



CHRISTMAS CULTURAL RESOURCES

Sunday, December 22, or Wednesday, December 25, 2013

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(Please see today's great music and worship recommendations in the Music and Worship Resources unit.)

I. Introduction and Historical Information

Christmas marks the fulfillment of Advent's hope. It is confirmation of the messianic prophetic declarations of one who would be born in Bethlehem who was indeed the Savior of the world. As such, on Christmas the Christian Church celebrates the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ, God incarnate. The birth of our savior has deep significance, as Dr. James Cone shares, "Christian theology begins and ends with Jesus Christ. He is the point of departure for everything to be said about God, humankind, and the world."¹ Understanding of the nature of Christ is a precursor to full appreciation of Christmas. Jesus Christ is the Son of God, a gift to humanity by way of a miraculous birth and the only hope for reconciliation with God.

While this moment in our liturgical calendar lands on December 25, the actual date of Christ's birth has been the topic of much controversy. By the late second century, there were a number of projections concerning the date of the virgin birth. By the fourth century, December 25 and January 6 were regularly embraced. December 25 emerged as the more widely accepted date, while January 6 became known as the Epiphany. Another controversial attribute of Christmas has been the influence of paganism and secular culture on the celebration. These influences continue today as the significance and theological merit of this liturgical moment is often imposed upon by consumerism and other contemporary and cultural values. Yet the heart of this moment is as described by Jon L. Berquist: "as if God, who had always been there, was suddenly visible, hearable, touchable, graspable. In the midst of this world with its wonders and its harshness, God lived in Jesus."²

The Gospel writers offer varying responses to the birth of Jesus Christ. The Gospel of Mark does not include a birth narrative; instead, the writer delves directly into the baptism of Jesus. The birth narrative is also excluded from the Gospel of John, yet the opening verses of the Gospel offer a strong description of the divinity of Jesus Christ. The birth narrative in the Gospel of Matthew is followed by a full genealogy of Jesus from Abraham to Joseph. The focus here is on the humanity of the miracle child and the announcement of his birth to Joseph. This announcement notes that Jesus' role in the earth will be to save His people from their sins. It is also Matthew's Gospel that emphasizes Jesus as Immanuel, God with us.

In Luke's Gospel, the story of Jesus' birth begins with the story of his cousins Zacharias and Elizabeth, who were both of priestly lineage. The announcement of Jesus' birth comes to Mary, his mother, and speaks to his special relationship with God and his purpose for coming into the earth. After the birth of Jesus, an angel appears to shepherds herding nearby and shares with them of the birth of Christ. Their evidence of the fulfillment of the messianic prophecy would be the child in swaddling clothes.

The birth of Jesus Christ was public, which was consistent with births in ancient times. "There were no hospital maternity wards that only the family could visit, no looking at baby through the nursery window or donning sterile antiseptic masks."³ The birth of a child, particularly a male child, was certainly reason enough for celebration and visitation. The Savior's first visitors were shepherds, who while they were herding were visited by an angel who brought news of the

miracle in their neighborhood. After witnessing God in flesh, they were compelled to offer glory and praise.

This miracle would have such significance that for many generations to come all people, regardless of race, gender, age, socio-economic, marital, or health status, would be invited to have a firsthand experience with this miracle through the gift of salvation. The memory of the birth of Christ through the celebration of this liturgical moment results in the renewal of hope. So much so that even for those who have separated from the Church, “whether through a sudden break in anger or outrage, or gradual process of drifting away due to indifference or disengagement, Christmas seems to be “the last thing to go.”⁴

II. Autobiographical Stories

Hope Renewed in Haiti

by Guy Karl Henry
(shared with permission)

The last Christmas I spent with my family in Haiti was in 2004. I arrived in Port-au-Prince on the 23rd of December into the welcoming arm of my grandmother. The ride to our family’s home was one I will never forget. As we journeyed through the streets, I could not help but ask, “What happened?” My native land was far different than when I moved to the United States years prior. The scenery was now a greater reflection of a warzone, especially around the capital. There were people all over the streets, children sitting in gutters while dogs ate from the trash that was next to them. This was a defining moment in my young adult life, as my heart broke as I realized that the country that I loved so much had changed.

We arrived at our family home in the hills of Delmas 33. The entire Jean-Paul, Henry and Jean-Jacques family was there! It lifted me up to see so many of the people that I had not seen in so long there in one place. We spent the next two days with each other! I distinctly remember gathering together in our kitchen and directing the cooking stations with my grandmother. Then we all sat around on the 24th and listened to my grandmother tell the story of our lineage and how our family got to where they are today. The joy and unity of family restored hope in spite of the ruins I witnessed earlier in my visit. So much so that I realized the condition of the world outside of us is no match for the love of Christ and the hope that rests within us.

Having grown up in New Jersey, I was able to compare this Christmas in Haiti with Christmas in a different context. While I enjoyed Christmas in New Jersey, there was a sense of renewed hope as a result of this Christmas in Haiti. All that I saw, felt, and experienced contributed to a greater reality of the essence of Christmas. Even the beggar on the streets of New Jersey has a shelter he can go to on Christmas Eve, but the homeless man on the streets of Haiti does not have that luxury. Christmas in Haiti taught me to be grateful for what I have, thankful for where I come from, and passionate about my mission in life.

My Child in Swaddling Clothes

by M. W. Leach
(shared with permission)

It was Christmas of 1997 and our first holiday in our newly purchased home. Having just installed new windows in the family room, my husband and I enjoyed decorating our live tree in front of them. Everything about the moment was beautiful: a loving marriage, a beautiful home, and two well-educated young people making our mark on the world. However, the most significant of all was the baby I was nursing in my arms that day. I was well-acquainted with what it meant to hope for the unseen, having lost two babies. This Christmas, however, the fulfillment of years of hoping was wrapped in swaddling clothes and safe in the company of his mom and dad. I had gone through so much to bring a child into the world and recall feeling such a sense of solidarity and special bond with Mary the Mother of Jesus. As I considered the miraculous and wonderful birth of Christ, my heart was warmed as I beheld my own firstborn who was also a miracle child. I thought of the love and care that Mary must have felt for her son while resting in the manger that first Christmas night. It had to be just as deep as the love I now had for my son. I was sure she wondered what her son's life and future would be like. Having the assurance that he was a gift from God, here for a special purpose, I could identify with the uncertainty that his purpose presented.

On this night prayed for God's will concerning him. Having experienced loss twice over, I had a deep appreciation of the life my husband and I had been trusted to guide, nurture, and protect. Now I could see, feel, hear, and hold my miracle. The favor of God was overwhelming to me as I considered the type of mother I would be. I thought of how my home should be structured in consideration of my child's destiny. I wondered about the endless possibilities there were for his life and the impact he would have on the world in the future. I cannot describe the joy and sense of God's favor this Christmas brought to me. Now, looking into the face of my own child, I wondered what kind of sacrifices he would have to make in order to make the world a better place. I knew the story of baby Jesus; I knew how his story would end. Yet, it was hope in the miracle of Christ's birth that provided hope for me after my losses.

Sixteen years later, the baby who was in swaddling clothes is wearing Air Jordans and playing varsity sports. His coos and whimpers have been replaced by a very deep voice. Swaddling blankets are no more, but there are big bear hugs and kisses. Now, instead of doing all of the giving at Christmas I am on the receiving end. My baby in swaddling clothes has grown into a generous young man who has a generous and kind heart. Most notably are the love, honor, and respect he gives to my husband and me. For our family, there remains a Christmas tree and the telling of the story of Jesus on Christmas morning. There is the child we hoped for and the additional blessing of a daughter who is more than we could have dreamed of. As we eat breakfast together, enjoy the company of grandparents, snap millions of pictures on smartphones, there is always the memory of the miracle child, born in a manger, whose life provided hope for us all.

Everyone Is Welcome at Christmas A Personal Story

Everyone had their place; everyone belonged somewhere and to someone. There were aunts, uncles, cousins, sons, daughters, brothers, and sisters, but two of our guests simply didn't make

sense. Every year at Christmas, Mr. Williams and Mr. Davis would be the first to arrive to the celebration. Mr. Williams would walk and Mr. Davis, having suffered a stroke some time prior to my recollection, would be picked up by one of my uncles. As a very young child, I figured they were simply part of the family. However, as I grew older the questions concerning how they got there and why my family felt such a sense of responsibility for them at Christmas began to develop. I wondered where their relatives were. Where were their children, grandchildren, and siblings? I remember asking my Grandmother, "I'm related to everyone here by blood, but how am I related to them and where are their people?" My grandmother informed me that there are some people whose families are different from ours, they are not as large, live a distance, and can't get together for holidays. There are also some people who didn't make very good decisions when they were younger and although they are very different now, the people they hurt haven't forgiven them. Of course my ten-year-old mind met these statements with even further inquiry. Finally, my grandmother said, "That is the miracle of Christmas: No matter who wants you or who doesn't, no matter what your past has been, God sent His son Jesus, with every single one of us in mind." She stressed the importance of embracing those who were different from us and making room for those who have been outcast and rejected. That day, my grandmother taught me that everyone is welcome at Christmas.

