

**The Songs of Christmas**  
**Isaiah 9:6; Luke 2:10-14**  
**December 27, 2020**  
**Pastor Steve Richards**

In the words of the prophet Isaiah, we hear the pronouncement of what we celebrate at Christmas. **A child is born to us, a son is given to us, and authority will be on his shoulders. He will be named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.** And on the night of his birth, shepherds (of all people) were surprised by the news **“Your savior is born today in David’s city. He is Christ the Lord. This is a sign for you: you will find a newborn baby wrapped snugly and lying in a manger.” Suddenly a great assembly of the heavenly forces was with the angel praising God and singing: “Glory to God in heaven, and on earth peace among those whom God favors.”** I’ve always heard that as singing.

This would not be the season that it is, without music. Each year, we look forward to the music. It moves us, inspires us, cheers us, brings forth memories, and even calls from within us what we may not have known was deep inside. (What’s the first song of Christmas that comes to mind.) Is there anyone who could not think of a song?

The story of Christmas is celebrated around the world in songs that speak to the people living in that part of the world. I grew up with Nativity scenes where the baby Jesus looked like I did. And just like the Nativity scenes that we are sharing throughout this service, other nationalities have pictured the baby Jesus and the scenes of his birth as if he were born in their time and place. And I think that is a reminder that God sent Jesus into the world with a message for All people in all times and in all places. And for the next few minutes, we will hear four Christmas carols with a message of Joy about the birth of Jesus but each one comes to us from a different cultural context.

**“Twas in the Moon of Wintertime”** is a Canadian Christmas hymn written in 1642 by a Jesuit missionary who was living among the Huron Tribe in Canada. The Jesuits are known for their willingness to honor traditional languages and concepts. In the words of this carol, Jesus is born in a “lodge of broken bark” and wrapped in a “robe of rabbit skin.” He is surrounded by hunters instead of shepherds, and the Magi are portrayed as “chiefs from afar” who bring him “fox and beaver pelts” instead of gold, frankincense and myrrh. The English translation also uses a traditional native American name for God, Gitchi Manitou (literally “great Spirit”). But the message is universal: Jesus your King is born, Jesus is born.”

[song]

**“Children, Go Where I Send Thee”** is an African-American spiritual. It is also a cumulative song which means each verse repeats the verses before it, making it easy to remember and easy to pass from one generation to the next. In the words of the song, Children, Go Where I Send Thee – and where is that? To the baby wrapped in swaddling clothing, lying in a manger, Born in Bethlehem.

[song]

**“I Wonder As I Wander”** is an American folksong. It originated in three lines of music sung without accompaniment by a young girl whose family was encamped in the town square of Murphy, North Carolina in July of 1933. The folk singer John Jacob Niles happened to be

passing through that town and heard the beautiful haunting melody which seemed reflective of life in Appalachia. He took what he heard and expanded it to what we have today. Song in which Jesus came as a king who would receive *“poor on’ry people like you and like I.”*

[song]

And finally, **“He is Born”** a French carol that dates back to the mid-19th century. The music gives the feel of a street band accompanied by dancers spreading the good news of the birth of the Christ child. The band includes both oboe and bagpipes. This holy child is adored by humble, simple people who express their joy with a childlike innocence that we still long for at this season. This carol will be beautifully sung by Casandra Hultgren in its original French.

[song]

This is the season when we sing. If you have no other hymns memorized, you know the Christmas songs. Turn on the secular radio stations, and even they are playing our songs. I walked into Target last week and even Target was playing our songs. 2000 years ago, the angels sang. The shepherds’ lives would not have changed if angels had not sung. The word angel in Greek means messenger. It does not mean “winged creature dressed in white.” It means messenger. Anybody can be a messenger. You know people who do not know the peace of which the angels sang but know the darkness. You know someone who is out of work, who lost a loved one recently, who is sick, feeling alone, or is anxious about all the uncertainties of our time. Could you help them sing? Next month, we will focus on how we embody the love that came into the world and extend that love to each other. You and I have the opportunity to be the messengers, to sing the songs, and to show the world that the baby of Bethlehem began a new way of living where each person is valued, each person is loved, and person is offered entry into the Kingdom of God. You can be a messenger. That’s the gift of Christmas.

### **Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of December 27, 2020**

**Weekly Prayer:** God of hope and light, your good news has been announced to the world, the great night of Jesus’ birth. You have given to us a new chance, a reminder of your continual love for us. Guide our thoughts and our actions. Heal and restore us. For we ask this in Jesus’ Name. Amen.

### **Monday, December 28**

#### **Scripture: John 1:19-34**

This is John’s testimony when the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him, “Who are you?” John confessed (he didn’t deny but confessed), “I’m not the Christ.” They asked him, “Then who are you? Are you Elijah?” John said, “I’m not.” “Are you the prophet?” John answered, “No.” They asked, “Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?” John replied, *“I am a voice crying out in the wilderness, Make the Lord’s path straight,* just as the prophet Isaiah said.” Those sent by the Pharisees asked, “Why do you baptize if you aren’t the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?” John answered, “I baptize with water. Someone greater stands among you, whom you don’t recognize. He comes after me, but I’m not worthy to untie his sandal straps.” This encounter took place across the Jordan in Bethany where John was baptizing. The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, “Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is the one about whom I said, ‘He who comes after me is really greater than me because he existed before me.’ Even I didn’t recognize him, but I came baptizing with water so

that he might be made known to Israel.” John testified, “I saw the Spirit coming down from heaven like a dove, and it rested on him. Even I didn’t recognize him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘The one on whom you see the Spirit coming down and resting is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ I have seen and testified that this one is God’s Son.”

**Observation:** We’ve just celebrated Christmas, when God came into our world as a tiny infant, when “the Word became flesh” (John 1:14). But that was just the beginning. Jesus grew up, and in today’s reading he began his public ministry. John the Baptist was his herald, declaring, “Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (verse 29).

**Application:** “The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” was an image from Israel’s sacrifices for sin. While Hebrews 10:4 said bluntly, “It’s impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins,” Jesus’ sacrifice could, did, and does set us right with God. Have you claimed Jesus’ gift of freedom from guilt and destructive ways of life?

**Prayer:** How grateful I am that you, God, would enter this world in a way that we could see and understand your love. Help me to accept all that you would do for me. I want the life that you offer. Guide me this day, in Jesus’ name. Amen.

## **Tuesday, December 29**

### **Scripture: Galatians 4:1-7**

I’m saying that as long as the heirs are minors, they are no different from slaves, though they really are the owners of everything. However, they are placed under trustees and guardians until the date set by the parents. In the same way, when we were minors, we were also enslaved by this world’s system. But when the fulfillment of the time came, God sent his Son, born through a woman, and born under the Law. This was so he could redeem those under the Law so that we could be adopted. Because you are sons and daughters, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba, Father!” Therefore, you are no longer a slave but a son or daughter, and if you are his child, then you are also an heir through God.

**Observation:** Jesus, the Apostle Paul said, was born fully human, an Israelite (“through a woman ... under the Law”). Verse 5 explained why: “This was so he could redeem those under the Law so that we could be adopted.” We humans were all “under the Law,” guilty and condemned. But thanks to Jesus, we can all be adopted into God’s family and live new lives as God’s children.

**Application:** This Advent, we saw that God is seeking reconciliation – that is, seeking a relationship with us. In the Christmas story, we saw how shepherds and magi were seeking a relationship (in that Bethlehem manger). In different ways, they all sought Christ. In what ways are you seeking him? Do you sense him seeking you, too? What did you gain from this Advent season that you want to keep?

**Prayer:** Just as there were people two thousand years ago who were seeking you, I long for signs of your presence in my life today. Help me to see clearly the way that you want me to go. Amen.

## Wednesday, December 30

### Scripture: 2 Corinthians 5:14-21

The love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: one died for the sake of all; therefore, all died. He died for the sake of all so that those who are alive should live not for themselves but for the one who died for them and was raised. So then, from this point on we won't recognize people by human standards. Even though we used to know Christ by human standards, that isn't how we know him now. So then, if anyone is in Christ, that person is part of the new creation. The old things have gone away, and look, new things have arrived! All of these new things are from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and who gave us the ministry of reconciliation. In other words, God was reconciling the world to himself through Christ, by not counting people's sins against them. He has trusted us with this message of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors who represent Christ. God is negotiating with you through us. We beg you as Christ's representatives, "Be reconciled to God!" God caused the one who didn't know sin to be sin for our sake so that through him we could become the righteousness of God.

**Observation:** If you have followed our Advent reading, today's scripture should be a review. We are approaching the end of another year – a year that most of us will not be sad about ending. There is hope as we enter a new year, but no guarantee that the year ahead will not have its own challenges. The apostle Paul said, though, that there is a way to actually enter into a better way of living than what we've known, a "new creation." Through Jesus, God gives us all fresh starts, the chance to live as a new person.

**Application:** Trying to "fix" our deepest selves on our own, unaided, usually falls short. For instance, research showed that the most likely buyers of self-help books are people who bought a different self-help book within the last 18 months. In what ways does the new life Jesus gives us go beyond "self-help"? How can you choose to act in ways that open your life and heart to the fresh start, the "new creation," Jesus offers you?

**Prayer:** God, give me the strength and courage that I need – and then the determination to keep following you, even when the way is uncomfortable. I want to trust your greater purpose for my life. Today, I am open to whatever you place in my path. Amen.

