



Westminster Presbyterian Church
1200 Marquette Avenue
Minneapolis, MN 55403
(612) 332-3421
www.westminstermpls.org

Meditations on Hymns

Alexandra Mauney

Sunday, December 27, 2020

Psalm 148; John 1:1-14

Last weekend as I scrolled through my Hulu account, I came across the most recent episode of Saturday Night Live. I am not a regular SNL watcher, but I occasionally tune in to see what kind of poking fun they're up to - occasionally, it gives me just the chuckle I need. This particular week, they offered up a sketch that had me laughing out loud - a belly laugh, not a chuckle. It was the kind of laugh you laugh when something hits *a little too close to home*, and this one certainly did. The setting was a family's home on Christmas morning: two parents and two children, who were probably meant to be late elementary or middle school aged. The family was doing the typical Christmas morning activities of opening gifts and having breakfast, and they were taking turns singing about the presents they'd received. For the first round of the song, we hear about everyone's gifts, and it's kind of funny - the kids get a globe and a telescope and a book, the dad gets an autographed baseball bat, and the mom gets a really nice robe. But then the song goes on, with all the other things the kids and the dad gets, and still it returns to the mom at the end of the verse, "and I got a robe!" It becomes clear that the robe is the *only*

thing the mom gets for Christmas, and because she is the keeper of traditions like stuffing stockings, her stocking is empty. She cuts her finger preparing the fancy Christmas morning breakfast, and we eventually see a big pile of new presents under the tree, only to find out that they're presents for the dog. The sketch ends with the family taking a selfie in which the mom has fallen into a puddle of exhaustion on the couch. It made me laugh out loud because it's too real. Although the division of domestic responsibility in your household might look different than this SNL sketch, I wonder if you end up in an exhausted puddle on the couch by noon on Christmas. For those of you with little ones at home, this might ring especially true, but I imagine that for all of us, Christmas can feel like this in one way or another. Maybe it was different this year - fewer gatherings, a bit less pressure - but even in the midst of a pandemic, we are not immune to the emotional buildup of a big holiday season. It can be a lot.

And so, we make it to this Sunday in the Christmas season, and we might feel a bit like moving on from the fanfare of Christmas. We might be a bit *over* the Christmas carols and greenery and fanfare of this season. But the church calendar, the pattern of our liturgical year, does not quite afford us that immediate movement from this moment. The church calendar insists that we dwell here for a little while longer, that we stay here at the manger, with the crying baby and the exhausted parents and the motley crew of visitors both human and animal. Christmastide is a whole twelve days long, and we get to keep looking at the creche, keep being filled with wonder at this thing that has taken place.

And this thing that has taken place, of course, is the coming of God into our world. The Word became flesh and lived among us. Or, as one contemporary translation puts it: The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood. On this Sunday in the church year, we're invited to stay right here in this moment where God moves into the neighborhood. The Christ-child is still a baby, and though we don't pretend not to know the course of the rest of his life, for now, we stay close by the manger. We marvel at all that this event means, for the world and for us.

And this morning, we will let two pieces of music for this season be our guide. The first, which we will sing in just a moment, is by a prolific Lutheran poet/musician team, Carl Schalk and Jaroslav Vajda. Vajda's poetry and Schalk's music invite us in this hymn to imagine and wonder together at the experience of the *angels* who are part of the Christmas story. You'll notice that this hymn text is a bit unique in that our singing is directed towards the angels. Listen for the role that these hymn writers imagine the angels might have played in the story of God taking on flesh this Christmastide. I invite you to join in singing now: *Before the Marvel of this Night*.

Hymn text: Before the Marvel of this Night (Jaroslav Vajda)

Before the marvel of this night, adoring, fold your wings and bow;
Then tear the sky apart with light and with your news the world endow.

Proclaim the birth of Christ and peace, that fear and death and sorrow cease:

Sing peace; sing peace; sing gift of peace; sing peace; sing gift of peace!

Awake the sleeping world with song: this is the day the Lord has made.

Assemble here, celestial throng, in royal splendor come arrayed. Give earth a glimpse of heavenly bliss, a teasing taste of what they miss:

Sing bliss; sing bliss; sing endless bliss; sing bliss; sing endless bliss.

The love that we have always known, our constant joy and endless light,

Now to the loveless world be shown, now break upon its deathly night.

Into one song compress the love that rules our universe above:

Sing love; sing love; sing God is love; sing love; sing God is love!

Meditation

One of the most wonderful things about this Christmas story, this story of God moving into the neighborhood, is just how many characters get to play a part in this cosmic drama. And in this hymn we just sang, it is the angels whose role we remember. Of course, we know that no Christmas pageant is complete without the angels - without the little ones with their sweet pipe cleaner haloes and flowy cotton tunics. But this hymn reminds us that quite a lot hinges on the actions of these majestic players in God's

story. They have, after all, much to announce along the way. The angels are there to announce to Mary that she will have a very special child. They are there in a dream to announce to Joseph that he is to *stay* with Mary, who is about to have a very special child. The angels are there to announce to some unsuspecting shepherds in a field that the longed-for Messiah has made his way into the neighborhood. Good news of great joy for all the people.