III. Poetry and Quotations

The Work of Christmas

by Howard Thurman

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flocks,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among people,
To make music in the heart.⁵

Amazing Peace: A Christmas Poem

by Maya Angelou

Thunder rumbles in the mountain passes
And lightning rattles the eaves of our houses.
Flood waters await us in our avenues.

Snow falls upon snow, falls upon snow to avalanche
Over unprotected villages.

The sky slips low and grey and threatening.

We question ourselves.
What have we done to so affront nature?
We worry God.
Are you there? Are you there really?
Does the covenant you made with us still hold?

Into this climate of fear and apprehension, Christmas enters,
Streaming lights of joy, ringing bells of hope
And singing carols of forgiveness high up in the bright air.
The world is encouraged to come away from rancor,
Come the way of friendship.

It is the Glad Season.
Thunder ebbs to silence and lightning sleeps quietly in the corner.
Flood waters recede into memory.
Snow becomes a yielding cushion to aid us
As we make our way to higher ground.

Hope is born again in the faces of children
It rides on the shoulders of our aged as they walk into their sunsets.
Hope spreads around the earth. Brightening all things,
Even hate which crouches breeding in dark corridors.

In our joy, we think we hear a whisper.
At first it is too soft. Then only half heard.
We listen carefully as it gathers strength.
We hear a sweetness.
The word is Peace.
It is loud now. It is louder.
Louder than the explosion of bombs.

We tremble at the sound. We are thrilled by its presence.
It is what we have hungered for.
Not just the absence of war. But, true Peace.
A harmony of spirit, a comfort of courtesies.
Security for our beloveds and their beloveds.

We clap hands and welcome the Peace of Christmas.
We beckon this good season to wait a while with us.
We, Baptist and Buddhist, Methodist and Muslim, say come.
Peace.
Come and fill us and our world with your majesty.
We, the Jew and the Jainist, the Catholic and the Confucian,

Implore you, to stay a while with us.
So we may learn by your shimmering light
How to look beyond complexion and see community.

It is Christmas time, a halting of hate time.

On this platform of peace, we can create a language
To translate ourselves to ourselves and to each other.

At this Holy Instant, we celebrate the Birth of Jesus Christ
Into the great religions of the world.
We jubilate the precious advent of trust.
We shout with glorious tongues at the coming of hope.
All the earth's tribes loosen their voices
To celebrate the promise of Peace.

We, Angels and Mortal's, Believers and Non-Believers,
Look heavenward and speak the word aloud.
Peace. We look at our world and speak the word aloud.
Peace. We look at each other, then into ourselves
And we say without shyness or apology or hesitation.

Peace, My Brother.
Peace, My Sister.
Peace, My Soul.⁶

Quotations

“And yet, my friends, the Christmas hope for peace and good will toward all men can no longer be dismissed as a kind of pious dream of some utopian. If we don't have good will toward men in this world, we will destroy ourselves by the misuse of our own instruments and our own power.”

—Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., (1929–1968), Civil Rights Activist

“Something stupendous, earth-shattering, happened in Bethlehem that first Christmas night: God's promised Messiah, God's own Son, was born in Bethlehem, and who were the first to be told the good news? It was not the high priest, not the king or his courtiers; it was shepherds watching their flock by night.”

—Bishop Desmond Tutu (1931–), social rights activist,
Retired Anglican Bishop, South Africa

IV. Songs That Speak to the Moment

(Please also see today's great music recommendations in the Music and Worship Resources unit.)

“Hark the Herald Angels Sing,” and “Go Tell It on the Mountain” (sung as a Spiritual) are songs that I grew up singing and are still sung in African American churches today. “Christmas Time” by David Curry is a new favorite song of mine for the Christmas season. Curry sums up Christmas for me when his song says, “Christmas time is a special time of the year, we give all praises to God for sending Jesus Christ, His beloved Son.”

Hark the Herald Angels Sing

by Charles Wesley

Hark! the herald angels sing,
“Glory to the new born King,
peace on earth, and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled!”
Joyful, all ye nations rise,
join the triumph of the skies;
with th’ angelic host proclaim,
“Christ is born in Bethlehem!”
Hark! the herald angels sing,
“Glory to the new born King!”

Christ, by highest heaven adored;
Christ, the everlasting Lord;
late in time behold him come,
offspring of a virgin’s womb.
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see;
hail th’ incarnate Deity,
pleased with us in flesh to dwell,
Jesus, our Emmanuel.
Hark! the herald angels sing,
“Glory to the new born King!”

Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace!
Hail the Sun of Righteousness!
Light and life to all he brings,
risen with healing in his wings.
Mild he lays his glory by,
born that we no more may die,
born to raise us from the earth,
born to give us second birth.
Hark! the herald angels sing,
“Glory to the new born King!”⁷

Go Tell It on the Mountain

Go, tell it on the mountain,
Over the hills and everywhere
Go, tell it on the mountain,
That Jesus Christ is born.

