

INVESTING IN SONG<sup>1</sup>  
Isaiah 12: 2-6  
A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens  
December 13, 2009

No season of the year is quite so immersed in song as is Christmas. Only in this season do we hear carols played in elevators, chimed from steeples, blared from radios, and sung from all the Christmas specials on TV. This doesn't happen on Valentine's Day or Labor Day or Presidents' Day. And some of the Christmas songs have nothing to do with Christmas. Some, like the wassailing songs, are actually drinking songs. But at Christmas time there are hundreds of carols. You can find books of German carols, Russian carols, Swedish carols. We are all invested in song at Christmas. It is unthinkable that a Christmas would go by without our singing *Joy to the World* or *Silent Night*.

I was once at a faculty Christmas party and found myself standing next to a Jewish faculty member as we sang Christmas carols. I was amazed that this Jewish faculty member was belting out those carols with as much enthusiasm as anyone. I asked her, "Sylvia, how is it that you sing Christmas carols with such enthusiasm?" She said, "I've been singing them since I was a child, and I love them."

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<sup>1</sup> ©Thomas R. McKibbens, December 13, 2009.

## I

Don't we all? The message of Christmas is better sung than preached, better hummed than explained, better harmonized than theorized. Set aside all logical explanations, all arguments about a virgin birth, or angels in the sky, or wise men following a star. This is poetry, not prose, and poetry set to music reaches deep down to touch a part of us that prose can never reach.

Those of you who have visited Australia likely know about what the indigenous Australians call "Songlines." In the creation myths of the aboriginal people, they are taught that the gods sang the world into existence as they walked the land. They had a song to create the sun and the moon, another to create the trees and rocks and waterholes. They had a song to create all the animals. They even had a song to create humans. The ancient trails through the interior of Australia are called "songlines" because the indigenous people believe that those were the pathways walked by the gods when they sang the earth into being. Their songs created all that is.

During Advent we sing our way into Christmas. In a way, our investment in song creates Christmas for us. This investment in song does not require a credit card; it does not demand double A batteries, or an extension

cord. The songs of Christmas are available 24-hours a day, in any weather, any time of the year.

Do you remember the first Christmas carol you ever learned? Do you remember where you sang it, or who was with you? Can you remember special times when the singing of those old familiar carols lifted you up in a special way? There are certain Christmas carols that evoke memories that lie hidden until we sing a particular carol, and then in the darkness or in the candlelight the memory of that time and place comes back to us, and we sing with a lump in our throats.

All that is part of investing in song at Christmas. Public Radio had an oral essay a while back that pointed out that when you look around you see that almost everyone, it seems, is plugged into some kind of music. On the street, in airports, walking alone, people are listening to music. But in the age of iPod, that music is not heard by anyone else except the person plugged in. We are desperate, it seems, for music, but we do not know how to join our voices with others in song.

About the only place left where there is regular singing together is...you guessed it...church! Oh, I suppose you can say that we do sing the national anthem together and shout "Play ball!" during the last few bars. But on a regular basis, week in and week out, church is one of the few places in our

culture where people sing together. And there is no better singing in church than at Christmas time!

But carols were not always sung in church. In fact, almost all the well-known carols were not sung in church at all until the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Before that, they were more often sung by carolers, who walked from house to house, singing carols, for which they were often rewarded with gifts, such as mince pies or a glass of some beverage.

But then along came Isaac Watts, who wrote *Joy to the World*, and Charles Wesley, who wrote *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing* when he was just 32 years old. *Silent Night* comes from the Austrian Alps, when a distraught pastor discovered on Christmas Eve that the organ was broken. He decided to write a new song that could be sung without an organ. It was sung for the first time on Christmas Eve, 1818, accompanied only by a guitar.

Then there are the locally written carols, like *It Came Upon the Midnight Clear*, written by Edmund Sears while he was pastor of the First Church of Lancaster. And of course there is the children's song written by Phillips Brooks in 1865 after a visit to the Holy Land. He called it *O Little Town of Bethlehem*. Then there is the lullaby by James Murray of Andover, MA entitled *Away in a Manger*.

What are we doing when we sing carols? Well, let's take today, for instance. We opened the service with that great Advent hymn, *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*. In its present form it was published in 1851, but its origins go all the way back to 9<sup>th</sup> century, when monks would sing a different poem each day from December 17 until December 23. Each of the poems they would sing began with the word "O." They were called the "O Anthems." They were reworked in the 1100's, and eventually published by an Anglican clergyman named John Neal in 1851.

When we sing this hymn, the same hymn sung in various ways by Christians spanning 1200 years, we are saying that Jesus is welcome here. We are looking forward to our Christmas celebration! And we sing,

*O Come, Desire of Nation's, bind  
All peoples in one heart and mind.  
Bid envy, strife and quarrels cease,  
Fill the whole world with heaven's peace.*

And we really mean it! We enter this sanctuary to pray for no more quarrels...no more strife...people bound together as one.

Then, after a sermon on song, we respond by singing *Angels from the Realms of Glory*, a great Advent hymn that comes from the Moravian tradition. It was written by an Irishman, James Montgomery, who flunked out of

seminary and bounced from job to job until he finally found fulfillment as a newspaper editor in London.

Finally, at the conclusion of our service we will sing another carol about singing, *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*, a Charles Wesley hymn, but a version of it he would not have approved. He was very sensitive about people changing the wording of his hymns. The original as Wesley wrote it began this way: “Hark! How the welkin rings, glory to the king of kings.” But over Wesley’s protests, his friend George Whitfield changed the first line to what we sing today, “Hark! The herald angels sing, glory to the newborn king.”

When you truly sing this carol with conviction, you give up any pretense to half-hearted faith. In this carol we turn ourselves over to God in Christ—heart, soul, mind, and body.

### III

When we sing these carols with meaning, we not only sing ourselves into Christmas, we sing the world into Christmas. We open our hands and our hearts to the needs around us. We invite our friends, our enemies, the hungry and homeless, those who have given up, and those who cry for justice, to enter into the great story of Jesus. We sing people into healing; we sing people into hope; we sing the world into action. We sing people of every race and hue and

zip code into a new reality of peace on earth. Poetry? Yes, of course, but it is a poetry that makes things happen.

Once again this year you will hear people claiming that there is a war on Christmas. Some will want to turn the greeting “Merry Christmas” into a test of patriotism. There will be those who charge that saying “Happy Holidays” is a subtle way of destroying America. This is silly, and it is an insult to those who are spending this Christmas in a real war zone where lives are being lost. We do not promote a true Christmas spirit by aggressively snarling “Merry Christmas” to every beleaguered store clerk.

All of this silliness is unworthy of the true Christmas spirit. We live in a multi-religious society, and it is a society we love precisely because we enjoy true religious freedom.

#### IV

Instead, we will sing about a teenage girl and an older carpenter who became parents to a child who would change the world. We will sing of the mystery and the hope and the peace of it, and in singing we will make the story part of us and part of our world.