

# December 3, 2023

## Experiencing Christmas: Sing a New Song

### Isaiah 42:1-4, 9-10; Luke 2:8-20



We've entered into the season of Advent. This is the time of year that we spend getting ready for the coming of the Christ child at Christmas. The idea of Advent comes from what would be done in cities to prepare for a King's visit. Things would be cleaned up, spruced up, and the whole village would be filled with anticipation, awaiting the coming of the King. During this season, leading up to Christmas, we are preparing for the King of Kings and Lord of Lords to come as a baby. As we learned last week, it's about more than waiting with anticipation—it's waiting with expectation—knowing that God sees the world through eyes of hope, challenging our imaginations for what God can do through the coming of a little child.

To help us prepare during this Advent, we have been looking at Matt Rawle's book, "Experiencing Christmas: Christ in the Sights and Sound of Advent", and it's not too late to join a small group if you are looking for some friendly conversation to go deeper than we are able to do on a Sunday morning. This series is challenging us to Experience Christmas through our senses. To consider how, when God became human in Jesus, God saw through our eyes, heard through our ears, tasted and felt what we do. Last week, we focused on the Sights of Advent that bring hope—bring light into the darkness. This week, we turn to our sense of hearing.

By now, the sounds of Advent are everywhere. When I ask about the sounds of Advent, what are the first things that come to mind? Go ahead and turn to your neighbor and share with them what you think about when we talk about the sounds of Christmas or Advent. 10 seconds...

OK- shout it out- what sounds do you associate with Christmas?

Christmas Carols.... I am going to take a quick poll this morning, and it requires your participation. I'm going to guess that I will see everyone's hand raised at some point.

Raise your hand if...

You heard a Christmas Carol on your way into church today? This week? Started listening months ago?

Music is powerful, especially at Christmas time. In many ways, it underscores our experiences, like the scores in movies. Music transports us back to times and place in our lives, like little else can. It's even been shown to reach those who are living with Alzheimer's. A piece of music can play, and we are suddenly back to a certain time and place.

Christmas carols are no different-- I'm guessing that you have a favorite Christmas carol. Do you want to call them out? Maybe give us some ideas of songs that we want to include?

With each of these songs that are mentioned today, there's something that has touched your heart, shaped your experience. A back story for why that is your favorite...

For me, my favorite carol is "Silent Night". Yes, this carol recalls images for me of standing in sanctuaries, as darkness is turned to light when one candle after another is lit by the light of Christ. It also carries for me memories of holding my infant son in the first months of his life. My oldest son, Joshua, was born on November 19<sup>th</sup>. As I held him through those first few weeks, I found myself singing to him, "Silent Night" as a lullaby. As I look back now, it was probably also a prayer of mine during those sleepless nights. I wanted more than anything a Silent Night and for us all to get some peaceful sleep.

As the days and weeks wore on, this became his lullaby, and it continued long after Christmas. In fact, when his brother was born in January a few years later, he too, was rocked with the song, "Silent Night."

Music is powerful, and it's hard to think about Christmas apart from music. Add sleigh bells to any song, and it's an instant Christmas classic. The apostle Paul tells us that faith comes by hearing, and that's true. Music is an incredible way to communicate our theology, values, celebrations, and laments. Songs like "Silent Night", "Joy to the World" and "Hark! the Herald Angels Sing" draw us ever closer to the manger and conveys to us a hopeful vision for the future in words, like

"Joyful, all ye nations rise, join the triumph of the skies." "Joy to the World, the Lord has Come.... Let every heart prepare Him room and heaven and nature sing"

These words and sounds draw us ever nearer to the manger where Christ came to bring hope, peace, love, and joy to a hurting world.

Yet, there is surprisingly little music when we look at the Christmas story. You might be surprised to hear that the angels didn't actually sing their praise. When they appeared to the shepherds, Luke 2:13 tells us that "suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and *saying*, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom He favors!" Matt Rawle points out here that the word for praising is "aineo" which means "speaking of the excellence of God".

Luke uses this word at only a few other places in the scripture. Just a few verses later, the shepherds have gone to see Mary and Joseph and have found Jesus just as the angels told them, and in verse 20, the shepherds return "praising God for all they had heard and seen." As Rawle says, "It's striking that the shepherds began mimicking or imitating the kind of language that they received from the angels." (Rawle, p. 47). The Good news is hard to keep to yourself. It's infectious and joyful. It must be shared!

I can't imagine that with all this going on, it was a very "Silent Night" in Bethlehem that night. Think of all the sounds that Jesus might have heard that night. The sounds of the animals that surrounded Him, the cries of his mother going through labor, the sounds of the travelers outside the cave/stable, the rustle of the

wind.... Mary would have heard Jesus' first cries. Did Jesus hear the beating of his mother's heart, her soft lullaby sung to put Him to sleep?

I can just imagine Mary getting Jesus calmed and asleep, laying him in the manger, and suddenly, this group of rowdy shepherds appear. You see, shepherding was a despised occupation in the eyes of the first-century elite. The shepherds likely were nomads, and here they burst into the stable where Mary had given birth, where Jesus rested in a manger.

I can imagine the shushing that might have come.

We know that feeling, don't we? When the sounds of Christmas get too loud? The title of this chapter in the book is, "Do you hear what I hear?" and I can't help but think of the song, the little drummer boy. When I was little, I can remember my family playing this in our small church where I grew up. My dad played the drum, my sister the flute, and I played the clarinet. I loved the song. But, after having children, I can't help but think, "Who would want a 'little drummer boy' to come play around a newborn?!" That's the last gift a new mother would want to receive.

Sometimes, the sounds of Christmas are too loud, it's like the little drummer boy has come to play on our last nerve. We are stressed over the unknown. We are tired, weary, maybe even in pain. Perhaps, we've experienced the pain of loneliness or heartbreak, we are coming into Christmas missing, grieving for someone we love. The grief might be fresh or maybe it is lingering. Maybe we have struggled this year with the loss of health- we aren't able to do the things that we used to be able to do, or we are facing challenges of the unknown. Some have lost jobs and aren't sure what tomorrow will bring. We understand that some Christmases are hard or painful and make us long for silent nights. Some Christmases, the sounds of joy around us don't resonate with the sounds of sadness or perhaps even silence that play in our hearts.

I can't help but think of Mary- she was a young girl, giving birth, away from home and all that she knew, she was in a stable for heavens sake, she has gone through the pain of childbirth. And now, adding to all of that, here come the shepherds who come, not quietly I'm sure, to share what they had heard about this child.

She listened intently to them, considering all these things in her heart. She heard the good news that peace was on the way, what the angels had said. Yet, Mary's response seems so counter to that of the shepherds. As Rawle puts it, she seems "unapologetically unafraid to rest in this quiet place." (55)

A few days later, when taking Jesus to be dedicated at the Temple, she will hear Simeon offer the prophecy that "a sword will pierce her heart". We don't know how Mary took this news, but she is acquainted with holding the both/ands of the uncertainty of the future, fear and heartache, with the promise of salvation and hope. So, if you are feeling this or struggling with this today, know that you are not alone, in fact, this is the tension that God in Christ helps us to live within.

Rawle puts it this way, "This is why God blessed us with harmony. When heaven and nature sing together, when the fully divine and fully human melodies come together in the person of Jesus, we find our harmonic peace. Peace isn't passive. It's a hard-fought reality sometimes reachable only through unspeakable lament. Do you hear what I hear?... What your neighbor hears? What God hears? What melody do you offer with which your neighbor might harmonize?" (59),

I was listening to a podcast this week, and Michael Stipe from the band REM said that he hears harmonies everywhere he goes. Do we? Can we find ways to harmonize with our neighbors to bring peace on earth? To offer them hope when they are singing songs of sadness or despair?

Paul Simon shared on another episode of that podcast that he believes that every song finds its completion in the hearer. So, perhaps when we hear the silence or the dissonance of painful times, we might also listen for the harmony that tells us of peace on earth and justice and hope. Maybe those two seemingly disparate themes might complete a song of praise in our hearts and lives. Maybe this is the new song that Isaiah is telling us about. The old has passed away, the new song has come, to be completed in each one of us.

Perhaps that song comes in the silence of a mother caring for her child. Or, maybe it's the praise of the angels and shepherds that point us toward the child in a manger. The music of both are found at the manger where the God of the universe made the chasm between heaven and earth razor thin. In the place where Jesus came to hear the cries of those in need, those in pain, those who suffer from injustice, those who cry out for mercy.

God came to earth to hear the needs of God's people, to cry out with them, to hear as we hear. But, do we hear as God hears?

Do we hear the voices of the hurting and helpless that cry out in the middle of the night? Do we hear the voices of frustration of those who only want to be treated the same as their brothers and sisters? Do we hear cries for freedom?

Then, to go a step further, do we not only hear their cries, but also hear God calling us to speak for the lonely, lost, and last? Do we hear God calling us to be a part of bringing justice and peace to a hurting world?

Are we singing or shouting or sharing the praises as those who have witnessed the love of God that came down to earth, the God who loved us so much that God came to us so that our needs no longer need to raise to the heavens? Are we those voices? Do we raise our voices, like the shepherds, to mimic the offerings of heaven? Do we offer words and songs of hope, peace, love and joy to a struggling world? At the same time, can we hold space for the silence of pondering hearts and allow them to sing a new song? Do we allow God's Advent song to be completed in us?

Sometimes, we are the shepherds, filled with notes of wonder and awe, praising God. Sometimes, we sing the harmonies, crying out with pain and confusion, and sometimes, we rest—holding it all in our hearts, trying to make sense of it, as we wait to play our next note. Through it all, God's music draws us to the manger, for moments of quiet pondering, for moments of joy, and for all the moments in between. God's music draws us to the least, lonely, and lost. God's music draws us to proclaim the hope of having seen and heard the God of heaven come to earth.

May the sounds of Christmas call you to the manger to see the babe that we've been told about. The one who completes in us a new song- a song that proclaims "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth, peace among those whom He favors."

Blessing:

May the sounds and songs of Christmas bring you hope, peace, joy, and love and may you go with shepherds and angels, praising God for all that you have seen and heard. Amen.

### The Shepherds and the Angels

8In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

10But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 11to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. 12This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” 13And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

14“Glory to God in the highest heaven,  
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

15When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” 16So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. 17When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; 18and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. 19But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. 20The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.