

The Sunnybrook Pulpit

Rev. Ross Smillie

December 22, 2019 – Fourth Sunday of Advent

Singing Emmanuel: The Songs of Christmas

*"Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son,
and he will be called Immanuel (meaning, God is with us)." – Matthew 1:18-25*

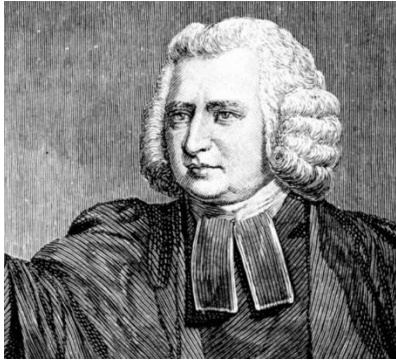
One of the things I like about Christmas is that we all know the same music. Most of the time I don't listen to the same music that my kids do, but at Christmas time we all sing along to the same songs, and even better, most of us even know the words, at least to one verse of Joy to the World and Silent Night and Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer and I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas. There is something about this music that draws us together.

One of things I really like about worship is that people from preschoolers to ninety year olds sing together. People who like country music and people who like classical sing together. And the young people learn some the music that the old people like and (hopefully) the old people learn some of the music that the young people like. And we sing songs that, in some cases have been sung for hundreds of years. Like, for example, "Jesus, Our Brother, Kind and Good." (slide) This is a French Carol that has been sung in different languages since the 12th century. That's nine hundred years! Children love this song because it tells the Christmas story from the point of view of animals: a donkey, a cow, a sheep and a dove. Each of those animals speaks of how they helped Jesus and his family. So when we sing it we can remember two things: first, that just as the animals served Jesus in their own way, so we can as well; second, Jesus' coming was not just for the church, not just for people, but for the whole creation. As Paul says, "all creation waits with eager longing... to be set free from its bondage to decay, and [to] obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God." That passage, and this carol reflect an ancient sense, that we are all in this together – when one suffers we all suffer – the bondage to sin of humans is shared by the animals and the rest of creation and that the good news of Christ is good news for the whole creation. Let's sing together, "Jesus, Our Brother" (VU # 56)



Jesus, Our Brother ends with a reference to today's Scripture passage, and its reference to Emmanuel, a title which first appears in the book of the prophet Isaiah and was later applied to Jesus. Emmanuel has a simple meaning: "God with us," but the implications of the good news that God is with us are anything but superficial. When we say that God is with us, we mean not only that God was fully present in Jesus of Nazareth, but that God is present with us today, in our joys and our sorrows, on the highest peaks of triumph and the dark valleys of illness and grief and despair. The Christmas story is about a God who enters into human existence, and who endures even the worst experiences imaginable, being born in poverty, driven into exile, a peasant throughout his life and tortured to death at the end of it. And because God entered fully into every experience of human life, we can also know that God is with us, a compassionate

presence even in the worst experiences of our lives: in our struggles, in our poverty, in our illness, in our death, in our grief and loss and despair.



The next carol we will sing also bears witness to the wonderful good news that God is with us, Emmanuel. “Hark the Herald Angels Sing” (slide) was written in 1739 by Charles Wesley, who with his brother John founded the Methodist movement – The people called Methodists weren’t a separate church at first, but a reform movement within the Church of England. – In addition to attending worship in their local parish Church of England, the early Methodists (and a lot of modern ones too!) gathered together in classes, where they would read Scripture, talk together about their efforts to follow Jesus, and sing.

Many of the hymns they sang were written by Charles Wesley, who wrote more than 6000 hymns in his lifetime, which since he lived to be 80 years old, means that he must have written a hundred hymns a year over a sixty year period, and makes him one of England’s most prolific poets. The hymns were intended not just for praise, but also to instruct. So Wesley’s hymns are full of Scriptural references and theological phrases. (Slide) Hark the Herald Angels Sing is a celebration of the saving work of Christ, with references to the incarnation (like “veiled in flesh”), the atonement (like “God and sinners reconciled”), Jesus’ healing ministry and resurrection (“risen with healing in his wings”), and being born anew (“born to give us second birth”).



Incidentally, **if you don’t like it when modern hymn book editors change the words to hymns, you really aren’t going to like this!** In fact Charles Wesley didn’t like it either! **You are going to think this is quite scandalous!** You see, we don’t sing the original opening lines Wesley wrote for this hymn: "Hark! how all the welkin rings / Glory to the King of Kings." Welkin is an ancient word that means heavens. Hark how the heavens ring. One of Wesley’s colleagues changed the words to the ones we know today, and apparently Wesley was not happy about it! But hymns belong to the church not to the original composer, and I for one am glad that someone had the courage to leave behind the archaic “welkin” and help this song find the words that have helped make it a favorite that everyone knows. I suspect that if the words had not changed, it would have been forgotten. Let’s sing this wonderful carol together (and if you want to revert to the original words, feel free!)



