

## Advent Week 2: Song - 4th December 2022

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[ 0 : 00 ] So I think last week Matt talked a bit about Christmas lights and basically since his sermon I've noticed that thousands of Christmas lights have started going up around Burntwood, which is always a joy. I remember when we first came to visit this place and we were just blown away by how into Christmas you were and we thought it was going to be a cheerful place to live. I think it's wonderful. The other way you can sometimes feel that Christmas is about to come is through the songs. So I don't know if you've been listening to the soundtrack in Morrison's lately, but they have been squeezing some festive numbers in there.

Now I don't know about you, but I personally have a competition with my friends which is to go as far as you can towards Christmas without hearing Wham's song last Christmas. So far on day four of December I'm still safe and I'm still in the game. I know other people who have already heard that song. Now I think when it comes to Christmas songs there are basically kind of three types of Christmas songs very broadly. So we've got kind of type one which is the kind of white Christmas, last Christmas thing. You know songs which are about how cold it is, how bright and fun it is, how nice it is to have an excuse for an extra drink in the middle of winter, how nice it is to fall in love or how sad it is to miss someone. And these songs are kind of part of the big Christmas story in the UK. They're kind of like the traditional Christmas movies. Does anyone here watch Christmas movies? Yeah. Oh we've got some great people there.

Now Christmas movies are a guilty pleasure but they all basically have the same plot. So the plot is man slash woman returns home for Christmas with their parents.

They've been working away some big job which takes up all their time. Maybe they've got a useless boyfriend or girlfriend who has somehow not come for Christmas and works in a big city with a high pressure job and they're corporate and unappealing. But when they go home they're inevitably trapped at home. Normally because of snow but there are some other variants of the story. And they end up there for a bit longer than they expected and they realise that their hometown has got a certain something about it. And normally they end up getting back together with their high school boyfriend or girlfriend. That is the kind of Christmas secular story. I can see many of you nodding. Which is a bit of a backdrop of the season. And I actually think that isn't completely unreligious. I know you might think it is. But I think, well I think many of the things that our religion does is it gives us an opportunity to celebrate joy. Joy in the small things. Joy in the things that the world isn't always good at celebrating. Like your hometown. Like your not so rich but nice high school boyfriend.

[ 2 : 54 ] Like the love of the people around you. And we also have this second type of Christmas song which we get around Christmas. Which is perhaps seen as a more religious kind of song. This is a song which essentially boils down to what a nice baby. Often no more content than that. Sometimes the slightly spirituous and I don't believe it at all story. This is a baby that never cried. I think that they would have written that down. Because personally I think that probably would have been the first miracle. I mean forget water into wine. If this baby had been born and genuinely never cried someone would have written that in the Bible I'm sure. There are also variants of this like Good King Wenceslas which are look there are some nice people and they're being nice. Isn't that nice?

These songs are very sweet. Honestly I find them a bit too sweet and a bit too troubling because they make something which I think is huge into something kind of containable. Something that you can like put up in a nice picture. And I also think that depicting Jesus as a worryingly well behaved child isn't really good for any of us. Because it kind of makes well behaved and good like Jesus is good the same. And I certainly hope that they're not the same. And then we have the third kind of Christmas song. The kind of dark complicated songs. The traditional carols that we all sing so

happily but perhaps don't always look at the words. So perhaps the second verse of Hark the Herald Angels Sing which is a bit of an odd one.

Or We Three Kings where you have the whole myrrh is mine it's bitter perfume breathes a sigh of gathering dune. Great cracking tune. We all sing it very cheerfully but sometimes you have to step back and think oh there's quite a lot going on there. It's not just one dimensional. There is a whole universe.

There's enough darkness that you can see the brightness of the scars. And why am I talking about songs today? Well I think when you come to the start of Luke's gospel. This is a picture of Luke from the video by the way. There are lots of songs in the first two chapters of Luke's gospel. In fact you could almost say that the first two chapters of Luke's gospel are basically a musical number because basically all of the characters you're introduced to suddenly and unexpectedly break out into song. Quite alarming really if you hate that kind of thing. I can see Helen is here. She doesn't like that kind of thing. But we're first introduced to this very sweet very dedicated priest Zachariah who wins the lot that lets him enter the holy of holies and pray to God in his own way. [ 5 : 41 ] And Zachariah we're told is a very good man. He keeps all the rules. He's married to this very nice lady called Elizabeth but sadly they have no children. And when he goes in gosh does he get a shock because the angel Gabriel appears to him and tells him all his prayers have been answered.