The angels play the role of herald, messenger-on-a-mission, in God's story that unfolds on Christmas. When we listen to the angels, we remember that this is a remarkable story. That God has put on flesh and moved into the neighborhood is not just a tidy theology, tying up some loose ends of the story of God's people, offering a bow on a well-wrapped present. This story is anything but tidy. It's the kind of out-of-control good news that you can't keep quiet about. It's the kind of brilliant message of joy that made the heavenly multitude break out into song in the middle of that shepherd field. Glory to God in the highest! Sing peace, sing bliss, sing love. The angels are the proclaimers, partnering with God in this beautiful song of love and justice. The angels have something to teach us, too, about what it means to witness to good news. They teach us that when you witness good news, you share it. When you catch a glimpse of heaven, you sing about it, because good news of great joy is meant to be shared. Our songs will all take different forms - I imagine that the angels sang in some kind of harmony when they burst forth with their glorias. But when we join our voices in witness to the good news, we echo

the song of God's love being made flesh in the person of Jesus Christ.

This song that we get to join is a surprising one. The melody does not go how the world thought it would go. The rhythms are at times jagged, at other times wonderfully smooth. The harmonies are majestic, with some beautiful twists and turns. The song of God's love moving into the neighborhood is unexpected - who would think that the world needed a tiny infant in a feeding trough, born to young, poor, unwed Palestinian parents? Who would think that a child would forge a new pathway forward in quite this way? These are the questions we encounter in the next hymn we will sing together, by contemporary Scottish hymn writer and pastor John Bell, of the Iona Community. As we sing, I invite you to listen for the surprises of this Christmas story. I invite you to take a step back from the familiarity of it all, to try to hear some of this good news of great joy anew, as we sing together *Who Would Think that What Was Needed*.

Hymn text: Who Would Think that What Was Needed (John Bell)

Who would think that what was needed
to transform and save the earth
might not be a plan or army,
proud in purpose proved in worth?
Who would think despite derision,
that a child should lead the way?
God surprises earth with heaven,

coming here on Christmas Day.

Shepherds watch and wise men wonder,
monarchs scorn and angels sing;
such a place as none would reckon
hosts a holy, helpless thing;
stable beasts and by-passed strangers
watch a baby laid in hay:
God surprises earth with heaven,
coming here on Christmas Day.

Centuries of skill and science
span the past from which we move,
yet experience questions whether,
with such progress we improve.
While the human lot we ponder,
lest our hopes and humour fray,
God surprises earth with heaven,
coming here on Christmas Day.

Meditation

This story of God moving into the neighborhood, of God's love putting on flesh and bones, is a story full of holy surprise. It is not the story that God's people might have thought up for themselves, nor is it the kind of story that we might imagine for ourselves today. It is neither fairy tale nor hero's journey, moral allegory nor romantic drama. It is a story of love and justice unlike anything the world has seen. It is not a story of a powerful army, of violence fighting violence. It is not a story of a ruthless

and powerful ruler, of injustice fighting injustice. It is not a story of a powerful king, of economic exploitation fighting economic exploitation.

No, the story of God moving into the neighborhood is far better than anything the world would have dreamed up. It is God surprising earth with heaven, coming here on Christmas day in the form of a tiny child. One of the texts from the Old Testament that we often hear around Advent and Christmas reminds us what this surprise might have felt like. Because here is what the prophecy says: “For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” But we come to find out that this “wonderful counselor” is not like earthly judges; he is the one who calls for reconciliation and wholeness and flourishing for all people. And this “mighty God” is not like the mighty God you’d expect; he is the one who takes children on his knee and washes the feet of his friends and speaks in story and parable. And this prince of peace is not like an earthly prince; he is the one who spends time with folks on the margins of society, listening to the stories and experiences of people without wealth and children and people in marginalized ethnic groups. God surprises earth with heaven, coming here on Christmas day.

During these twelve days of Christmastide, I hope we find ways to stay close to the manger. I hope we find ourselves marveling at this thing that has taken place, this holy surprise of God moving into the neighborhood. God’s love with flesh and bones on is here

- really, here! - and we take our cue from the angels and witness to this love. That witness may not take the form of words or songs, as it does for the angels in the Christmas story. In fact, most of the time it will not be a wordy witness but an action-packed one. We will look around at our own lives, within our own homes and our own communities, and the communities outside our own insular communities, and see that the Christ-child has been born there, God's love with flesh and bones is there, surprising earth with heaven yet again. We will see what Jesus is doing and we will jump in. We will partner with people who are struggling for justice, because that's what the infant in the manger will grow up to do. We will work for the healing and restoration of deep wounds of all kinds, because the Christ child will one day do just that. We will care for children and love our enemies and pray for peace because 30-some-odd years after this child is born in Bethlehem, these are the things he will call us to do. This is how we join the song of God's love moving into the neighborhood. This is how we witness to this good news of great joy for all people.