

# Let Us Sing “Alleluia”

The fourth sermon in the Advent/Christmas series

“Calm and Bright: 200 Years of ‘Silent Night’”

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- Isaiah 9:2-3, 6-7 (Good News Translation) The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. They lived in a land of shadows, but now light is shining on them. <sup>3</sup>You have given them great joy, Lord; you have made them happy. They rejoice in what you have done.... <sup>6</sup>A child is born to us! A son is given to us! He will be called, “Wonderful Counselor,” “Mighty God,” “Eternal Father,” “Prince of Peace.” <sup>7</sup>His royal power will continue to grow; his kingdom will always be at peace. He will rule as King David's successor, basing his power on right and justice, from now until the end of time. The LORD Almighty is determined to do all this.
- Matthew 2:1-3a (Common English Bible) After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in the territory of Judea during the rule of King Herod, magi came from the east to Jerusalem. <sup>2</sup>They asked, “Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We’ve seen his star in the east, and we’ve come to honor him.” <sup>3</sup>When King Herod heard this, he was troubled, and everyone in Jerusalem was troubled with him.
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: We embrace Jesus as our “king,” the one to rule over our lives.

During these Sundays in the season of Advent I’ve been exploring the biblical insights that can be found in the beloved Christmas carol “Silent Night.” As I said at the outset of this service, “Silent Night” is turning 200 years old tomorrow night, since it was composed and first sung on Christmas Eve in the year 1818. This week we turn to the fourth verse of the carol which is printed in today’s bulletin right below the sermon title. While we’re not singing the carol until Christmas Eve, join me in *saying* the words of that fourth verse, speaking in the voice you would use if there were a sleeping baby in the room:

*Silent night, holy night! Wondrous star, lend thy light;*

*With the angels let us sing “Alleluia” to our King;*

*Christ the Savior is born! Christ the Savior is born.*

“With the angels, let us sing “Alleluia” to our King...” Doesn’t that sound sweet... lovely... innocent... charming. But if anyone popping in for a visit to the Holy Family – shepherds, Wise Men, anyone – had suggested that they wanted to address the infant by singing ‘Alleluias’ to the cute little king in the crib, they would have been stirring up a big pot of trouble.

To understand why singing Alleluias to our King would have been bad, let’s start by confirming what “alleluia” actually means. Actually, let’s start with a similar word: “Hallelujah” (which starts with the letter “h”). That Hebrew word means “praise the Lord.” When the Hebrew word “hallelujah” is translated using the letters of the Greek alphabet, it’s pronounced “alleluia” (beginning with the letter “a”). But whether you say the Hebrew form “Hallelujah” or the Greek or Latin form “Alleluia,” they mean the same thing: “praise the Lord.”<sup>1</sup>

Of course, it’s a wonderful thing to sing praise to the Lord, to sing “alleluia.” But back in the days when Jesus was born, if you were offering praise to a king, you were offering it to Herod. The Roman emperor Caesar Augustus had appointed Herod to govern this corner of the Roman Empire – this land populated by the Jewish people. Herod’s title was not “president” or “prime minister” or “governor.” Herod was declared to be the “King” of this region known as Judea. Herod was the “King of the Jews.”

Now, picture some well-meaning foreigners – wise astrologers from eastern lands – who traveled from afar to the region of Judea. They paid a courtesy call on the local monarch, King Herod. Based on

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.quora.com/What-is-the-difference-between-alleluia-and-hallelujah>, accessed 12/17/18

their interpretation of astrological signs they had perceived, they asked what seemed to be the obvious question: “Where will we find the newborn king of the Jews?”

Herod’s reaction was not, “Oh, good, finally there’s a succession plan and I can start preparing for retirement!” No, when he was asked, “Where is the newborn king of the Jews?” paranoid, power-hungry, tyrannical Herod immediately launched into High Alert mode: a threat to the throne had been revealed. Somewhere some baby was being groomed to challenge Herod’s dominance. If people were singing “Alleluias” to a king and that king wasn’t Herod, then Herod had to act swiftly, with brutal certainty to maintain his power, his domination, his control, his reign of fear that kept people in line and kept him in power.

So now we see how something seemingly as innocent as singing sweet “lullaby-alleluias” to a newborn king was actually a bold statement of faith. Singing praises to the infant Jesus signaled allegiance with God’s power, not worldly power. “Singing ‘alleluias’” to an infant king would be taken by Herod as a treasonous act threatening his control, his dominion. It would undermine his subjugation of the Jewish people through intimidation and ruthless violence. From Herod’s perspective, that’s what the birth of Jesus meant.

But from the people’s perspective the birth of Jesus announced the blessing of living out of hope and not out of fear. This blessing was the hope that prophets had envisioned for ages. They had written that the arrival of God’s savior would be like people who had been walking in darkness suddenly seeing a great light. They envisioned life shaped not by fear but by love and compassion, by mercy and forgiveness. For the first time... ever!... they could imagine being liberated from the reign of fear carried out in Judea by Herod, and elsewhere by other power-crazed dictators. They could imagine that life did not have to consist only of being ignored, or taken advantage of, being treated cruelly, held back brutally, being viewed with disdain by the few who possessed power. How could they help but sing “Alleluia!” to their newborn king!

And what about us? Aren’t there powers in our lives that we need to be liberated from? There may be expectations that weigh on us so heavily, forces that seem hold us back or hold us down, mindsets that imprison our thinking, conditions we contend with that limit our ability to enjoy the creativity and fellowship and personal fulfillment that life could offer us.

For some it is the Almighty Dollar, perfectionism, upward mobility. For some it [could be] an abusive spouse, an unforgiving relationship, the rejection of family. For some it is the addiction to [material possessions as] an attempt to numb the fear.<sup>2</sup>

For some it is chronic or severe illness. For some it the loss of a job or the fear of being put out of work.

Many people today live in fear. They live in fear of violence, perhaps on the local scene or on the international stage. They live in fear of economic downturns in the national economy and in their own household. But in Jesus God has shown us that we are not at the mercy of fearful powers.

In living among us in Jesus of Nazareth, God has shown us a new way of “lording over humankind” – a way of ruling our lives that is not founded in fear but lavish with love. In Jesus we discover that God lifts us up with hope, opens our eyes to see joy, comforts us with forgiveness, consoles us with mercy, encourages us to embrace the world with love. Because of the birth of Jesus in our lives we realize that we needn’t resort to an “every man for himself” survival plan. Because God has our best interests at heart, we can care about the needs and desires of others as well as our own.

For this reason the prophet Isaiah declared, “You have given them great joy, Lord; you have made them happy. They rejoice in what you have done.... A child is born to us! A son is given to us!”<sup>3</sup>

The carol proclaims “Wondrous star, lend thy light.” That Bethlehem star guided the Wise Men – and thus the world – to discover Jesus. Now Jesus is a star shining amid life’s darkness to guide the world to God. And that is why we join with the host of heaven to sing “Alleluia!” to our King. Praise the Lord who came to live among us – and now to live within us – in Jesus the Messiah.

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<sup>2</sup> Marcia McFee, Calm and Bright: 200 Years of “Silent Night,” “Sermon Fodder,” at worshipdesignstudio.com, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 9:3, 6a Good News Translation