

The Final Song of Christmas

sermon digest

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John 1:1-18

larry dipboye

During Advent and Christmas we have listened to the songs of Luke's birth stories. The four canticles in Luke reflect the importance of songs in early Christian life and share common ground with the practice of quoting hymns in the Epistles and the rich songs of Revelation in the rest of the New Testament. The canticles do more than add spice to the story. They suggest a commonly held faith that can be sung by an entire congregation and that forms a bridge between churches across vast distances in time and space. On this final Sunday of Christmas, we need to hear the final song of Christmas from a different Gospel with a significantly different tone. Luke's story of Christmas comes primarily from Mary's point of view. From Joseph's view, Matthew ties the birth story to dreams and visions in the Jewish tradition and provides a glimpse of the larger world of Epiphany, the manifestation of God in the star that led Gentiles to a Jewish event. Mark, probably the earliest Gospel, says nothing about the birth or childhood of Jesus, but begins the Jesus story with the mission and ministry at the Jordan and John's baptism. The Fourth Gospel (John) is also silent about baby Jesus and the role of Mary and Joseph in the birth of the Son of God, but John is far from silent about the origin of Jesus. John's Gospel opens with a song, probably borrowed or edited from another source. His Christmas canticle begins with Genesis, "in the beginning," and identifies Jesus as the Word that spoke the world into being, "the Word became flesh and dwelled among us." Because John is probably the last of the four Gospels to be written, his Christmas song has the distinction of being a final word about the origin of Jesus.

Songs stick in our memory. I learned a long time ago that people remember hymns and forget sermons. Music teaches theology and shapes our view of orthodoxy more than scriptures. While many of us can remember the words to three or four stanzas of "Amazing Grace," we probably cannot remember the subject, the scripture text, or an illustration from last Sunday's sermon. Songs of faith have long lived at the core of Jewish and Christian worship and have long served as a major bearer of theology from one generation to the next. Early Christians followed the strong Jewish tradition of singing the faith collected in the Psalms, but they went beyond repetition. They modified Jewish songs and composed new songs appropriate to their experience in Christ. The poetic lyrics of psalms can be found throughout our Old Testament. Hymns and hymn fragments, probably familiar to the first readers, have also been detected throughout our New Testament scriptures. Then as now, the songs served as anchors of memory for both the stories and the meaning of the Christian faith. Repetition is a major factor. Neither the message nor the music of a song has to be worth remembering; but, if sung repeatedly, both the words and the melody will stick.

I have retained words and melodies of hymns that would cause the Apostle Paul to gasp in horror, and I have found myself in the uncomfortable position of challenging the theology of a song that is more of a distortion or distraction from the gospel than a song of faith. In spite of the fact that music is not a magic medium that assures orthodoxy, I personally cannot imagine worship without music. Music is emotional. Music goes beyond mere intellect and the limits of human understanding to the joys and sorrows of life beyond description in mere words. The hymns and psalms and spiritual songs of the church, more than just entertaining moments, are soul music that probes the depths of our being far beyond the reaches of science or history.

What is your song? A facet of religion that cannot be ignored or avoided is the cultural root of each world religion. Hinduism and Buddhism, for example, reflect the Eastern culture in which they were born. Judaism also has an Eastern flavor with ties to a variety of cultures alien to the people of the Old Testament. Christianity was born in a Jewish culture and a Roman context. A peculiar geography is associated with the pages of the Bible, and specific religious teachings can easily be tied to political and social conditions in the surrounding community. Unfortunately religions tend to confuse the message with their cultural roots and demand that outsiders adopt insider habits.

The music of faith, like the music of life, does not come in one key, beat or language. Just like the church today, the church behind the Gospels contained a diversity of people. They did not come from the same family or from the same neighborhood. The inclusion of Gentiles in the church created immediate diversity to the point of division, of habits, language, and tastes. Some practices, like temple prostitution, were rejected; but others, like the common Greek language of the Roman world, became the medium for the Christian scriptures. The songs of Luke included Gentiles in the grace of God, but the Prologue to John's Gospel is sheer genius.

In the Jewish tradition, the poetry of creation describes God as speaking the world into existence. Jews had long held language to be a powerful expression of our humanity reflected in the creative power of Word in the creation. Gentiles had come into the church with another slant on the power of the word. The Word, the *logos* of Greek thought, was the power of reason and harmony that holds the world together. The lines and fragments of John's Christmas song were probably borrowed, whether from Jewish, Christian, Gnostic, or

Gentile sources no one knows for sure. But the message brings together the Jewish songs of faith in God as Creator and Greek ideas of a power beyond our control that runs the universe. Both are tied to the Word. Whatever the idea that *WORD* sparks in your thought and experience, John proclaims, "the Word became flesh."

As the Gospels were being written, the writers could distinguish various levels of understanding of both the Jewish faith and theological abstractions. People with strong Jewish moorings brought a radically different understanding to the gospel than folks who had only known Platonic philosophy. Jews liked stories about people that touched on history. Greeks loved abstract thought, theories, and philosophy that explained the furniture of life. John's Gospel contains stories about Jesus, but more than the other Gospels, John gets to the theology behind and beyond the story.

After several years of graduate study I found myself more in tune with John's idea of Christmas than Luke's. I recall a discussion of the issue of virgin birth in a bull session with fellow students. The question was, "what do you do when the church tests your orthodoxy with a yes-no question, 'do you believe in the virgin birth of Christ?'" One of my friends said, "I would change the subject to the Gospel of John and talk about the Incarnation, the word become flesh." My friend was not really dodging the question. Without elaboration, he was saying that John proclaims in the language of a hymn what Matthew and Luke present as a story.

In casual conversation with friends in the church, we were struggling with the different opinions of what makes a good sermon. We kept hearing from the younger crowd that they wanted more illustrations and stories. They did not resonate with theology or abstract ideas. Reflecting her roots, Irene Keller-Rankin recalled her father's criticism of a pastor; his sermon was trivial, too many stories.

I think that I have made a discovery of profound dimensions. Some people follow stories better than abstract ideas. Some listen for the emotion as well as the facts. Some folks prefer opera over jazz and Bach over Isaac Watts. What is your song?

The Christmas message of Matthew and Luke touch the same sensitive question that John dares to address, "what is the source, the origin, of the man Jesus?" Whether we prefer the stories of Matthew and Luke or the song of John, the source is the same, Jesus is a man who came from God. Matthew and Luke see the beginning issue as conception and birth, while John begins at the very beginning of beginnings, the creation of the world and the cosmic order of things. Just as you may prefer Bach to Watts, you have a right to prefer one Gospel over another; and if you look long and hard enough, you might just see the common message.

Songs lead to action. "Elevator music" is intended to stay in the background where it can be ignored. Some music brings us to our feet in the steady beat of a march or the play of a dance. The songs of faith, the music of life, are more than entertainment to make us feel warm and cozy. The message of the Christmas song calls us to our feet. The Word become flesh in the action of God may sound like an abstract theological note, but in John's mind it was rooted in the church's experience of the man Jesus. John consistently proclaimed that Jesus was God's act in history. Call it an abstraction if you wish, but the action of God in the Incarnation of Christ moves toward tangible experience: "what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life." (1 John 1:1) The message came down to that critical moment when the risen Christ commissioned his disciples, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." (20:21)

If indeed we are followers of Jesus, the church that sings her faith on Sunday ought to put flesh and bones on that faith on Monday. The power behind the creation of the world that became flesh in Christ can be known to the world in your flesh and mine.