

From the Community Pulpit
“A Time for Singing”

#7 in the *CHRISTMASTIMES* series

Texts: Isaiah 9:2, 6-7, Luke 2:1-14

Sermon by Dr. Robert Lee Hill

Sunday, December 25, 2011

10:45 a.m. (Sanctuary)

✧ Community Christian Church ✧ 4601 Main ✧ Kansas City, Missouri ✧ 64112 ✧ 816.561.6531 ✧

Merry Christmas! It's Christmastime and that means it's time for singing!

We've now reached the culmination of our *CHRISTMASTIME* series.

Four Sundays ago, we began the series by considering the theme of hope as “*A Time for Letting Go of the Past.*”

Then we looked at “*A Time for Being at Peace.*”

In a brief communion meditation, on our special Christmas Sunday, which was also *Gaudate* Sunday, we celebrated “*A Time for Real Joy.*”

Then last Sunday, we explored love as “*A Time for Second Chances,*” a phrase which captures Jesus' life and ministry and what he proclaimed about the possibilities of love among us.

This past Wednesday, during our Traveler's Christmas Eve Service, we illuminated Christmas as “*A Time for Light.*”

Ultimately, in each of our four beautiful candlelight Christmas Eve services, we shared with great feeling and poignancy what it means to celebrate our “*First Christmases.*”

Now on Christmas morning, it truly is “*A Time for Singing,*” as we continue to enjoy some of the greatest music in the Christian music repertoire.

Singing is surely the best way for proclaiming “Merry Christmas.”

Whether in dulcet, whispered tones or with bold blasts of gusto, singing helps when spoken words fall short. Not that saying what we feel about God and faith aren't important. They are. But in expressing what's deepest within us, music, more often than not, elicits our grandest affections and our strongest adorations.

This morning, very briefly, I'd like to amplify four specific Christmastime songs and highlight their special significances.

Four Sundays ago, we began our journey to the Christmas cradle with "*O Come, O Come Emmanuel*" and last night at the "midnight mass," as it's commonly called, The Chancel Choir's opening Introit was also "*O Come, O Come Emmanuel*," ushering in our blessing of the Christ Child.

"*O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*" is one of our oldest Christmas songs, with words dating back to a 12th century gathering of seven antiphons that employed seven Old Testament names for the Messiah. Its music dates back to a 15th century funeral processional used by French nuns as a devotional hymn.

All of which conveys the power that Christmastime music possesses to transform even something associated with death into something life-giving.

"*Joy to the World*," which culminated three of our Christmas Eve Services and commenced this one, is the most popular hymn among Disciples of Christ. Did you know that? On July 27, 1992, at Walden Inn in Greencastle, Indiana, The *Chalice Hymnal* Development Committee cast its

very first vote for the new hymnal they were creating. The first song for inclusion in the new hymnal was “Joy to the World!” According to a denomination-wide survey the committee had used, it was recognized as the most widely sung hymn by Disciples congregations.

“*Joy to the World!*” is without a doubt, the most popular of the six hundred hymns composed by Isaac Watts, the father of English hymnody.

You should also know that “*Joy to the World!*” was not originally a Christmas song but rather a hymn giving voice to Psalm 98:4, 9 (“*Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth... for he is coming....*”). Don’t be surprised if we sing it before next Christmas, say in April !

All of which conveys that Christmastime is not to be kept only to December 25th but truly can be celebrated at any time.

There’s a Christmas carol that’s not in our hymnal, and its absence is a shame.

I first heard “*In the Bleak Midwinter*” as a cut from an album by insanely talented guitarist John Fahey, who was probably more famous for influencing Leo Kottke. After turning the corner at Westport Road and Broadway, I literally had to stop my Jeep and park it in order to hear the entirety of the tune.

“*In the Bleak Midwinter*” is one of the loveliest songs ever to express the Christmas story. The words are by the English poet Christian Rosetti who died ten years before her poem was given a musical setting by Gustav Holst, now known famously for his symphony *The Planets*. The words describe the needfulness of the world, the great and simple grace of the

Nativity, and the exquisitely plain and genius response we can give to the gift of Christ.

*In the bleak midwinter, frosty wind made moan,
Earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone;
Snow had fallen, snow on snow, snow on snow,
In the bleak midwinter, long ago.*

....

*What can I give Him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;
If I were a Wise Man, I would do my part;
Yet what I can I give Him: give my heart.*

“Silent Night” is without peer or competitor as “the most popular Christmas carol in the United States.” The words by clergyman Joseph Mohr and the music by organist Franz Gruber made their debut on Christmas Eve 1818 in the Austrian village of Obendorf, at, appropriately enough, St. Nicholas Catholic Church. Legend has it that the organ at the St. Nicholas Church broke down, so Gruber provided guitar accompaniment for the song’s debut. Whether sung in the original German (*“Stille Nacht”*) or proffered by a group of 8 year-olds in a Christmas pageant or sanctified beyond imagining by Millie Edwards, *“Silent Night”* maintains, year after year, its capacity to swell our praise, expand our wonder, and magnify our awe in the presence of God who would deign to stoop low and grace us with unconditional love.

So, Merry Christmas! And let’s keep on singing! And let us know the

gifts that singing provides at all times, including at Christmastime.

- (1) As we “attempt to describe an event beyond description – the birth of divinity in a child” nothing is better than music.
- (2) Music, all kinds of music but especially music at Christmastime, will increase your peacefulness. Music, better than almost anything else (except for maybe the euphonic waves at a beach), increases endorphin rush in our biochemical make-up and therefore our equanimity and sense of calmness.
- (3) Singing is egalitarian. That is, music always is an “equal opportunity” occasion for blessing. Everyone can sing, even if you can’t carry a tune. You can take your instrument everywhere. Everywhere you are, there your voice is, too! And because of this mobility, you can sing everywhere – at home, in the shower, at the kitchen sink, in your car, on a walk, in your own mind and heart and soul!
- (4) Music helps us reclaim our child-likeness. Music at Christmastime has the power to transform the crustiest, sometimes even the most hard-hearted, among us into the children we once were. Becoming like a child is as close to the holy as we can possibly manage. Like our Song of the Christ Candle proclaims today:

Grace is a gift that dwells in our souls,

Jesus comes home and makes the world whole.

When God is a child there's joy in our song

*The last shall be first and the weak shall be strong,
and none shall be afraid.*

So, again, Merry Christmas! And let's keep on singing!

(NOTE: I'm grateful for Bill Henderson's *Simple Gifts: Great Hymns: One Man's Search for Grace* (New York: Free Press, 2006) and our Disciples' *Chalice Hymnal: Worship Leader's Companion* (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 1998) which supplied background information for some of the songs described in this sermon.)