## Thursday, December 31

### Scripture: Philippians 3:5-14

I was circumcised on the eighth day. I am from the people of Israel and the tribe of Benjamin. I am a Hebrew of the Hebrews. With respect to observing the Law, I'm a Pharisee. With respect to devotion to the faith, I harassed the church. With respect to righteousness under the Law, I'm blameless. These things were my assets, but I wrote them off as a loss for the sake of Christ. But even beyond that, I consider everything a loss in comparison with the superior value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. I have lost everything for him, but what I lost I think of as sewer trash, so that I might gain Christ and be found in him. In Christ I have a righteousness that is not my own and that does not come from the Law but rather from the faithfulness of Christ. It is the righteousness of God that is based on faith. The righteousness that I have comes from knowing Christ, the power of his resurrection, and the participation in his sufferings. It includes being conformed to his death so that I may perhaps reach the goal of the resurrection of the dead. It's not that I have already reached this goal or have already been perfected, but I pursue it, so that I may grab hold of it because Christ grabbed hold of me for just this purpose. Brothers and sisters, I myself don't think I've reached it, but I do this one thing: I forget about the things

behind me and reach out for the things ahead of me. The goal I pursue is the prize of God's upward call in Christ Jesus.

**Observation:** Typically, most of us set some goals for each new year. Here Paul described his life goal: "The goal I pursue is the prize of God's upward call in Christ Jesus" (verse 14). That goal meant that Paul's impeccable religious resume was no longer a source of pride or superiority. Paul left all that behind him to pursue what mattered most—knowing and serving Jesus.

**Application:** Paul's "impeccable resume" included persecuting Christians (verse 6; see also 1 Timothy 1:12-16), a reality he wasn't proud of. After accepting Christ as Lord, though, he let go of his past, reprioritized his life, and moved forward. As we enter 2021, what do you need to let go of in order to move forward with Christ? How can you reprioritize your life in ways that help you focus on knowing, loving, and serving Jesus?

**Prayer:** God of grace, you are the God of the second chance. You know the goals that I would like to make and my hesitancy to make them for fear that I will not be any more successful than any other year. Help me to see what goals you want me to make and to turn to you each morning as the strength to take the next step. Guide me in your ways. Amen.

## Friday, January 1

### Scripture: Acts 8:26-29

An angel from the Lord spoke to Philip, "At noon, take the road that leads from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a desert road.) So he did. Meanwhile, an Ethiopian man was on his way home from Jerusalem, where he had come to worship. He was a eunuch and an official responsible for the entire treasury of Candace. (Candace is the title given to the Ethiopian queen.) He was reading the prophet Isaiah while sitting in his carriage. The Spirit told Philip, "Approach this carriage and stay with it."

**Observation:** Happy New Year! Twice in this brief story, the apostle Philip responded obediently to God's Spirit. First, he took the road that an angel (or messenger) instructed him to take, a road that ran through bleak, unpromising territory. Second, when he met a chariot carrying an Ethiopian government official home from Jerusalem, he approached as the Holy Spirit directed him.

**Application:** "Take a desert road at noon" was God's message to Phillip. God often guides us to people and situations we wonder about at the time. Looking back, we can see that God used what was at the time a difficult order to follow; however, blessings flowed from that difficult order. When have you done something difficult because you believed God wanted you to? What blessings came from that?

**Prayer:** God of all creation, thank you for this new year and the great blessings of life itself. I look hopefully at what is ahead in this year, wanting to serve you and to be the person you want me to be. Give me the wisdom to seek you first in all things. Amen.

## Saturday, January 2

### Scripture: Acts 8:30-40

Running up to the carriage, Philip heard the man reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you really understand what you are reading?" The man replied, "Without someone to guide me, how

could I?" Then he invited Philip to climb up and sit with him. This was the passage of scripture he was reading: *Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter and like a lamb before its shearer is silent so he didn't open his mouth. In his humiliation justice was taken away from him. Who can tell the story of his descendants because his life was taken from the earth?* The eunuch asked Philip, "Tell me, about whom does the prophet say this? Is he talking about himself or someone else?" Starting with that passage, Philip proclaimed the good news about Jesus to him. As they went down the road, they came to some water. The eunuch said, "Look! Water! What would keep me from being baptized?" He ordered that the carriage halt. Both Philip and the eunuch went down to the water, where Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Lord's Spirit suddenly took Philip away. The eunuch never saw him again but went on his way rejoicing. Philip found himself in Azotus. He traveled through that area, preaching the good news in all the cities until he reached Caesarea.

**Observation:** God was preparing the Ethiopian for his visit with Phillip long before the two of them met. One of the main channels God used was the Bible. The Ethiopian was reading (and probably not for the first time) from Isaiah 53. Coincidentally (or perhaps not), the New Testament church quoted more often from that chapter than any other when preaching about Jesus.

**Application:** In New Testament times, the Bible was not even printed (much less e-mailed or on the Internet), and there were no chapter or verse divisions to help readers identify any particular passage. For us, the Bible is literally at our fingertips. What steps do you plan to take to read and understand the Bible more clearly during this new year?

**Prayer:** God, I am grateful for all the ways that I can know and learn of your work through history. Help me to turn each day to your Word found in scripture and to seek your direction for my life. Amen.