

There's so much that's familiar and certain about Christmas and I have to say, I love that. I sometimes think it's like that big, long, warm overcoat I keep in the closet year after year. It's not in perfect style every year but it's so familiar, so comforting to dig it out and put it on that one time when I really need it. It fits so well. So warm, so familiar. So good to wrap it around us, to rest in it, return to it like the beloved traditions of Christmas that improve with age, growing more and more beloved every year precisely *because* they're old. There's a deep satisfaction, a deep *nourishment* in drawing warmth from them in the midst of the cold that surrounds.

This midnight gathering is one of these nourishing traditions. It feels every year like an expedition into the ancient somehow, this setting out into the midnight, drawn, across the darkness, to a tiny light, a tiny flame. It has such unlikely *power*, this tiny, tiny flame. The *ocean* of darkness which surrounds it may well be vast, *galactic*. But it evaporates under the pull of this tiny spark that breaks *open* the midnight.

They *taste* so good these nourishing traditions, many of them literally so, in this time of feasting, rich and fragrant. They *feel* so good, as we wrap them round us and round our loved ones in loving generosity. They have a *look* of goodness as we gaze into

them and huddle together to their warmth, like these candles we'll light a few moments from now.

And the *sound* of Christmas is like no other. There is no other time when we depend so much on *songs*. I don't think we could *remember* Christmas half so well if we did not have them. For it is well known that this is what songs do, they unlock *memory*. Songs are used for this in every culture – used to *hold on* to what is essential and precious, to pass the stories across the generations. No doubt the scriptures do the same. We read again every year this unforgettable story in unfathomable depth and power, from these rich and ancient pages. I would not be without them. Yet I'm mindful that a full generation passed - or more - before the first accounts of Jesus were written down as gospels. There must have been songs before that. Dithyrambs of marketplace bards surely harped this *Gloria in excelsis deo* – this amazing story – before it became Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, the gospels we know. The New Testament epistles, which pre-date the gospels, tell of Paul and Silas singing hymns in prison. They admonish the faithful to, “*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns,*

*and spiritual songs to God.*¹ So the songs of Jesus *must* have pre-dated the written sources we regard as so authoritative.

The songs take us past the intellect, to the heart. They allow us not only to *find* our hearts, together, in singing, but after we've done so they *empower* us to come *from* the heart in our actions and our connections. The songs are more than decoration, more than baubles on the tree. They are a deep well into which we reach and dive, to find the thing we've *really* come looking for tonight.

They tell of an ancient *prophecy* fulfilled, *as seers of old have sung*. That *Isaiah* *twas foretold it*. This is a wonder. Our more pragmatic selves would likely talk us out of this one – out of believing in, or even paying attention to a prophecy – but our *souls* still seek it. We *need* wisdom, to unlock the looming mystery that is our future. What will come? What will it mean? What are the signs we see around us now? We think about this most at Christmastime / think, as we close out the old year and enter the new. The prophecies of Christ's birth *resonate* with the awe and wonder we feel for the coming time, as so they should for He is *still* the coming One of our human future.

¹ Colossians 3.16

The songs *call* us to worship. They *awaken* in us a love and adoration for the newborn babe in a way we can't *get* to without them. The miraculous birth, the awe and wonder of shepherds, the faithfulness of our hearts *live* in the songs in ways they *don't* always in the workaday. There's a *hunger* in our hearts, and at Christmas we plunge *into* this well of songs and *slake* our deep *thirst* for faithfulness, for goodness, for simplicity, for worship. In these Christmas songs, *glories stream from afar*, and *find* us, *here*, at midnight, shepherds all.

The songs tell all the Bethlehem tale, all the politics and intrigue of Royal David's city, of Herod, and Magi, and *flight* into Egypt. They unwrap and uncover these riches of memory that lie within us year after year, each of these 'silent night come faithfuls' brought *out* and dusted off, carefully unpacked like the sturdy, trusted, heirlooms each is: a manger, an ox, a box of ancient hay, a tiny babe. It seems so *fragile* this gleaming story, so *human*. *That moves us so*. If we dropped them they could *break*. So many songs to tell it all, so lovingly, each year.

But, if that were *all* the songs could sing, we'd pack them up on New Year's Day like all the rest - or else on Epiphany - and put them away and *maybe* get them out again next year. But there is

a greater tale, a greater song that *sings them all* and that is the song that keeps us singing all the year.

*Veil'd in flesh the Godhead see, hail th'incarnate deity
Pleased as one of us to dwell, Jesus our Immanuel.*

It's a song that bids us look up, beyond the manger, the stable, the inn, beyond Mary and Joseph - beyond the babe even - and see the star of *incarnation*.

Of all the strange and wondrous *words* that are unique the church, this is the *strangest, and* most wondrous, and perhaps, the least familiar. It's *somewhere* though in all these songs, a reminder that the *meaning* is not just *here*. The meaning is not just *tonight*. It is forever, and for always - a tale of *cosmic* love that sings *us* into being. It was there *before* us, and will be *after* us. It's a story of separation. Of God in Heaven and *us* on Earth and the deep *separation* between us. And most of all, the *smashing* of that this night. For *after* tonight there is no more of that, because He's come! He's come! Earth and heaven are separate no longer for God has left His heaven and come to earth! And all for cosmic love! The *firmament* of ancient times, is broken open in everlasting *incarnation*. What was once a solid

dome over our heads is now an open universe. God's love has broken *through* to Earth.

[Crucifer and Acolyte(s) go to Advent wreath - bring your taper]

It's often difficult for us to grasp, but *this* is what the babe announces, not so much about himself, but about *us*. We are no longer spectators in the manger tale but full *participants*, for we are veiled in flesh like Him! It is perhaps our hardest song. We still want to place it in the future - or in the past - but after tonight it is here! It is now!

[Light congregational tapers from the Christ candle and pass it to the choir and congregation]

And this is the tale of peace that sings from every song. In Him the separation of God and human is overcome - it is no more! And not for judgment, but for love! There is no greater peace than this.

*All is calm, all is bright
Son of God, love's pure light*