And that he and his wife even though they're very old in their 70s or so will have a miraculous and joyful and very strangely behaved child called John the Baptist. And it looks like the angel actually bursts into song. At least in the Bible it scans like a song. And at the end of the song Zachariah says I'm not sure about that. You do know that we're both very old. And Zachariah kind of needs a moment to take it all in. And I think in expressing surprise about this miraculous baby that's going to be given to him and his wife when they're so old the angel kind of turns around to him and says no you haven't got this. You have to be silent for nine months and then you'll gradually process it. So Zachariah is silent for all of his wife's pregnancy. Perhaps that was better for him anyway. And then when he names his son John his voice returns but he doesn't just speak. Zachariah bursts into this huge glorious song which we see in the video where there he is singing away.

You won't see it today because if we watched all the songs in Luke's gospel we'd be here a very long time. And this isn't just a song about joy or the goodness of God. It's a song about the great liberator that's coming. About the great overturning the promising of peace on earth.

In the meantime while his wife is still pregnant the Virgin Mary who's also pregnant gives time to spend some time with Elizabeth Zachariah's wife who's also her cousin. I guess there's a kind of solidarity thing. We know we've both got miraculous babies. We've both seen the angel Gabriel. We should hang out. Anyway Mary barely arrives and then Elizabeth bursts into a song. A song which we don't sing so much here but in the Catholic church which is quite a big deal which is the Hail Mary.

[ 7 : 48 ] So Elizabeth sings the Hail Mary to Mary and then Mary responds with this really big number. The Magnificat's a big political prophetic song about her joy in her position. Her excitement about the fact that God is going to overturn the rich and lift up the poor and set the people free.

And at this point the songs in the story kind of get out of hand. The baby is born and the songs start happening all over the place. So the song we're going to focus on today is that there are some hard-working shepherds, more on them later, who are overwhelmed by a whole chorus of angels singing about the glory of God, what God is doing on earth, and God's promise for peace.

And while that's as far as we're going to get today, while Jesus is still a baby, there are another two songs. So we've got both Simeon and Anna bursting into song when Jesus turns up to be presented at the temple. Now all of these songs are kind of a bit like the third type of Christmas song I mentioned earlier. Inspiring, uplifting, but a little bit troubling, deep and complex when you look at them in detail. So we're only really going to look at the shepherds and the angels song in detail today. Let's watch it first. This is from Luke's Gospel, chapter 2, verses 8 to 20.

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

But the angel said to them, do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people.

[ 9 : 42 ] Today in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you. He is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you. You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.

Suddenly, a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.

So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.

But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

[ 11 : 04 ] So who are these shepherds? Well, we know from Scripture that they were tending sheep in the fields above Bethlehem.

And this is significant because we know from the Mishnah, which is a set of rules that were recorded when the Pharisees were in charge, that the only people who were allowed to graze sheep in the fields were the temple shepherds.

All other shepherds were kind of banished off to the wilderness to graze their sheep. So the temple shepherds are quite interesting. They're essentially priests like Zechariah.

And they have this job, which I think sounds a bit more difficult than you might think. So they have to safeguard the Passover lambs so that each Jewish household will have one perfect lamb for Passover.

Now, when they say perfect, they mean unblemished. So they had to prevent these lambs from bruising themselves or scratching themselves in any way. So it's not like normal shepherding.

[ 12 : 05 ] If the lamb gets caught in the bush, then that's a really big problem. And if you think about it, lambs are a bit like toddlers in that they like to skip around. They're not very steady on their feet.

And they have more limbs than they know what to do with. So trying to keep hundreds of lambs from ever getting bruised is a bit of a mug's game, I think. But blessing on them for doing it.

These shepherds weren't just casually watching these sheep. They were kind of desperately trying to make sure that all of the sheep were desperately okay all the time. There are some traditions which say they might even have swaddled all of the lambs individually before they went to bed.

Now, that's very cute. I can't find any evidence for it. But it would be quite a big job to take all your sheep and swaddle them before they go to bed. And I guess in many ways, these priestly temple shepherds were the perfect first people to show the vulnerable, fragile God baby too.

Because they're used to the idea that God presents himself in fragile, delicate lives. They're familiar with the scriptures and the promises of a Messiah.

[ 13 : 14 ] And they spend so much time focused on Passover, which is the celebration of when God set the people of Israel free from slavery in Egypt.

So they understand this vision of a chain-breaking, oppressive power-overthrowing understanding of what God is doing in the world. Perhaps all of that would prepare them better for the baby God born in a manger secretly under the oppressive colonial Roman regime.

