

How Can I Keep From Singing?

Luke 3:7-18

Sermon Notes from the pulpit of First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois
Third Sunday of Advent, December 16, 2018
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Do you remember what “records” are? They are audio recordings pressed on vinyl. You’d put a record on the turntable, gently place the needle, and spin the evening away.

You’d have to be careful, however, not to bump the turntable lest the needle hop across the record and scratch it. Zip! Click. Click. Click. Click. There is nothing more disheartening than a scratched record.

For music Sunday today, I pulled out some of my Christmas records.

- **Paul McCartney and the Wings.** Well, that’s not a Christmas album but the song “Silly Love Songs” fits the Christmas theme, and I got that album from Mom and Dad at Christmas 1976. *Some people want to fill the world with silly love songs/What’s wrong with that?*
- **Art Garfunkel and Amy Grant’s** “The Animals’ Christmas” written by Jimmy Webb is great.
- **George Winston’s** “December” is a jewel. “Jesus, Jesus Rest Your Head,” and “Some Children See Him” are highlights.
- **Mannheim Steamroller’s** “Christmas” is wonderful and their electronic version of Franz Gruber’s “Silent Night” puts a modern twist on a classic.

There’s nothing better than Christmas music. Year-round, there’s nothing more healing than Christmas songs. *Silent night. Holy Night. All is calm. All is bright.*

Before we get to Christmas, however, our lectionary forces us to get through John the Baptist. As Eric so ably pointed out last week, John the Baptist is a mood wrecker. He crashes into our record player and the needle goes bouncing over our Christmas soundtrack.

Zip! Silent/Click. