



Last Days Beacon

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The Songs of Christmas



By Pastor Doug Brown

One of the first signs of Christmas is the sound of familiar Christmas music being played in stores and public spaces. Recently, I was surprised to have rounded a corner at a local home improvement store only to discover that all the Halloween merchandise had been removed and replaced with Christmas trees and other merchandise. I'm always caught off guard by how early retailers begin promoting Christmas merchandise. It seems that it appears earlier every year but then perhaps it's my own perception. Without question, retailers are relentless in their attention to the calendar, consummately presenting shoppers with the next opportunity to separate them from their money.

Every year about this time we hear passionate disagreements erupting over what is the earliest appropriate date that retailers ought to begin displaying Christmas merchandise and playing Christmas music. Some say not until after Thanksgiving, others just after Halloween. Regardless, retailers will always push the envelope of appropriateness in search of profit. Generally, for merchandisers, the music is about setting a mood and using the nostalgia of Christmas to entice buyers into spending more and the technique seems to work quite well.

We have to admit, Christmas music does that. It's a universal phenomenon to experience feelings of nostalgia and think of cheerful memories at the sound of certain Christmas songs. For most, Christmas music induces thoughts of simpler, happier times and brings to mind warm memories of family and friends gathered together during holidays. I suppose it's for the same reason that oldies radio stations are so popular. We all like to think on happy memories of days gone by.

One of the things I've noticed about much of the Christmas music we hear is how little of it has to do with the actual event which began the Christmas holiday in the first place, the birth of our Savior. Think about the content of most of the Christmas music we hear; so many songs about reindeer, sleighs, elves and presents under the tree. Most Christmas music is meant to trigger nostalgia and sentimental romanticism. I suppose there's nothing wrong with that in itself. It's just that it misses the true meaning of why we have a reason to celebrate in the first place.

Interestingly, songs were a part of the original Christmas event. Tradition holds that there are several songs associated with the birth of Christ. The most famous is the song of Mary (Luke 1:46-55), also called, *The Magnificat*.

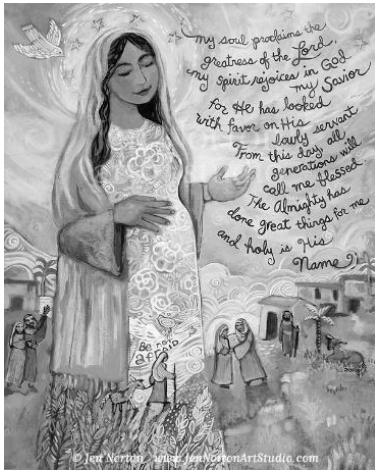
Then there's the song of Zacharias (Luke 1:67-79), known as *The Benedictus*, the song of the angels (Luke 2:13-14) and the song of Simeon (Luke 2:28-32), called *Nunc Dimittis*. These songs became rooted into the liturgy of the early church and have spawned choir, theatre, and ballet productions. Rightly, the birth of Christ is to be greatly celebrated and is worthy of such far-reaching and copious observance.

Unlike much of the music we hear in retail spaces however, these original Christmas songs were not induced by nostalgia or sentiment. There was no commercial motivation that produced these first Christmas songs. Their purpose in the Scriptures is not to give us fodder for mere sentimentality or the romanticizing of the Christmas holiday. They are simply a record of the real time reactions of those who were experiencing the amazing and wonderful thing God was doing.

Luke and the gospel writers simply wanted to record the events for future followers to have a record of what had taken place. The record is a raw and unedited picture of the emotions and responses to the experience of realizing that the Messiah would be born and that God was doing something amazing, something that would impact the course of history.

The Song of Mary

Second only to the impending arrival of the Savior, Mary is a central figure in the first two chapters of Luke. She is the one chosen by the Lord to carry the baby Jesus and give birth to the Savior of the world. What a great privilege and responsibility for Mary who was probably only about 15 or 16 at the time.



The words of the angel in the announcement to Mary were astounding, “Do not be afraid, Mary; for you have found favor with the Lord” (Luke 1:30). Imagine how amazing that must have been for Mary, just a teenager, to realize that she had somehow drawn the attention of God and that she would be tasked with an awesome responsibility. What’s so astounding about this is that Mary is just a young girl, from an obscure part of the country in the town of Nazareth with an estimated population of around 400 at this time and yet she has found favor with the Lord.

Mary’s song, called *The Magnificat* after the first word in the Latin text of Luke 1:46, draws attention to this. In her song she mentions how the Lord gives mercy to those who fear Him and brings down prideful and powerful rulers and exalts those who are humble (Luke 1:52). Appropriately, Mary’s heart was turned to worship the Lord in response to His favor being upon her. This is the godly and right response to God’s love and favor.

The overriding characteristic of Mary seems to be her humility. In her song (Luke 1:46-55) she focuses on the fact that the Lord has chosen one as humble as she. Mary’s response clearly shows that she gets this, that the events foretold to her by the angel reveals the Lord’s concern for the humble and lowly. I love that

Mary’s song speaks of what God is doing but moves beyond this to praise God for His character. This is a right response to God’s work in our lives also; to see what He has done for us but to quickly turn it to praise for His amazing character and love.

What a great encouragement Mary’s song is for us. Though the world turns its favor to the powerful, the wealthy, and the influential, God finds favor in those who are humble and of lowly status. The one who was chosen to give birth to the Savior of the world was a humble person of simple faith. It’s a message of God’s favor upon us. Though we may not be powerful or influential in the sight of the world, God’s love poured out on us should draw out of us a desire to worship and praise Him. Mary’s song conveys a beautiful motivation to sing during this Christmas season.

The Song of Zacharias



The song, or testimony, of Zacharias is recorded in Luke 1:68-79. The song of Zacharias is called *The Benedictus*, after the first word in the Latin text of Luke 1:68. Zacharias, a priest, was the father of John the Baptist. Scripture indicates that Zacharias and his wife, Elizabeth were both righteous in the sight of God (Luke 1:6).

You may recall that when Mary first went to visit her cousin Elizabeth to tell her about the events that had transpired, and about her pregnancy, Elizabeth blurted out, with excitement, that her baby leaped in her womb when Mary entered her home (Luke 1:41). Elizabeth took this as a sign that the Messiah was at hand and proclaimed in the Spirit, “how has it happened to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?” The Savior had not even been born yet and Elizabeth is declaring Him as her Lord. What an amazing event.

Later, we read of the birth of John the Baptist, Elizabeth’s son. Zacharias had been made mute by the angel Gabriel, because of his disbelief of the prophecy that his wife would become pregnant and bear a child (Luke 1:20). At the time of circumcision Zacharias indicated that his name was to be John as the angel Gabriel had instructed (Luke 1:13). It was at this time that his inability to speak was reversed, and, moved by the Spirit, he prophesied the words that tradition now reveres as his song.

The song of Zacharias contains his praise for the work of God fulfilling His covenant promises to David and to Abraham, promises that would be fulfilled in the Messiah, the One whom John the Baptist would announce and introduce to the world. It is clear in the song of Zacharias that he recognized the implications of the events that were taking place. His opening statement is resounding, “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited us and accomplished redemption for His people.” It is notable how Zacharias recognized the connection between the events that were taking place and the prophecies of the Old Testament. Zacharias’ prophecy is filled with quotations and prophecies from the Old Testament.

What an exciting discovery it must have been for Zacharias and his hearers to understand that what was foretold was coming to fruition right before their eyes. Luke makes this clear in the beginning of his gospel (Luke 1:3-4), stating that his intention was to write down an account of the events of Christ’s birth and life.

We too, can celebrate in this Christmas season because of the truths that have been given to us about the coming of the Messiah to this world and the gift of salvation He brought. We can trust that the promises of His future return will one day also be fulfilled. What a great cause for songs of praise to the Christ Child during this Christmas season.

The Song of Simeon



The song of Simeon is recorded for us in Luke 2:28-32. The Song of Simeon is traditionally called *Nunc Dimittis*, which is a title taken from the Latin translation of the first words of his declaration, “Now let your servant depart.” Simeon was described as righteous and devout (Luke 2:25). It is notable that the others, to whom revelations about the coming Messiah were given, were described in similar terms.

The 400 years preceding the time of Christ’s birth are recognized as silent years with no Word from the Lord so it’s noteworthy that there were some people who were godly and waiting for the coming of the Messiah.

Further, Luke informs us that the Holy Spirit was upon Simeon. As prescribed by the law Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to be presented in the temple in Jerusalem when He was forty days old. Luke states that “Simeon came into the temple in the Spirit” (Luke 2:27).

