

The servant's song

It has commenced: The constant stream of Christmas music everywhere you go! Once "I saw mommy kissing Santa Clause underneath the mistletoe last



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night" and "Santa Baby" gets in your head, the soundtrack is hard to stop.

For Christians, music is a big part of Advent and Christmas, but our mental soundtrack hopefully involves Handel's "Messiah" and "Silent Night." During this Advent we will study the Christmas songs in the Bible. A great deal of the Old Testament is musical in format, though Hebrew poetry does not use the meter and rhyme forms of English poetry.

Today we look at one of the "servant songs" in Isaiah.

There are four Servant Songs (Isaiah 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; and 52:13-53:12), all celebrating a remarkable and mysterious servant who comes to fulfill the ultimate promise of God. The Jews identify this servant as Israel, God's chosen people in whom all God's promises will be revealed to the world. Christians see this servant as Christ, who is the embodiment of God's promises and the ultimate revelation in this world of the eternal God.

Christians read the Old Testament texts through the lens of the New Testament as we examine the claims Jesus made of himself and the understanding that humanity cannot encapsulate the majesty, love and grace of God. Jesus began his public ministry with a reading from Isaiah 61 in the synagogue at Nazareth: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me. He has

sent me to preach good news to the poor...and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18-19). In addition to this connection with Isaiah's Servant Songs, Jesus tells his followers that he must suffer and die on their behalf. The Apostle Paul (Romans 4:25) explains Jesus was "handed over (to the authorities for execution) because of our transgressions (sins)" and "raised to meet the requirements of righteousness for us," a quote from Isaiah's fourth Servant Song. Galatians 3 and 2 Corinthians 5 similarly connect with Isaiah.

Paul interprets this second Servant Song (49:6) as calling the church to be "a light to the nations" as we tell the world that Jesus is God's Messiah, our spiritual hope. The history of Israel teaches us that God's plan is to reveal himself to us and through us to the world. Israel was called to teach the world about God, but too often failed in that task. We might recognize we often do no better! God's ultimate revelation comes in Jesus, the truly faithful Israelite who fulfills the Law and the prophets, bridging the gap of our soulful pride so we may find true life in God's grace. Now, Jesus the Messiah invites us to tell the world the good news.

The Isaiah text is marked by a sense of intimacy between the servant and God. The plan for God's Messiah to come into the world is not a revision or last attempt by God to make himself known to us. This salvation, which transcends time and distance, is described as "The Lord called me before my birth, called my name when I was in my mother's womb" (v. 1). This servant's words will be as direct and sharp as a sword or arrow (vv. 2-3). The servant is described by intimate language: "you are my servant" (v. 3)... "my reward is with God" (v.

Formations

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Scripture: Isaiah 49:1-6

4)... "one who formed me from the womb...I'm honored in the Lord's eyes" (v. 5)... "God has become my strength" (v. 5).

Old Testament texts are full of the majesty and otherness of God, yet the Psalms and prophets often speak of God in terms of his care, protection and provision for his people. The voice of this Isaiah song contains a beautiful melody of hope in God.

God desires that we come to know him and the blessings he has prepared for us. God says of his servant, "I will also appoint you as a light to the nations so that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth" (v.6). The Apostle John's account of the gospel begins: "In Him (Christ) was life; and the life was the light of men" (John 1:4).

Our modern concepts of Christmas reflect the need for God's life-changing love. We plunge into all the emotional excitement of the holiday, plan fun events, schedule parties and special meals. All too casually we blend the secular and sacred until the meaning of Advent is lost. Advent is the season when we welcome the coming Christ.

I am not suggesting we abandon the fun of Christmas in puritanical fashion. But, as followers of Christ and people who love God, we can focus on the wonder of this Suffering Servant whom God formed in the womb of a woman to offer love to a world lost in darkness. In this Advent, will you sing the servant's song?

Retired after 45 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques.