

CAROLS AND MEDITATIONS

Meditations preached at
Plymouth Congregational Church
1900 Nicollet Avenue
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55403

December 25, 2011

“Once in Royal David’s City”

Shannon T. L. Kearns
Youth Activities Coordinator

*Once in royal David’s city,
Stood a lowly cattle shed,
Where a mother laid her baby
In a manger for His bed:
Mary was that mother mild,
Jesus Christ her little child.*

“Once In Royal David’s City” was originally published in 1848 and was specifically written to be a song for children, particularly to teach them about obedience. One of the verses that we no longer sing says:

*And through all His wondrous childhood,
He would honor and obey,
Love and watch the lowly mother,
In whose gentle arms He lay.
Christian children all should be,
Mild, obedient, good as He.*

It’s a nice sentiment. But Jesus wasn’t mild and obedient. He ran away from his parents as a child, he turned over the tables in the Temple as an adult, he was arrested and crucified as an insurrectionist against Rome. This is not the tale we tell in our Christmas carols.

We paint pictures of a picturesque Bethlehem, a quiet manger, a silent baby. But the reality was a lot more complicated. Jesus was born to refugee parents in the occupied Roman Empire. His birth was felt to be a threat to established order, a threat to the King. In “The Song of the Magi” by Anaïs Mitchell, she sings:

*A child is born
born in Bethlehem
born in a cattle pen
a child is born on the killing floor
and still he no crying makes
still as the air is he
lying so prayerfully there
waiting for the war*

*welcome home, my child
your home is a checkpoint now
your home is a border town
welcome to the brawl
And life ain't fair, my child
put your hands in the air, my child
slowly now, single file, now
up against the wall*

What a different picture that paints! And yet it is much closer to the truth of Jesus' birth. We cannot divorce our stories of Jesus from the reality of the time in which they were lived.

Some might say that knowing this history takes away from the wonder and peace of the Christmas season, but I think knowing this history deepens our understanding of what it means for God to enter into the mess of human existence. Jesus wasn't born to people with wealth and power; he was born to the poor, and that, to much of the world, is good news.

And in this radical incarnation we understand a calling not to be obedient and mild but to an upheaval of the established order. We sing the Magnificat with Mary:

*My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for God has looked with favor on the lowliness of God's servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is God's name.
God's mercy is for those who fear God
from generation to generation.
God has shown strength with God's arm;
God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
God has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
God has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
God has helped God's servant Israel,
in remembrance of God's mercy,
according to the promise God made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.*

Once in royal David's city was born a child who called us to a restructuring of values, a reordering of how we understand power. This baby, in all his vulnerability, brings us to understand how God cares for the vulnerable. And teaches us, in turn, what we are called to do: Speak truth to power, overturn the tables of those who put profit before people and be in the mess with people wherever there is injustice. This is the message of Christmas: God with us. God in us. Bringing the good news of a new hope to all who have felt forgotten.

“Jesus, Our Brother, Strong and Good”

***the Rev. Dr. Paula Northwood
Minister for Education***

The carol “Jesus, Our Brother, Strong and Good,” is also known as “The Friendly Beasts,” “The Song of the Ass,” “The Donkey Carol” or “The Gift of the Animals.” It is a traditional Christmas song about the gifts that a donkey, a cow, a sheep, a camel and a dove gave to Jesus at the Nativity. The song seems to have originated in 12th century, set to the melody of the Latin song “Orientis partibus,” which first appeared in France and is usually attributed to Pierre de Corbeil, Bishop of Sens. The tune is said to have been part of the “Donkey’s Festival,” which celebrated the flight of the Holy Family into Egypt and was a regular Christmas observance. As part of the mass, a donkey was led or ridden into the church. Donkeys, of course, were important beasts of burden at the time, being inexpensive to maintain compared to the amount of work they could do. The early lyrics were all focused on the donkey and finished with the chorus “Hail, Sir donkey, hail.” When the song made it to England during that time, it began to take on its modern character. The current English words were written by Robert Davis in the 1920s.

Some of you might remember that Burl Ives included the song on his 1952 album *Christmas Day in the Morning*. Since then, it has been recorded by many other artists, including Harry Belafonte; Johnny Cash; Peter, Paul and Mary; and Garth Brooks. It’s a popular carol I think because of its charm. What’s not to like about such cute, self-sacrificing animals? Including them adds some magic while also making the story more real and humble.

