

What to Do at Christmas: Lessons and Carols  
December 23, 2018

Well, what are we to do at Christmas?<sup>1</sup> For most of us there are so many options. Christmas is a time to eat – we tend to do a lot of that. You can shop... you can decorate... you can send cards... you can go to parties and concerts... you can travel – see family and friends. Christmas is a time to do lots of things and here we are now at the end of another Advent season... tomorrow is Christmas Eve... and I am reminded again that Christmas is a time for three “other” things. For instance, Christmas is a time to listen. At Christmas we read you a story... you’ve heard it before... some of you have heard it all your life... and we say, “Yeah, yeah, yeah, we heard that before... tell us something new.” But the truth is we don’t want to hear something new, do we? We want to hear something old... something familiar... something that brings us good news and hope.

So, Christmas is a time to listen... Christmas is also time to sing. When Jesus was born, the angels sang: Hark! The herald angels sing. I love it that from up here I get to look out and see you guys and what I see from up here is that some of you are not really singers. You’re good sports... you stand up... you may even open a hymnbook... but you look sort of stoic and crusty... and your lips don’t move. But at Christmas more of you join in... you sing. I think about Mary going to visit Elizabeth. Mary is pregnant with Jesus... she goes to visit her older kinswoman Elizabeth who is pregnant with John... and when she arrives – it’s interesting – she sings. Ever wonder what Mary’s voice sounded like when she sang to Elizabeth?

I was reminded of this on Wednesday evening when we went caroling to Kingston and Pinecrest. The sound of the voices filling the room... the smiles on all the faces... and how the folks we went to carol immediately joined in to sing with us. And though I thought we sounded pretty darn good for a group of amateurs, it’s not a matter of how pretty the music is. Last Sunday our choir and some very talented instrumentalists offered some truly beautiful music – we try to do our best for God... always. Yet, it’s not the beauty of the music that counts – and if you walked away last week and just thought “what pretty music” then you missed the point. The point is the content of the music... the dream of the music... music that you’ve heard and sung all your life and know by heart. The dream is that we are not alone... that God is with us... Emmanuel... always. It’s so interesting – throughout the Bible when the angels show up the one thing they say over and over is, “Do not fear.” It’s almost as if they knew something about us – that for all our talents and abilities... for all our achievements and accomplishments, we would be fearful creatures. Oh, we know how to dress up and put on our game face and get out there... but underneath it all (behind it all) we are afraid of all kinds of things. And the dream that we sing in the music of this season is that we do not need to be afraid... do not need to fear... because God is with us... God is with us no matter what.

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<sup>1</sup> This message is adapted from one offered by Rev. James Howell, pastor of Myers Park United Methodist Church, Charlotte NC.

Christmas is a time to listen... it's a time to sing... and it's a time to do what Mary did. You heard it in the story – all this amazing stuff happens – I mean, some really amazing stuff... and the story says that Mary kept all these things in her heart... and she pondered them. Christmas is a season to ponder. At Christmas the world will tell you to eat and drink and shop and decorate and bake and send cards... but the world will never tell you to ponder. You have to come to church to hear that – to hear how Mary collected all these amazing experiences and kept them in her heart... and pondered them. Christmas is the time to ponder... this is the time to be still... to reflect... to pray... to collect all the ways God has come to you and touched you and blessed you... and to feel gratitude.

The ninth reading is from the Gospel of John – would you stand for the reading of the gospel?

<sup>1</sup>In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God,  
and the Word was God.

<sup>2</sup>He was in the beginning with God.

<sup>3</sup>All things came into being through him,  
and without him not one thing came into being.

What has come into being <sup>4</sup>in him was life,  
and the life was the light of all people.

<sup>5</sup>The light shines in the darkness,  
and the darkness did not overcome it.

<sup>6</sup>There was a man sent from God, whose name was John.

<sup>7</sup>He came as a witness to testify to the light,  
so that all might believe through him.

<sup>8</sup>He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

<sup>9</sup>The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

<sup>10</sup>He was in the world, and the world came into being through him;  
yet the world did not know him.

<sup>11</sup>He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.

<sup>12</sup>But to all who received him, who believed in his name,  
he gave power to become children of God,

<sup>13</sup>who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh  
or of the will of man, but of God.

<sup>14</sup>And the Word became flesh and lived among us,  
and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son,  
full of grace and truth.