

Advent Meditation  
David Lemley

At this most wonderful time of the year, we hear the angels sing in the strangest places and in the strangest voices. While everybody from Frank Sinatra to Jessica Simpson croons about the holy family, it's the regular old family that takes center stage in the pop music of Christmas.

Christmas pop music looks back, usually with rose-colored binoculars, to a picture of family and loved ones. Just like the ones we used to know, but better: joyful memories of being snuggled up together against the Victorian cold before the blazing yule, home for Christmas – troubles out of sight. Even those of us in southern California hear those sleighbells ringing. And these tidings of comfort and joy spill out into the streets: the warmth of brotherly and sisterly love on the busy sidewalks and at the glistening five-and-ten.

But right in the middle of the happiest season of all, there's a part of us singing, "o that we could always see such spirit through the year." Which brings us to the Christmas protest song. The activists come a-caroling.

In the late 1960s, Simon and Garfunkle set "Silent Night" as the backdrop to the terrifying headlines of the 7:00 news, sounding the alarm that, despite our celebrating, all was not calm and bright in the world. In the early 1970s, John Lennon and Yoko sang and screeched, respectively, wishes for a fun and fear-free Christmas, but reminded us about the gap between those of us surrounded by happy near-and-dear ones and those for whom the world is so wrong. In the 1980s, Christmas was the occasion for the Band Aid song that raised money for Africa relief, asking (somewhat awkwardly), "Do they know it's Christmas?" Can we, in our "world of plenty" throw our arms around the "world of dread and fear?"

These songs, and many that didn't get so much airplay, made their point through the stark contrast of pop Christmas past – the comfortable, affluent, care-free, light hearted visions of Courrier and Ives – and the places in our world with no shelter from the cold, no home fire memories, no hope of Santa's toys and goodies, no Christmas bells ringing, no promise of troubles out of sight.

But these are not the original carols of conscience. Christmas carols are full of the power and promise of God for the world – real promises for the world as it is, in all its fear and dread. This is the time of year when we sing,

No more let sin and sorrows grow,  
Nor thorns infest the ground.  
He comes to make his blessings flow  
Far as the curse is found.

And,

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 His name  
all oppression shall cease.

And, another sometimes-forgotten-between-familiar-verses,

Yet with the woes of sin and strife  
The world has suffered long;  
Beneath the Angel-strain have rolled  
Two thousand years of wrong;  
And man at war with man hears not  
The love-song which they bring;  
O! hush the noise, ye men of strife,  
And hear the Angels sing.

What does the little town of Bethlehem have to do with skid row, you might ask? This is how the New Testament church sang the birth of Jesus:

And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord,  
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.  
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;  
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,  
and holy is his name.  
His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.  
He has shown strength with his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.  
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;  
he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty.  
He has helped his servant Israel,  
in remembrance of his mercy,  
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,  
to Abraham and to his descendants forever."  
(Luke 1:46-55)

The paradoxes used in those pop song protests point out the contrasts between our own comfortable affluence and the suffering in the world. But for believers, Christmas is not only a time to remember with Hallmark channel wonder the birth of a child in

Bethlehem. The birth of Christ is the announcement of God's indictment against the powers of evil in the world. The song from Heaven is God's promise – Christ is born! The light has come, and the darkness will not overcome it!

The true song of the Christmas season is the fulfillment of God's promise in the coming of Christ into the world, and the second verse promises his victorious return.

At our church, we are marking this season by the growing light of advent candles. Each week the light builds as another flame is lit, just as the birth of Christ brought a light into the world that anticipates the dawn of his Kingdom fully present in the world. Each burning flame represents God's faithfulness to his promises, and each wick yet to be lit reminds us that there is more to come. The days of our exile to sin and suffering are numbered.

Christ has died, Christ has risen, and Christ will come again. The clouds of night and dark shadows of death cannot stand against resurrection. The good news of the Christmas season is that the light in the stable is not just the glow of a comfortable hearth, but the bright power of God's promise.