

GOOD NEWS IN UNEXPECTED PLACES

Luke 2:1-20

Kelly Boyte Brill
Avon Lake UCC
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All Christmas Eve services have two things in common: a celebration of light, and a celebration of music. Most services feature candlelight of some kind; and - though the genre of music varies widely - all services feature music of the season.

It is no coincidence that Christmas is celebrated at the beginning of winter, just after the shortest day of the year - at least this is true for the northern hemisphere. In the 4th century, an emperor and a pope declared that the date of Christmas would officially be December 25, in part to coincide with other cultural festivals taking place around the time. There is something about the shortened days that makes people long to remember and celebrate the light. In ancient Rome, a festival called Saturnalia featured a Mardi Gras atmosphere. In addition to partying, houses were decorated with greenery, and people would often give candles as gifts.

No one knows when Jesus was actually born. No one wrote it down at the time. Luke and Matthew's gospels were written decades later, embellished with the details that are so dear to us now, as tribute to the life that Jesus led and the influence he continued to have. The actual event was unremarkable. And that, actually, is the only fact we know for sure. We know that Jesus' birth was unremarkable, so ordinary that even the visits by angels, shepherds and magi still leave us with a poor, unmarried couple who have to give birth in a barn. There is no taking away Jesus' humble beginnings. It

is who he is. The only fact we know for sure is this: God chose to bring good news to an unexpected place, to unexpected people.

Luke gives us the story of shepherds, a blue-collar job if there ever was one. Shepherds, moreover, working the night shift - a time when you need a little cheer, a little good news. The good news is delivered by angels who visit the shepherds, telling them the good news of Jesus' birth saying, or - we imagine - singing, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth - peace! Peace among those who God favors." The shepherds hear the song and its message and realize, "That's us! God is favoring us!" Dirty, poor shepherds working late at night.

Matthew brings us the story of a star that guides the wise men towards the baby Jesus.

It's a story of a light that shines in the darkness, a light that dispels despair, a light that guides, a light that brings warmth and hope, a reminder of God's presence. And so, on Christmas Eve, we think about the imagery of light, the miracle that one candle can transform a dark room. Just as one act of kindness can cause someone to believe that life is worth living.

Christmas Eve is celebrated with light and with music.

Even if you know nothing about classical music, you probably have heard pieces of Handel's "Messiah", the most popular portion of it being the "Hallelujah Chorus." The "Messiah" is a staple of orchestras throughout the United States and Great Britain. Think of a performance of Handel's "Messiah" and you probably picture a concert hall full of well-dressed patrons.

George Frederick Handel chose to perform it for the very first time 276 years ago, in Dublin, as a benefit for people living in debtors' prison. People at the bottom of the economic ladder who were unable to pay off a debt would end up in prison. They would be forced to work in prison until their debts were paid off. Social justice advocates knew that the system was unfair and cruel, that it separated families and caused a cascade of other problems, but yet the system persisted. Proceeds from that first performance of Handel's "Messiah" allowed 142 people to be freed from debtors' prison.

The lyrics come from the prophet Isaiah - comfort ye, comfort ye, my people...oh thou that tellest good tidings to Zion...and surely it was comforting good news to those who found liberation because of the performance of a piece of music, and to all those who loved them.

Unexpected good news. Once again, God shows favor to those who thought themselves the least likely candidates.

Four years ago, Brian Palmer, a 44-year-old native of Beaumont, California, was a homeless man struggling to overcome heroin addiction. All he owned was a bag containing some clothes, a blanket, and a pillow. He sought assistance at a recovery center at the heart of Skid Row, the large tent city in downtown Los Angeles.

There are about 53,000 homeless people in LA County. The streets of the Skid Row neighborhood have become "home" although that's really not the right word. Block after block, the sidewalks are crammed with tents, boxes, broken furniture, and shopping carts full of possessions. It would be an unexpected place to find good news.

But you can find some at one end of Skid Row at a place called the Midnight Mission. Founded in 1914, the purpose statement of the Midnight Mission is to offer paths towards self-sufficiency to people who have lost direction. Their logo features the phrase, "Step into the light." First they offer the basic necessities to people on the streets: food, shelter, clothing, medical care. But they don't stop there. They continue with twelve-step programs, counseling, job training. Their website tells some incredible success stories.

To enter the mission, you have to step over people in sleeping bags. It is, however, a different experience to visit the Midnight Mission with Vijay Gupta, a 31-year-old violinist who plays with the LA Philharmonic. Seven years ago, when Gupta was 24, he co-founded a group called Street Symphony, a group of professional musicians which works with homeless, mentally ill, and incarcerated populations. These aren't musicians who swoop in, play some beautiful music, brighten someone's day, and leave. These are musicians who form relationships with people, and who provide music education to the people with whom they work. When Vijay Gupta walks into the Midnight Mission, he greets residents and staff with smiles, handshakes, banter, and an explosive laugh. They know each other. He's not an occasional guest. He has become a part of their community. He is bridging the gap between high-culture and the streets, between people of privilege and people who are as down-and-out as it gets. He shows up.

When Brian Palmer was a kid, he dreamed of becoming a professional singer; he was a member of the church choir and appeared in musicals at school. On Skid row,

Brian encountered the Street Symphony and began taking voice lessons from one of its professional singers.

Last year, Brian was tapped to sing one of the arias in the annual performance of the “Messiah” on Skid Row. Before performing, he shared with the audience some thoughts about the music. “When I came here, three years ago, i didn’t know where my life was going to take me,” he said. “I just knew that I needed to change, and that I needed help. When I was walking through my life in addiction, and the darkness and hell I had created for myself, it was like the phoenix coming out of the darkness and seeing the light.”

He then began to sing. The music comes from Handel, but the text is from the book of Isaiah: “The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light; they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them the light shined.”

There are other singers who can sing it a little better, perhaps, with more polish. But Brian Palmer makes the text sound as though it had been taken from his own life. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.

It starts with a God who has a particular love for those who are most vulnerable - like widows, and orphans, and strangers, those with no home or homeland. And it continues with the story of a man who walked the earth noticing those no one else noticed. The poorest woman in worship. The person with a disease that has caused everyone to abandon him. The one whose mental illness frightens those around him. Children whom everyone else wanted to use as sources of labor. Into these lives came the light of Jesus’ compassionate love. It wasn’t just that they were noticed, although that in it-

self was a gift. They were noticed, and then they were accepted - just as they were - and then they were loved back into community. Those who walked in darkness experienced the light of extraordinary compassionate love.

No one thought the Messiah would bring this kind of love to these places. It was as unexpected as the birth itself, to two insignificant people in a place you couldn't even find on a map.

The story continues tonight, as we light a candle, as we sing in one voice, as we proclaim in our hearts and lives that we are people who choose to walk in the light of God's love and justice.

Sermon illustration: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/01/01/handels-messiah-on-skid-row>