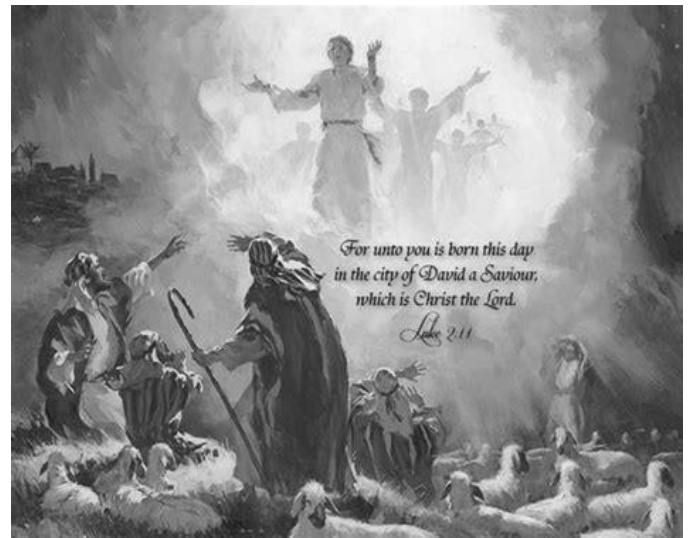
After centuries of silence God was about to grace the world with His presence again. It had been previously revealed to Simeon that he would “not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ” (Luke 2:26). Imagine the moment when Simeon first laid his eyes on Jesus realizing that what had been foretold to him was taking place right before his eyes. He not only saw the Messiah but held Him in his arms and praised God as a response. Imagine the emotion he must have experienced in that moment.

Like the others, Simeon would respond with his own song. Simeon began his declaration stating that he could now depart in peace (Luke 2:29). Now that he had seen the Savior and held him in his arms, he knew he could leave this earth knowing that what the Lord had promised had come to pass. Simeon could now pass on in peace. Imagine the emotion that must have been wrapped up in that moment for Simeon as he realized that what God had promised had come to pass and was held in his arms. Simeon’s pronouncement is a beautiful declaration of God’s provision, “For my eyes have seen Thy salvation...A LIGHT OF REVELATION TO THE GENTILES, And the glory of Thy people Israel.”

Like Simeon, you and I can travel through this world, with all its difficulties and hardships, trusting that God’s Word is faithful and true and that what He has promised to us will come to pass. And then at the end of our earthly life we can enter into eternity with the knowledge and trust that salvation has been provided by

Christ. What a wonderful reason to sing during this Christmas season.

The Song of the Angels



Clearly the most miraculous of all the Christmas songs is the song of the angels. The timing of this angel chorus is remarkable. Think about this with me for a moment. When the angel Gabriel appeared to announce the birth of Jesus to Zacharias, the father of John, he did not sing. Then later when Gabriel next appeared to Mary to make the announcement there is no record of any angel choir. Finally, when it was later revealed to Simeon the priest that he would not see death before he had laid eyes on the Messiah there is no record of angels singing.

It is notable that it was not until the Savior had been born and the announcement was made to lowly shepherds that the Scriptures tell us about the beautiful Angel chorus. How fitting that the angel choir was reserved for this moment. It was to this event that all the previous announcements were directed. Prophesied for hundreds of years, this is the great awaited arrival of the Savior, the Lord Jesus, who came to earth as the baby and who would save His people from their sins.

I've been thinking about what a great contrast it is between the angelic choir praising God and the ones to whom the announcement was made. What a wonderful picture of the meaning and importance of the Savior coming to earth. It was for lowly mankind that the Savior left His heavenly abode and came to earth as a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes. What a wonderful reason to have a song in our hearts this Christmas.

Our Song



Mary's response was a song of humble trust in the Lord, Zacharias' song was a thankful song of praise because God was faithful to His promises. Simeon's declaration of praise came as a result of seeing God's provision, for the light to the world had come. The heavenly chorus announced the arrival of the Savior, praising God in the highest. Just like these who were witnesses and partakers in the coming of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, when you sense God at work in the circumstances around you it's an opportunity to sing a song of praise to Him; to sing of His mighty character and love for His people.

It's my hope this season when you hear the songs of Christmas being played may it be an opportunity to praise the Savior for coming to earth as a baby in the manger to save us from our sins. What song will you sing this Christmas?



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