

TABLE SONG  
Isaiah 9:2-7  
December 20, 2009

Each year, when this morning's scripture from Isaiah is read, I have a very difficult time speaking it.

It's not because there's that one disturbing verse in the middle of the beautiful prose promising great light in the midst of darkness—that verse 5 which sticks in my throat when I read it because it tells of things that are not light and beautiful—the tramping of soldiers and their garments rolled in blood.

It's not because Isaiah had just prophesied punishment to his people when he said in Chapter 8, "Be ye broken, you peoples, and be ye dismayed".

Each year, when Isaiah 9:2-7 comes up in the Advent readings, I have a very difficult time speaking it—

--because I want to sing it!

I can't hear this text without hearing the music of Handel in my head—

"For unto us a child is born."

I have to push myself to say in one phrase

"Wonderful counselor"

—there's always that urge to put in the melodic pause.

Isaiah's prophecy compels my heart to *sing* the Good News of Messiah's birth.

And it's not the only text that does it. In truth, many of the scriptures around Christ's birth bring a song to my lips.

More than any of the other holidays in the secular and Christian calendar, Christmas inspires song. While other holy-days have hymns attached to it—like Easter's "Christ the Lord is Risen Today" and Pentecost's "Spirit of God, Descend Upon My Heart", no other holiday comes close to the quantity of music that accompanies it as Christmas.

Why is it that this season elicits such an urge to lift up our voices in song? Why is it that December days are accompanied by background music?

It's been that way from the beginning. The gospel of Luke breaks into song several times as it tells the story leading up to Jesus' birth.

- Zechariah's angel sings as he tells the old priest that he and his wife Elizabeth would give birth to a son in their old age, who would be "great before the Lord" and whose job it was "to make ready for the Lord a people prepared."
- Mary lifts her voice in song after the angel tells her that she would bear the Son of God into the world, and she trills, "My soul magnifies the Lord."
- And, of course, the most famous music of all was sung by the angelic choir announcing Jesus' birth to shepherds in the field, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace."

Over the 2 millennia that our faith has celebrated God's physical union with the world, we have been moved to sing in order to express that which mere words are unable to express. We have sung so much that the practice of it has even seeped in our secular observance of Christmas, so that we hear music wherever we go.

Now admittedly, some of our contemporary Christmas music has taken a turn toward mushy sentimentality and cutesy carols that, while they warm the heart, do not take into account the awe-inspiring greatness of Immanuel/God with us.

Though I love Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer as much as anybody, it's a far cry from the majesty of the Hallelujah chorus, or the quiet reverence of Silent Night.

Dr. Leonard Sweet, currently the E. Stanley Jones Professor of Evangelism at Drew University in Madison, NJ, cautioned in a sermon to "Beware of Cute."

He writes, "This is the time of year when we need to be on high alert for cute. We love cuteness. This is a cute-driven culture. And this season of the year turns everything it touches into glitz and cuteness."

But the story of Jesus' birth wasn't cute.  
The Annunciation wasn't cute.  
The virgin birth wasn't cute.  
The Magnificat wasn't cute.  
The little town of Bethlehem wasn't cute.  
The killing of the innocents wasn't cute.

The nativity genealogy puts Mary in the lineage of Tamar, Rahab, Bathsheeba, and Ruth (yes, the one who snuck in to the rich Boaz's tent at night while he was sleeping to seduce him). Jesus' genealogy is not cute.

Golgotha wasn't cute.

"Crux" in Latin means cross. The crux of Christianity is the cross. And the cross isn't cute.

The old Christian calendar had ways of resisting this cultural drift into cuteness. On 26 December, the church celebrated the martyrdom of Saint Stephen. On 28 December the death of the infants whom Herod killed was remembered.

In other words, the Christmas story was part of a larger story that dealt with injustice, suffering and even death. The joy of Christmas wasn't a cute joy, but a joy that overcame obstacles and negatives." Collected Sermon, "Beware of Cute." Leonard Sweet, ChristianGlobe Network, Inc.,

We have to be careful not to be taken in by the commercialized jingle of Jingle Bells, which has its place in the season, but is not the focus of why this holiday exists in the first place.

Isaiah's prophetic hymn helps re-settle us in the center of our observance. He sings about the eternal struggle of good verses evil, light verses dark, life verses death. Though I would like to skip verse 5 altogether—in fact, I originally told the Carson's this morning they could take poetic liberty and not include it in their Advent reading

—we have to take seriously our reality that in our world today:

- there is still a war going on; and that Christmas day will be like any other day on the battlefield, with the potential for men and women on both sides of the war to die.

We have to take seriously that in our community today

- over 3000 children were not chosen on the Salvation Army Angel Tree—the largest number of unclaimed gift-receivers in recent years.

We have to take seriously that in our homes today

- some of us are bearing the burdens of worry and anxiety over financial stresses
- some of us are bearing the weight of grief and loss
- some of us are bearing the overwhelming darkness of depression and physical disease
- some of us are bearing the quiet despair of loneliness
- some of us are bearing the fear of being victims of crime.

The power of Christmas does not come the night before with visions of sugarplums dancing in our heads.

The power of Christmas comes in the birth of a baby who changes the world by transforming death into life.

The Power of Christmas comes because God so loves the world that he gave us his only begotten son.

There really are no words that can express the immensity of that message.

And so, we have to sing, for it is only through music that we tap into the mystery of our love song to God.

I don't want to put words into our Minister of Worship and Music's mouth, but I would suspect that one of the reasons why Sing We Now of Christmas is scheduled for today, the Sunday before Christmas, is that in our worship we will share in tonight, we offer up our best Love Song to God.

Whenever the Morgan family gathers at table together like we will do in 5 days, as we prepare to bless our meal, the adults ask the kids what prayer they would like to offer. Always, the little children in our family request a singing prayer, most often "For Health and Strength." Already my nieces and nephews seem to understand that it is through song that we express our deepest thanks to our God for the blessings we've received, the love he's given to us.

The last four Sundays, as a church family, we have gathered around the Lord's Table for the Feast of Advent. We have fed on words of hope, peace, joy, and today, love.

How appropriate it was that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, which literally translated means "House of Bread."

And so I end this sermon with excerpts from a poem entitled "Song of Bethlehem," and I invite us, as we hear the words, to also be aware of angels voices making melody in the background, echoing our own joyous strains.

"I was a shepherd on that star-filled night  
In Bethlehem...

For here of David's family Christ was born  
And alleluias rang from night till morn!

Yes I, a shepherd on that holy night  
In Bethlehem, saw the star, whirling bright,  
It Shattered the darkness like a shaft of light,  
Shedding great gleams of glory from afar.

Ah Bethlehem, my home, my house of bread.

Here let my body and my soul be fed." (Melva Rorem "Song of Bethlehem" Illustrations Unlimited. pp. 82-83).

May the song of Christmas feed our souls this day. Amen.