture celebration of Christmas. In fact, I'm continually struck by how *uncomfortable* they are.

There's this abiding meditation on the depth of God's empathy and on the extent that God would go in the incarnation to be a friend to humanity, enmired in pain and suffering.

Christmas, at least as we find it in many of our classic hymns, is all about how God comes alongside us in our misery.

I found one hymn that I don't think I've ever sung before, number 97 in our hymnal if you want to turn there with me. It opens with a question to Christ: Why the humility in your birth?

Dost thou in a manger lie,  
Who hast all created,  
Stretching infant hands on high,  
Savior, long awaited?  
If a monarch, where thy state?  
Where thy court on thee to wait?  
Royal purple, where?  
Here no regal pomp we see;  
Naught but need and penury:  
Why thus cradled here?

A good question, isn't it?

In answer, we learn the reason for the humility. It's not just that our God is one of deepest empathy, but that through the solidarity of becoming human, God redeems us, saves us from our sin and invites us to something far greater than the lives we lead now: *abundant life and divine joy*.

Pitying love for fallen man  
Brought me down thus low;  
For a race deep lost in sin,  
Came I into woe.  
By this lowly birth of mine,  
Sinner, riches shall be thine,  
Matchless gifts and free;  
Willingly this yoke I take,  
And this sacrifice I make,  
Heaping joys for thee.

This is the beginning of the Good News that Christians share, the news that God has come amongst us.

We sing this message in countless other Christmas hymns. In the words of O Come Let us Adore Him, Christ,

"God from God, Light from Light eternal, abhors not the Virgin's womb... Child for us sinners, poor and in the manger."

And we know this message from the familiar readings, like those we heard from Isaiah, Titus, and Luke just now.

The birth of Christ isn't about holiday comfort, or good food, or even familial togetherness.

Rather, Christmas is about how we lost our togetherness with God and Christ begins the process of restoring it.

The eternally begotten Son of God chose for us to relinquish what is his by nature.

And he does so because humanity gave up what was its by grace: peace, concord, and love with God.

Christ restores that peace and fellowship by humbling himself, first through a human life, not in a castle or palace, but rather in the most meager of surroundings.

And second by humiliating himself in death, a convict's death.

I'm convinced that one of the hardest parts of celebrating Christmas is consciously holding in our minds the manger and the cross.

It's too tragic, it's too jarring to simultaneously think about that baby, surrounded by choirs of angels, and shepherds and his parents, to think about that baby crucified.

Hard as it is, however, it is that tension, that juxtaposition that is at the heart of Christmas. It is in this juxtaposition that we see *divine friendship* extended to humanity.

But that juxtaposition goes all the way back to the nativity in Bethlehem.

As one of my favorite theologians asks, "What is more loving than for the master to redeem the servant by taking the form of a servant? Certainly this is a deed of such unfathomable goodness that no greater proof of mercy, kindness, and friendship can be conceived."

Or in the words of one of our most beloved Christmas hymns  
We would embrace Thee, with love and awe;  
Who would not love Thee, loving us so dearly?  
Oh come let us adore him.

My friends, come, let us adore him, him through whom the worlds were made, him, the eternal Word of the Father. Let us adore him for he so loved that world that he made that he chose to enter into that World as one of us, and then died as one of us.

Let us ponder that divine love, that exceedingly wonderful act of friendship, reflecting on not only the manger, but the cross as well.

God reaches out to us, to the world, in love and friendship through the Incarnation.

As we reflect on this wondrous event, let us reach back to God, certainly in awe, but then also in Love.