While shepherds kept their watching
Over silent flocks by night
Behold throughout the heavens
There shone a holy light.

The shepherds feared and trembled,
When lo! above the earth,
Rang out the angels chorus
That hailed the Savior's birth.

Down in a lowly manger
The humble Christ was born
And God sent us salvation
That blessed Christmas morn.⁸

Christmas Time

by David Curry

Chorus:

Christmas time is a special time of the year,
we give all praises to God
for sending Jesus Christ, His beloved Son.

Christmas time is a special time of the year,
we give all praises to God
for sending Jesus Christ, His beloved Son.

Verse:

God sent His Son to save us from sin,
open up your heart and let Jesus Christ come in.
He came to give us life more abundantly,
that we might live with Jesus throughout eternity.

Hallelujah,
Glory to Ya,
Lord we thank You,
for sending us Your beloved Son.

We thank God for sending us His Son.
We thank God for sending us His Son.
We thank God for sending us His Son.⁹

V. Create a Memorable Learning Moment

The shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us” (Luke 2:15), and after having witnessed Jesus, they glorified God. The following activities could create a memorable learning moment:

- Designate an evening as “Family and Friends Night” and invite every household in the congregation to gather both relatives and friends (members and non-members) in their home for fellowship and the following:
 - Select a story or poem from sections II and III. Prior to reading the story, read Luke 2:15-20 twice, then read the selected story or poem. Follow the reading with a discussion about what is being revealed in the story, poem, or song. Are there themes or experiences in the story to which those present can relate? Perhaps someone has had a similar experience? How does the reading relate to what we have heard and seen previously about Jesus Christ?
 - Choose a hymn or song from section IV. First, discuss the lyrics and the central message of the song. Utilizing technology search for the song on YouTube, then watch the video together. Create a “remix” of the hymn or song with your friends and family. If there are enough people present, you can break up into groups of two or three, then perform your remixes.
 - Encourage each friend and family member to choose three people and write a letter to them. In the letter, they should include some words about the meaning of Christmas and ways that they have seen, heard, or felt the hope of Jesus Christ because of the recipient. In closing, the letter should offer praise to God and appreciation for the recipient’s role in their life.
 - If your church has a Facebook page, invite congregants to post on your wall about their experiences during Family and Friends Night.
- Encourage congregants to open their homes to someone who does not have family or friends to celebrate Christmas with.
- As a congregation, host a “Night of Hope” during the week of Christmas for children who are currently in foster care. On this night share the story of Jesus’ birth, serve dinner, provide entertainment, and give a gift to each child. Remind the children that every child who is born, even if their family is non-traditional, has a special purpose from God. Also, offer the ongoing support and love of your local church.

- Find Jesus! Invite congregants to spend one hour out in the community. As they go into local businesses, the mall, hair and nail salons, etc., have them observe the people they encounter. During Bible study have a discussion about how they did or did not encounter Jesus Christ as they observed the activities of the people.

VI. Audio Visual Aids

- A short video about the birth of Jesus Christ can be found at: http://www.jesusstorybookbible.com/index.php?option=com_video.
- “Go Tell It on the Mountain” video with lyrics can be accessed at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iEaQKuId9sQ>.
- “Hark the Herald Angels Sing” video with lyrics can be accessed at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xpe9Eds0N30>.
- Information on the history of Christmas and 21 video clips are available at: <http://www.history.com/topics/Christmas>.

Notes

1. Cone, James. A Black Theology of Liberation (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1986), 110.
2. Berquist, Jon. L. Incarnation (St. Louis, MO: Chalice, 1999), 89.
3. Maier, Paul L. In the Fullness of Time: A Historian Looks at Christmas, Easter, and the Early Church (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 1991), 43.
4. Roll, Susan K. Toward the Origins of Christmas (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1995).
5. Thurman, Howard. “The Work of Christmas.” Online location: <http://absw.wordpress.com/tag/howard-thurman/> (accessed 8 April 2013).
6. Angelou, Maya. “Amazing Peace.” Online location: <http://www.oprah.com/oprahshow/Maya-Angelou-Amazing-Peace/2#ixzz2QwqhZ7yy> (accessed 17 April 2013).
7. “Hark the Herald Angels Sing.” By Charles Wesley. The New National Baptist Hymnal. Nashville, TN: Triad Publications, 1977. #58
8. “Go Tell It on the Mountain.” Spiritual. The New National Baptist Hymnal. #66
9. “Christmas Time.” By David Curry. Online location: http://www.music-lyrics-gospel.com/gospel_music_lyrics/christmas_time_501.asp (accessed 2 April 2013).