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Advent: A Thrill of Hope

Howard Schaap

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Advent: A Thrill of Hope

Abstract

"Despite the darkness—of literature, of human nature, of the decline fall into winter—we have God's promises."

Posting about meaningful Christmas carols from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

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Advent: A Thrill of Hope

Howard Schaap

The older I get, the more I find the descent into darkness that is November and December on the northern plains terrifying. “What if the sun doesn’t come back?” I can imagine myself asking with ancient ancestors of similarly northern climates.

That’s especially true this semester, however, which I’ve spent teaching literature that covers things like cyclical violence, systematic sexual assault, and total war. Even the most upbeat book I taught included domestic abuse, psychological manipulation within marriage, and attempted murder.

Choose better books, you say.

I taught a PEN/Hemingway award winner, two Pulitzer Prize winners, and a Nobel Prize winner.

Choose nicer books, you say, literature is dark and despairing.

Our world is dark, I’d say.

At an earlier point in my life, I would also have brought up an argument that went something like, “We have to study history so that we don’t repeat it.” I no longer believe that. We are doomed to repeat history. The next dictator is rising somewhere, the powerful are already planning our next war, and these things will kill children. “Peace on earth” has primarily been turned into a Christmas slogan used to sell products.

That sounds like despair, but I’m afraid the optimism of Christmas commercials is more dangerous than a frank assessment of the darkness of the world.

So, especially this semester, I need reminding: what does hope actually look like?

“O Holy Night” is a good place to start looking.

I love the hymn “O Holy Night” for its drama, for its soaring melody, and mostly for its seemingly impossible theological and historical claims.

The song begins by setting the scene clearly and plainly before getting theological:

*O holy night! The stars are brightly shining,
It is the night of our dear Savior's birth.
Long lay the world in sin and error pining,
Till He appear'd and the soul felt its worth.*

“The soul felt its worth.” The Christmas story is a felt story. The mind can't logically deduce the manger; we don't primarily hear and then interpret its worth. No, it is a felt thing down deep in the core of one's being, enlivening midnight shepherds who could feel the wonder of the angels' song rumble, could sense that because of a baby born in a cattle trough, somehow everything had changed.

The end of the verse soars both musically and lyrically, with exclamation points and repetition that even the praisiest praise song today would find embarrassing.

*A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices,
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn.
Fall on your knees! O hear the angel voices!
O night divine, O night when Christ was born;
O night divine, O night, O night Divine.*

Considering all the unabashed exclamations of this verse, the back story to “O Holy Night” is surprisingly fraught and modern. The original words for “O Holy Night” come from the Frenchman Placide Cappeau, a poet and wine merchant in a town called Roquemaure, in southern France. Cappeau's education had made him a decent poet, but it had also made him critical of Christianity. Perhaps in an attempt to draw Cappeau back into the fold, the parish priest asked him to write the words for a new song to be played on the newly renovated church organ on Christmas Eve mass of 1847. Cappeau was surprised by the request and took the bait, and on a carriage trip to Paris wrote the song that he called “Cantique de Noel” or “Minuit, chrétiens” (“Midnight, Christians”). John Sullivan Dwight, a Unitarian minister, would translate the song into the version we know in 1855.

Cappeau's original lyrics take a somewhat stronger theological stance than the English version:

*Midnight, Christians, is the solemn hour,
When God as man descended unto us
To erase the stain of original sin
And to end the wrath of His Father.*

In Cappeau's words, we're not just "pining" away in "sin and error." No, Christ's work is to undo the work of humanity's essential darkness, to end a wrathful relationship with the Father and to begin another. Christmas in Cappeau's version is even more fully the pivot of history.

Because of this work of Christ, Cappeau's lyrics also emphasize the "thrill of hope":

*The entire world thrills with hope
On this night that gives it a Savior.
People, kneel down, await your deliverance.
Christmas, Christmas, here is the Redeemer,
Christmas, Christmas, here is the Redeemer!*

Perhaps my favorite thing about "O Holy Night" is its use of present tense. The song sets the manger before us *now*; it makes the old historical story immediate. The first two lines of the second stanza collapse time in a surprising way, transporting us into the scene itself by the "light of faith." We find ourselves standing there at his cradle watching the wisemen make their entrance:

*Led by the light of Faith serenely beaming,
With glowing hearts by His cradle we stand.
So led by light of a star sweetly gleaming,
Here come the wise men from the Orient land.*