Initially, I picked this carol because of its presumed low Christology. I like the idea of Jesus being a brother, who is strong, good and humble. There is no mention of his mission on earth, no messianic expectations. It’s just a simple song about a baby receiving gifts from the animals. Nativity scenes down through the ages include the donkey, cow, sheep and often the dove, even though there is no mention of any animals in the stable in any of the infancy Gospel passages. No donkey is mentioned when Mary and Joseph travel either to Bethlehem or Egypt, no cow in the stable, only the flocks the shepherds watched are mentioned. We simply assume that animals were present because they were such an important part of daily life 2,000 years ago.

And even though we are a bit more removed from them now in an urban setting, animals still are important to our survival as a source of food, clothing and companionship. Animals have ways of knowing that even to this day mystify us. We’ve all read that animals behave differently before an earthquake or tsunami. They seem able to pick up creation’s mood where their hooves meet the ground. If you have pets, you know that they sense your mood without any words or signs. They may offer a lick or come up for a cuddle when you most need it.

The lyrics of this carol are about the gifts the animals give to the Holy Family, which raises the question: “What would I give?” What would you give? We often want to know what is required of us. What are the expectations? Some think it’s belief. For others, it is right action and pious devotion. The Magi thought it was gold, frankincense and myrrh. Maybe the shepherds were closer to the mark. They simply brought themselves—dirty, imperfect, confused but humble and open to new life.

What did the animals know that night? They must have felt the very earth singing that God is not merely for us, or with us...but *in* us...whether or not we are able to give ourselves. Awaken to the gift that you are.

Let this be our prayer as we sing about the friendly beasts and the gifts they have to share.

“Angels We Have Heard on High”

Tara Bauer
Pastoral Resident

Often at this time of year, many people tire of hearing Christmas Carols. After all, some songs have been heard over and over by the time we reach Christmas. We may have shut our ears to the meanings of these songs and what it is that they seek to inspire within us: perhaps a sense of awe, a sense of majesty or even quiet gratitude.

One song that always calls me to celebration is the carol “Angels, We Have Heard on High.” This carol was written around the 18th century, possibly from a French folk tune called “Les Anges dans nos campagnes.” (Pardon my French.) The French title literally means, “Angels in the Countryside.” It was first translated into English by a Roman Catholic Bishop, James Chadwick, to “Angels, We Have Heard on High” and appeared in the book *The Holy Family Hymns* in 1860. Since then the song has been translated into several other languages and has been adjusted many times in its English form.

One such adjustment occurred in verse four: rather than sing, “Mary, Joseph, lend your aid, while our hearts in love we raise,” one composer changed it to “Lend your voices, lend your aid, to proclaim the Savior’s birth,” in order to avoid calling upon Mary and Joseph for aid, due to the composer’s theological difference. Although we sang the fourth verse with Mary and Joseph last night from the bulletin, you will not find a fourth verse in your hymnal. Why, I don’t know, so you can draw your own conclusions.

Regardless of theological differences, the rousing “Gloria in excelsis Deo” has long captured my heart with childlike enthusiasm. It reflects most of the Latin I know, and the “Deo” always makes me think of Harry Belafonte.

More importantly, it always sparked my imagination to envision this immanent choir of countless angels, as multiple as the night stars seen from countryside hills.

After all, when we pay attention to the words of the carol, we find that it is most likely the song of rejoicing shepherds returning to their flocks from having visited a newborn baby, the Christ child. The shepherds sing with uncontained joy and glee.

In the second verse, someone questions the shepherds as to why there is this great jubilee, to which the shepherds basically reply, “We have heard the angels, now go look and see who the angels sing about.” These carols are not meant to be words strung together and set to a snappy tune, but a movement, an expression to help us to see clearly this gift of God.

So on this Holy Morning, I invite you to hear this song anew. When we sing “Gloria in excelsis Deo” (“Glory to God in the highest”), I hear our voices lifting to the heights with those humble shepherds and the magnitude of glorious hosts. We become one as a rejoicing choir proclaiming welcome and gratitude to God in the highest for the presence of God with us.