

Pastor Janneke's Page

Faith Lutheran Church, Sioux Falls, SD

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The Songs of Christmas



"It's the most wonderful time of year," one secular Christmas song claims. While not everyone would agree with that statement, one of the blessings that does make this time of year more wonderful is that of music. Many of us have learned Christmas carols like "Silent Night" since before we could read. We learned these special lyrics in Sunday School, Christmas programs, and around our dinner tables at home.

One of the special things about Christmas songs is that they simply tell the story. Their focus is a little less theological than some other hymns, but they make up for it by bringing our hearts and imaginations into the wonder of the first Christmas – God's arrival in our sinful, hurting world as a newborn baby boy.

One of the storytelling aspects of our Christmas songs that I've noticed this year are the many references to the possible weather conditions! Was Christmas night really a "midnight clear"? Possibly. Or was there "snow on snow" (from "In the Bleak Midwinter")? While we don't know all those details, we do at least know that the shepherds were doing their work "by night" when the angels appeared to them (Luke 2:9) and that the skies were clear at some points around Jesus' birth for the Magi to be able to see His star (Matthew 2:2). (By the way, join us for Bible study on Sun, Dec 31 as we watch an informative film about the Christmas star!)

Christmas songs are also filled with powerful phrases like "dawn of redeeming grace" (from "Silent Night"). Other Christmas songs make the connection to the cross: "Nails, spear shall pierce Him through, The cross be borne for me, for you" (from "What Child Is This").

The original songs of Christmas are likewise powerful songs of praise to the Lord. These songs or "canticles" are found in the Christmas story itself in Luke chapters 1 and 2. As you celebrate Christmas in the coming days, take some time to look up and reflect on these words of praise which come to us from Mary, Zechariah, the angels, and Simeon.

Christmas Song #1: The Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55) – This song gets its name from Mary's opening line, "My soul magnifies the Lord." Mary is blessed by the Holy Spirit to speak

these words after her long journey from Nazareth to Judea to visit her older cousin, Elizabeth. You can also read Elizabeth's words of praise in the preceding verses, Luke 1:39-45. Here are some things to think about as you reflect on the Magnificat: What is Mary's attitude toward herself? How does this compare with how Mary is sometimes characterized, especially in Roman Catholic teaching? Look for the message that God keeps His word.

Christmas Song #2: Zechariah's Prophecy (Luke 1:67-79) – Eight days after the birth of his son, John the Baptist, Zechariah is also filled with the Holy Spirit. It is the first time Zechariah has spoken in nine months and this is what he says: "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel!" (This song is also known as the "*Benedictus*.") How else does Zechariah describe God's character? Do you notice any similarities to Mary's Magnificat? One of the differences is Zechariah's prophetic words specific to his son's eventual ministry of preparing people to meet the Lord (v. 76-79).

Christmas Song #3: The Angels' Message (Luke 2:14) – The "*Gloria*" is the shortest but by no means the least of these four songs! What makes this song so powerful is *who* is singing these words and to *whom* they're singing. These are the words of "a multitude of the heavenly host" (2:13), in other words, an angel *army*! No wonder the shepherds were filled with fear! But surprisingly, the angels' message is not one of judgment but of grace. This good news of peace and favor from God is spoken to "the least of these" – despised shepherds. No one is beyond God's amazing grace!

Christmas Song #4: The Song of Simeon (Luke 2:28-32) – We call Simeon's song the "*Nunc Dimittis*" (from "now let [your servant] depart"). Like Mary and Zechariah before him, elderly Simeon is led by God's Spirit to burst into song. He does so while holding eight-day-old Jesus in His arms – no wonder he speaks of seeing the Lord's salvation! Notice how this faithful Israelite speaks of Jesus as salvation not just for the Jews but for the *world*!

I think we owe a "thank you" to the Holy Spirit for inspiring these first Christmas songs and setting an example for the many hymn writers that followed! Taken together, these Christmas songs all teach us to glorify the Lord with both our lips and our lives. May God's Spirit continue to inspire us to sing our Savior's praises along with the faithful men and women who have come before us!

Merry Christmas! Magnify the Lord!
Peace in Christ,
Pastor Kory Janneke