Our time is a very prolific time for new hymns and one of the most prolific producers of modern church music is Shirley Erena Murray (Slide) . Murray is from New Zealand, and has written hundreds of hymns for public worship that express concern for modern issues: for human rights, the environment, women’s concerns, and especially peace. There are nineteen of her hymns in our hymn books (some of which we sing regularly and others we have yet to learn!).

While the first two hymns I have talked about this morning reflect very directly on the story of the first Christmas, “Dream a Dream” expresses the good news of Christmas in more modern terms. It invites us to dream, as children do on Christmas Eve, but as Joseph also did in the story we read this morning. (slide) In ancient times, dreams were often seen as ways in which God’s messengers spoke to people, and even today a prominent school of psychology, founded by Carl Jung, seems dreams as ways in which our unconscious minds connect with the collective unconscious. And when Jungians speaks of the collective unconscious, which is one modern way to express the reality of God.



In this hymn, Murray invites us to join our imaginations to those of children and of God and to envision a world where no one is hungry or afraid, a world of peace, friendship and abundant harvests. And in a lovely turn of phrase, the hymn reminds us that in the incarnation of Jesus, God has “touched the clay,” “the holy ground where life is found.” Such dreaming, this hymn suggests, is not idle daydreaming, but one of the ways in which God works in us, helping us to bring God’s dream to reality. The future, the hymn suggests, begins as a dream, a possibility, a vision of a possible future. Let’s sing, “Dream a Dream.”

Do you remember how to tell if an angel is really an angel? (slide) The word *angelos* is a simple Greek word that means messenger, and God’s messengers can take many forms, from dreams to something that is delivered by Canada Post or Fed Ex. So how do you know if a messenger is from God or not? There is something angels always say, and if they don’t say it, it must not be one of God’s messengers! “Be not afraid.” Check it out. Every time an angel appears in the Bible, it says “Be not afraid.” “Don’t be afraid.”



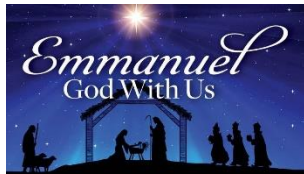
And so, finally, this morning, we sing again the short chorus that we sang after the Scripture reading, which invites us not to be afraid. This piece of music comes to us from John Bell and Graham Maule, two members of the Iona Community, an ecumenical community of Christians from around the world who covenant to worship, pray and study Scripture, to work for social justice and to meet together regularly to support each other in their discipleship. While there are small groups all over the world, the community is centred on the ancient monastery on the island of Iona, off the coast of Scotland, which has become a retreat centre very similar to Naramata and the other retreat centres operated by the United Church.



The Iona Community has become a rich source of music for the modern church, and John Bell (slide) is probably the most prolific of the composers and authors in that community. There are 22 of his pieces in our hymn books, and again, many of them are familiar, but there are a few that we have saved for later! One of the great musical experiences of my life was attending a workshop in Victoria where John taught several

hundred people a number of songs, including the “Alleluia! Amen!” we often do at the end of worship. He got up without any accompaniment or song sheets, and in a wonderful Scottish brogue taught us to sing several brand new songs. Within a few minutes he had this big congregation singing complex interweaving harmonies that were joyful and moving and inspiring.

“Don’t be afraid” is a haunting rendition of that angel message: “be not afraid.” In very simple language it reminds of why we don’t need to be afraid: because God’s “love is stronger than your fear,” and God has “promised to be always near.” Let’s sing:



(slide) God’s promise to be always near is, again, the promise of Emmanuel, that God is always with us, always near. Even and especially in those times when we feel abandoned, even betrayed, utterly alone, utterly terrified, we need not be afraid, because of Emmanuel, God with us. In the darkest times of our lives, it is that hope which will sustain us. That is worth singing about. It is worth celebrating. It is worth rejoicing over. It is good news of great joy.

Let’s join together in saying “A Creed for our Advent Pilgrimage” by a United Church minister from Winnipeg named barb janes (she doesn’t capitalize her name on purpose!)

A Creed for Our Advent Pilgrimage, by barb janes, adapted
Gathering, Advent/Christmas/Epiphany 2010-2011, p. 32

I believe in the promise of Christmas
and the importance of
celebrating it in the church

I believe in the God
at the centre of Christmas,
whose hope for the world
was imagined by prophets.

I believe in Mary,
who sang of turning the world
upside down
and who allowed her life
to be disrupted by God.

I believe in Joseph,
whose broken heart
broke the rules
to do the right thing.

I believe in the smell of a stable –
I believe there is no place
God will not go.

I believe in the shepherds,
those simple people open

to hear the angels' song.
I believe in the Magi,
the ones outside the faith,
who were led to the Holy
in their own way.
I believe in Jesus, born in poverty,
soon a refugee, raised in faith,
lived seeking justice,
died speaking forgiveness,
rose with a love
that could not be silenced.
I commit to use this season
to seek out the Holy
both in God among us,
and in God beyond us.
I open myself to an Advent journey
of great joy
that will change my life.