

“Overtures and Jarring Christmas Songs”  
 Christmas Eve A (December 24, 2019)  
 Rev. Dr. David A. Kaden

>>May light dawn. May hope be kindled. May peace be ours. In the name of the Prince of Peace we pray, Amen.<<

I bet many of us here tonight can recite from memory *at least* the first verse of some favorite Christmas songs, say, carols, like *Joy to the World*, *Silent Night*, *God Rest You Merry Gentlemen*, *The First Noel*, or songs from popular Christmas culture, like *White Christmas*: “I’m dreaming of a white Christmas,” sang Bing Crosby; or Nat King Cole’s rendition of *The Christmas Song*, which begins: “Chestnuts roasting on an open fire, Jack Frost nipping at your nose . . . .” I bet many of us know *at least* the first lines and perhaps the first verses of our favorite Christmas songs. When my children were little, I used to sing them to sleep each night, often singing the first verses of Christmas carols and songs - the first verse, because that was usually the only verse I knew by heart! Christmas music is omnipresent at this time of year - it plays on FM 107.7 day and night; we hear it in the background while shopping in stores; and it’s often part of advertising jingles on television. And probably for most of us, what makes a Christmas Eve service so special is singing those well-known carols. The familiar music of the season is woven into our annual Yule traditions.

But, Christmas music hasn’t always been so culturally pervasive. On Christmas Eve of last year, Neil Young - not *that* Neil Young, but Neil J. Young who is a journalist and historian - he published a piece in *The Atlantic* about how Christmas songs in Christian history have often been quite controversial.<sup>1</sup> Well-known figures in Christian history, like St. Francis of Assisi and the Protestant Reformer Martin Luther, urged Christians to sing carols at Christmastime, because they’re beneficial to the soul. But the Puritans in Britain and North America felt differently. They saw in Christmas a festival with pagan roots that had been layered with “excessive ritual and pageantry” by the Catholic Church. In the 1640s the Puritans banned the celebration of Christmas altogether in part because they were skeptical of the carols - singing songs about the birthday of a god sounded too much to them like something ancient Roman pagans would do. Plus the song-singing was often accompanied by “heavy drinking and louche conduct” among commoners in the towns. In Scotland fines were levied against Christmas carol singers. And in the city of Aberdeen more than a dozen people were arrested for the “singing of filthy carols on Yule day.” But banning these sacred songs only made them more popular among ordinary folk; and, as a result, 350 years later we hear Christmas songs everywhere - the radio, the mall, the grocery store, and in the theatre previews that run before the new *Star Wars* film begins.

The Puritans were an anomaly in Christian history, since songs have been part of the fabric of Christmas from the very first Christmas, according to the New Testament gospels. The Gospel of Luke’s Christmas story is rich with song. When Luke shares stories about an angel announcing that Mary will be with child Mary responds by singing *The Magnificat*: “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior . . . ,” is the first line of the song she sang. And after the angels in Luke’s gospel announced Christ’s birth to the shepherds who were “keeping watch over their flock by night,” they joined together in a

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/12/singing-christmas-has-always-been-controversial/578464/>. The following is drawn from Young’s article, both ideas and direct quotes.

heavenly chorus singing, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors.” And when infant Jesus was presented in the temple in Luke’s gospel, an old saint named Simeon held the newborn child and sang to himself, “Now you are dismissing your servant in peace . . . , for my eyes have seen your salvation.” Since the third century, Christians have been singing that song - Simeon’s canticle, the *Nunc dimittis* in Latin - since the third century, Christians have been singing Simeon’s song at evening worship with lyrics beautifully rendered into English in the 17th century *Book of Common Prayer*: “Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace . . . .” The story of Christmas since the first Christmas has been told in song.

