

A New Song -- Christmas Eve A

O sing to the Lord a new song -- for the grace of God has appeared, offering salvation to all, leaving us room to question our worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-aware, creative and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our Savior, Jesus Christ who gave himself that he might redeem us from all iniquity and shepherd a people who are zealous for good deeds.

In religions, there are two dimensions: these are sometimes described by as the horizontal dimension which is our relationship our fellow human beings and the vertical dimension: our relationship with God. A lot of religious believers place a higher priority on the vertical dimension, calling it the primary focus, the real deal. But as Isaac Bashevis Singer points out, the essence of religion is the horizontal dimension. The vertical dimension is only important insofar as it results in human action.

Contemporary evolutionists have shed light on the effect that enduring religions like Christianity have on those who follow them: although cooperation and altruism don't confer much, if any advantage on individuals, groups with lots of cooperative people in them outperform other groups. Natural selection pulls in the direction of survival of the fittest, it's true, maximizing the individual slice of a given pie, but

natural selection also pulls in the direction of group flourishing; how well do we succeed at making bigger, more equally divisible pies?

Tonight, as we gather to revel in the excitement and wonder at the miracle of a tangible, walking, talking God, who comes alive for us, in us and as us, we take comfort and purpose in this great underlying truth: because of Jesus we are conscious of the selflessness and sacrifice that constitutes a good and thus a godly life. Because of Jesus, we are emboldened to seek ways of pacifying human strife, healing human suffering, and expanding human cooperation. We mark the day of Jesus' birth as the day we reiterate our common identity as gladly thoughtful and well-intentioned people. If Easter reminds us we need never fear, Christ is come again tonight to remind us never to give up: to give us purpose and activity for our bolder selves.

Christmas was not celebrated by early Christians – birthday parties were a heathen custom. When the Puritans were in charge of England, celebrating Christmas was forbidden by law, and in Massachusetts before the Revolution, Christmas observances would get you a jail sentence. You'd better watch out indeed! It was thought that boisterous revelry and pagan symbols like brightly decorated trees would distract true believers from their primary purpose, which was a kind of purity.

But a religion whose understanding of God does not evolve has little chance of surviving. It is wondrous and good to celebrate together. What we have come to know is that purity is overrated, and smacks of the vertical focus of religion that overlooks what matters more. We celebrate because it is joyful and fun, not because celebrating makes us no better Christians. We celebrate because there is one night of the year when the arrival of God in our midst takes (as it should every night) its rightful place as the central event of history. The rest of the year we turn our attentions – more or less – to the implications, the obligations and the possibilities that came into existence because of this night.

The implication is, of course that God will always be with us and in us and fully connected with us. We do not operate or exist outside of a relationship with God. The obligation this brings is one of self-examination: Who am I trying to be? How am I trying to respond to my godly potential? And the possibilities are endless. Time and again, we sing with the Psalmist, “Sing to the Lord a new song.” The Archbishop of Canterbury said recently, “We have to face the fact that the vast majority of people under 35 not only think that some of the things we say are incomprehensible, but also think that some things we’re just plain wrong about, and unjust, maybe even wicked. We have to continue trying to be real about that.”

Here are words from the little-known Gospel of Mary (not in your daily Bible):

O light of life we have known you

O womb of all that grows we have known you

O womb pregnant with the nature of God we have known you

O never-ending endurance of God who gives birth, so we worship your goodness

The so-called Thanksgiving Prayer is among the many early Christian documents unearthed in modern times. Known as the Gnostic Gospels, they were often condemned as the work of heretics. Several are told from the point of view of women. The Gospel of Mary, for instance, tells the story of Mary Magdalene, one of Jesus's closest followers, who has been given teachings to pass on to the rest of his disciples. As in our own time, the perspective, the prescience and the voices of those marginalized and dispossessed will declare to us and teach us what God would have us know and change if only we have ears to hear.

O light of life we have known you

O womb of all that grows we have known you

O womb pregnant with the nature of God we have known you

O never-ending endurance of God who gives birth, so we worship your goodness

Professor Hal Taussig of Union Seminary offers a meditation on Mary's prayer:

Tonight there is a womb pregnant with divinity itself, making us ready for taking that next step forward, in our relationships that are hurting or broken, the parts of our minds that don't know what to do, and the many areas of our societies that need help."

Tonight is the night for new birth, in our hearts, our churches, our family of nations. Tonight God offers fresh purpose and new joy to the World. Tonight God joins us in a new beginning, a new song, a Merry Christmas.

The heavens are telling the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims God's handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech and night to night declares knowledge. Christ is born again this night because God is still communicating with us, still influencing and accompanying us through this life if only we will pay attention. The very wellspring of openmindedness, imagination and creativity that came into human life as a Bethlehem baby once, and once again comes into human life tonight is our cause for celebration.

Christmas' musical roots go back centuries. And so does the history of the songs being viewed as a nuisance.

In the Middle Ages, caroling became popular with attendees of nativity plays. In England, the tradition was fused with singing songs in exchange for alcohol, specifically the drink wassail. But by the 17th century, the English authorities had enough of the raucous practice [and they banned Christmas carols.](#)

It stayed that way for almost two centuries, until [Queen Victoria married Prince Albert](#). He imported traditions he learned in Germany as a boy.

Some of the best-known carols were written during this period, like “We Three Kings,” and “Jingle Bells,” [which was actually first played at a Thanksgiving concert](#).

Many of the modern songs were created in the 1940s and 50s. The music became more secular, and the genre became big business. The king of them all, though, was “White Christmas,” sung by Bing Crosby.

It stands as the [best-selling](#) holiday standard of all time, something its famous American composer, Irving Berlin, a Jewish immigrant, had a hunch would happen.

It wasn't just the best song he'd ever written, [he once said](#), but “the best song anybody ever wrote.”