And the song the angels sing to the shepherds has this very important message. Glory to God on the highest, and on earth peace and goodwill to humankind.

This is a song about the most intimate and important event in all of human history. The place where we see most clearly what the nature of who God is.

That God is always and has always before Jesus throughout all time been desperately coming into the world. Trying to be close to the creation of God has.

[ 14 : 20 ] And particularly seeking out closeness with humanity. Humankind, which we remember we see in Genesis, God made intimately, delicately, in God's own image.

And this story of God coming into the world, choosing to be close to the world, isn't the story that we expect to tell about God. Because God comes into the world with more respect for God's creation than we might expect.

When we see the prophets talking about how God will come, they say God will rip the heavens from the earth and descend in a mighty chariot. They talk about things like that. But God doesn't come in a way that causes havoc to creation.

Instead, deeply, God comes in peace, in vulnerability, into the world as it is. Not forcing it to be different.

Born as one of us. And when we have pictures of the Messiah in the Old Testaments, we have pictures of someone like David, the greatest king of the Jews, who is a wonderful, great warrior king.

[ 15 : 28 ] David, who was a man who was fundamentally a very violent guerrilla warrior. And yet, when God comes to earth, God is not in warrior form. God is no competition for Zeus.

God is born as a defenseless baby who couldn't even pick up a sword, let alone wield one. And the way that we see Christ throughout God's life on earth change the world is fundamentally this peaceful way.

God doesn't change the world by winning the arguments once and for all, or by winning battles. Instead, God tries to change us through relationship, through love, through conversation, through healing, through friendship, and sometimes frustratingly through seemingly losing battles and arguments.

As Jesus says, if my kingdom was of this earth, you would see my followers fighting. And perhaps sometimes we do see the followers of God fighting.

And that is a troubling thing to see. Especially when God put God's fragile, defenseless self in the hands of unlikely, unreliable people, people like you and me, and showed soft, defenseless flesh in a world ruled by steel.

[ 16 : 43 ] And those relationships, those conversations, those seemingly lost battles do change the world. I mean, the church we're in today only exists because of the friendships Jesus made when Jesus was on earth.

And I guess if we're taught a model of how to be on earth, that's how we're taught to be. We're taught that our longing for a God that will just come and twist everything and sort everything out, has and always been displaced.

In place of the warrior, we're given the defenseless Passover lamb in the manger. This is the God that makes the angels sing of God's glory. A God who will not use force on us, even if there are things about us we might want to change.

But instead, is born into humanity. And exists in this human form that will not defend itself for its sake. And honestly, peaceful, gentle work at transforming the world, free relationships, is hard. There are lots of times when it would have been much easier to have the kind of God that comes in a blaze of fire and wrestles creation into place. That would be an easier God to follow sometimes.

[ 18 : 04 ] But I think that's perhaps why we have some of the songs that I bad-mouthed earlier about the innocence of the baby. They do capture this important truth. I mean, the whole baby story is quite radical because it's told in a place and a time when babies were not important.

Nowadays, babies are very important. But I guess back in the day of the Roman Empire, A, there's no expectation that your baby will survive childhood. Most children did not.

And also there is a legal right just to kill unwanted or abandoned children under the Roman Empire. And somehow, this image of the baby, the importance of the baby, isn't just saccharine or sweet.

But it's an important image of God that we have to hold. And it's a hard picture of God to be comfortable with, that one. A God who is as vulnerable as a baby.

I think sometimes it's easy to worry a baby wouldn't be particularly good at trampling our enemies, wouldn't pulverize our insecurities. And that's an important message too.

[ 19 : 16 ] Our God came in this vulnerable form to offer love and relationship, not trampling or pulverizing. And I think it's always important to remember that what God is doing in Jesus is the same thing God has been doing since long before creation was created.

God has consistently come into the world with peace, with love. God's glory is not this distant throne looking down at us from the heavens like we are meager ants, but a closer and more intimate glory.

And I think this stands against the images we have of God, certainly the images I have of God.

Because one of the images, which somehow many people, including me, have within us, is that this belief that we have to convince God that God should be interested in us.

That if we're good enough, we can earn God's love and God's attention. But perhaps thankfully, God is not like an elf on the shelf. God does not come if we're good enough, if we're well behaved enough, if we're polite enough.

And this is a very difficult belief to shift because somehow it's deeply ingrained. Perhaps it's pride, secretly. I think there's part of me that likes to think that we've earned love when we have it.  
[ 20 : 39 ] That we are loved because we're lovable. And that's the kind of mentality that ultimately stems from all kinds of things, perhaps even gold stars in primary school.