New Testament scholars Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan in their book *The First Christmas*, speak of the New Testament Christmas stories themselves as “overtures.”<sup>2</sup> Overtures like the overture to Handel’s *Messiah* or to Tchaikovsky’s *Nutcracker*. An overture, they write, “is the opening part . . . of [a classical opera or a musical] that serves as a summary . . . of the whole.”<sup>3</sup> The Gospel of Matthew’s Christmas story - its overture - is structured in five parts - five miraculous dreams and five statements about fulfilled prophecies. The rest of Matthew’s gospel is structured in five parts or movements. And the Gospel of Luke’s Christmas story - its overture - places those who are marginalized on center stage. It’s the shepherds in Luke’s story, who were the first witnesses of that first Christmas. To be a shepherd in the ancient world was to be a peasant. The rest of Luke’s gospel places special emphasis on Jesus as a champion of the marginalized: Samaritans and prostitutes, prodigal sons and lost sheep. Christmas stories as Overtures that introduce of the stories about Jesus.

Christmas overtures and songs and carols are filled with lyrics about joy and mirth and silence and light and peace; about God in flesh and angels singing and shepherds watching and wise men searching; and with jarring lyrics that make extraordinary claims. If we sing passed the first verse of *O Holy Night*, we find these lyrics: *Truly He taught us to love one another; His law is love and His Gospel is Peace. Chains shall He break, for the slave is our brother. And in [Christ’s] name, all oppression shall cease.* These lyrics were added by abolitionist John Sullivan Dwight in 1847 to add a political edge to Christmas. Or, consider the Advent hymn by Rory Cooney, *Canticle of the Turning* with lyrics that warn those in the halls of power that the world is about to turn: *Let the king beware for [God’s] justice tears ev’ry tyrant from his throne. . . . This saving word that our forebears heard is the promise which holds us bound, ’Til the spear and rod can be crushed by God, who is turning the world around.* Even John Lennon’s famous song *Happy Christmas*, which is often heard in malls and grocery stores and on the radio makes the extraordinary claim that *war is over now*. Beyond the peace and the mirth and the light; beyond the baby, and the angels, and the shepherds, and the wise men - beyond the first “verses” of Christmas, so to speak, Christmas songs sing of breaking the chains of oppression; and they sing words of warning to tyrants; and they sing of ending war by crushing spears and rods. Lyrics created by Christmas artists - artists who, as poet Mary Oliver once put it, “are not trying to help the world go around, but [are trying to make the world move] forward.”<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The First Christmas: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus’s Birth* (New York: HarperOne, 2007), ch. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Borg and Crossan, *The First Christmas*, 39.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.brainpickings.org/2016/10/12/mary-oliver-upstream-creativity-power-time/>

Let me close tonight with a story about a Mexican artist named Pedro Reyes.<sup>5</sup> Reyes is from Culiacán, Mexico, a city with the highest rate of gun deaths in the nation. His work tries to see “the failures of modern culture in a positive light.” During Christmas of 2015, Reyes started a campaign in Culiacán, “asking residents to hand over their guns in exchange for a coupon they could use to buy electronics or household appliances. After [he] collected 1,527 guns for the project ... , he had them melted down and transformed into 1,527 shovel heads. These new shovels were then distributed to art institutions and public schools, where people in the community [began] using them to plant a minimum of 1,527 trees.” Part of the inspiration for this project came from the prophecy of Isaiah in the Bible, words we often read at Christmas: “they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.” A few of Reyes’ shovels have been on display in art galleries around the world from Vancouver and San Francisco to Paris.

... As we sing our favorite Christmas songs this year, let’s also keep in mind that Christmas makes truly extraordinary claims. Claims that try to move the world forward; claims about what could be; claims that we try to ritualize in church. “We ... believe,” wrote one minister, “that what makes church a unique institution is the fact that, if we’re doing it right, it ... ritualizes a reality we wish to see in the world ... .” Amen.

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<http://www.pochocom.com/chilango-artist-melts-1527-guns-makes-shovels-to-plant-trees/?fbclid=IwAR2kKos3AzNyRomRbj5EymEeolr22C8yXSZ4-4KT-gqUMjoV9C7rV0IPzUI>