Here they come—Balthasar, Melchior, and Gaspar. The English version goes on to emphasize the humanity of Christ, how similar he became to us in weakness. If stanza one emphasizes the soul, stanza two emphasizes the body and our humble response:

*The King of Kings lay thus in lowly manger;
In all our trials born to be our friend.
He knows our need, to our weaknesses no stranger,
Behold your King! Before Him lowly bend!
Behold your King, Before Him lowly bend!*

Cappeau's original, on the other hand, seems to be more of a prayer, directing us rather than transporting us with a magic wand:

*May the ardent light of our Faith
Guide us all to the cradle of the infant,
As in ancient times a brilliant star
Guided the Oriental kings there.*

And, he follows with something even more surprising—a bold instruction to those who find themselves at the manger, that they might not miss the Christ child in their pride. It's in this request that we can slide down Cappeau's lyrics into his life. Cappeau, it seems, had been critical of the clergy and had flirted with socialism, which was thought to be at odds with Christian faith at the time. No doubt we can read his criticism of humanity, especially of the powerful, in these lines:

*The King of Kings was born in a humble manger;
O mighty ones of today, proud of your greatness,
It is to your pride that God preaches.
Bow your heads before the Redeemer!
Bow your heads before the Redeemer!*

I prefer the English lyrics; we do not have a high priest who is unable to identify with us in our weakness—that is, we *do* have the Christ child in the manger, human in every way. However, the prophetic challenge of Cappeau's lyrics also remains true: the humility of the manger remains a stumbling block in a world still so bent on power.

It's verse three, however, that seals the far-reaching hope of this hymn. Perhaps only "Joy to the World" reaches as far. Whereas that hymn emphasizes the extension of joy to the entire creation, "O Holy Night" seeks a specifically human peace:

*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.*

It's that line, "all oppression shall cease" that gets me. That's hard to imagine. Yes, "peace on earth" can come into our lives spiritually, and yes, peace can come already in the present time in small ways, but that peace is nothing like this more specific claim, when "*all* oppression shall cease." It's an apocalyptic line, one that looks over the horizon into a new time and makes you imagine a new world.

The song finishes with praise and more of that impossibly soaring melody for which we can thank another Frenchman.

Cappeau took his poem to Adolphe Adam, a composer who was building an international reputation. Adam worked on it for three weeks and then Cappeau took the composition back to the priest, who found an opera singer from Paris to perform the song at Christmas Eve mass. Considering the last line of the song, which lifts to height out of many people's range, an opera singer is entirely appropriate.

Then again, I don't want to sell the rest of us singers short. The way "O Holy Night" climaxes requires you to fill your lungs. If you want to reach it's higher and then even higher notes, it demands your all.

*Sweet hymns of joy in grateful chorus raise we,
Let all within us praise His holy name.
Christ is the Lord! O praise His Name forever,
His power and glory evermore proclaim.
His power and glory evermore proclaim.*

In the dark of winter, I need to be drawn out like that. I need to be pulled, dragged even, into the vision of hope that "O Holy Night" offers. Adam's music does exactly that.

It's not an easy song to sing, and it's not an easy vision to hold onto.

At one point, the church banned "O Holy Night." Cappeau had broken with the Catholic Church for good and committed to socialism; Adolphe Adam was found to have Jewish blood. And so for a time, the machinations of power and the identity politics of the day put the song on ice, except by then it was too popular, the vision too endearing to the common people.

If you know the story, you can hear Cappeau's call to action echoing through his words. In this way, the English version may be better, more artistic. Then again, to be called to both kneel at the manger and to stand up for peace is a call we will always need. This is where Cappeau's vision ends, with worshipers willing to meet the high call of the gospel:

*The Redeemer has broken every bond:
The Earth is free, and Heaven is open.
He sees a brother where there was only a slave,
Love unites those that iron had chained.
Who will tell Him of our gratitude,
For all of us He is born, He suffers and dies.*

*People, stand up! Sing of your deliverance,
Christmas, Christmas, sing of the Redeemer,
Christmas, Christmas, sing of the Redeemer!*

Despite the darkness—of literature, of human nature, of the decline fall into winter—we have God's promises. That the Son will return, that all oppression shall cease.

This Advent season, may the invitation to kneel at the manger and to sing praise at the top of our lungs remind us all of that bright hope.