But the truth is that God doesn't love us because we're lovable. Because anything, God loves unconditionally whoever and whatever we are. And that's difficult because as humanity, we're not very good at unconditional love.

Not very good at accepting it. Not good at receiving it. And I guess if I have a big Christmas takeaway for you, that is that if, like me, sometimes your prayers start, I'm really working at this, God.

And then move into, these are the other things I'd like to pray about. You need to step back and think, is this a helpful way to approach God? Or is it me trying to say, I'm a work in progress, I'm going to be good enough, now please listen to me.

And I think it does matter trying to accept that God loves you unconditionally. Because when you're carrying toxic images of God, they affect the way you relate to God and to other people.

[ 21 : 50 ] So, perhaps one takeaway this Advent, this Christmas, is to look at the remnants that you may have, that I know I have, of beliefs and practices which seek to persuade God to love us.

You know, yes, I've managed my hour of quiet time or my daily prayer. Things that we try and do to persuade God to forgive us, to take an interest in us. What do we do when we pray?

What do we do when we act to try and persuade God to be nice to us? Because it is somehow deeply etched in our minds that we need to persuade God to be on our side.

But you might as well persuade the desert to be dry, the waterfall to be wet, the snow to be cold. When we see Jesus, we see God. We see a God who values our humanity fundamentally, absolutely.

And that does raise questions which make day-to-day life difficult. Because when we look at God who loves us unconditionally, exactly as we are, not better than we are, not thinner than we are, not more reliable than we are, but exactly as we're made to be, it also makes us ask ourselves, How do we value other human lives?

[ 23 : 08 ] How do we value those who affect our lives negatively? Those who make us feel hurt? How do we value lives who are hurt by decisions which benefit us?

When you do something and you think, I can do that for me, and you know it hurts someone else. How do we value lives that are not effective or efficient, that need looking after?

How do we value people who don't seem to contribute? And God shows us that we do need to value all of these people, however challenging that may be, and that we need to try and value them as God does, unconditionally.

And that can be hard, so I think perhaps it can lead us to make costly decisions, like not buying things cheaply, where the price is played in the blood and sweat and tears of others.

Like not walking past the conversation that you don't know when it's going to end, when you don't really have enough energy to deal with it. Decisions like looking at how much we have here, because we do have a lot here in the UK, and how little others have around the world, and how we can share that better, because God values all people, not just the ones that benefit us.

[ 24 : 33 ] The angels sing this song of God. They sing of God's goodwill to all humanity. It translates, well, there's a huge debate on how to translate it exactly, but glory to God in the highest, we're pretty sure about.

And then peace on earth, possibly peace on earth, to the men who already are in God's goodwill, which could mean there are some men who are in God's goodwill.

But I personally understand it as all men are already made in God's goodwill, because they are made in God's image, because God comes to earth, born as one of us, to redeem us.

So how do we approach this strange and challenging and difficult festival of Christmas? How do we honour the image of God, who is born as a child in the manger?

God, who is that child, not just growing up into God, but in that defenceless image, is God. The child born in peace, to challenge humanity, with words and love and healing, not lightning bolts and swords.

[ 25 : 36 ] A child who lives out the eternal truth that God is always moving closer to us, not because we have ever earned God's attention, but because of a bigger, more radical, unconditional love for

all humanity in its messy beauty.

So I guess one way to start is to think about Christmas. And I think it's really important that Christmas is filled with joy. But perhaps the best model for Christmas is not to try and earn love through perfection, not to try and make it picture perfect.

You don't need to earn anybody's love through buying the best or most expensive gift, or putting on the best and most mouth-watering meal. There's no need to worry about the size of the tree or if the decorations are perfect.

Instead, perhaps we need to look at Christmas where it is about relationships more than anything else. So perhaps, what I'm going to do this Christmas anyway, and you're very welcome to join me, is to take time to just look at one person each day and remember that God thought that this person, this face, was worth everything.

That there was no risk too great to bring love to this person. Take time to reflect on God's amazing love for that one person. And I think the other way of doing it is a way which has already been celebrated so much in the service, which is seeking to build our community at Christmas.

[ 27 : 11 ] So whether that's through getting involved with Light for Children, or just through celebrating the Christmas Day lunch and helping create a space of joy, of not quite perfection, but I bet it's very, very good because it's being organised by the amazing Kay.

A space of love where enough is enough. That's where I think Christ would be at Christmas nowadays. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.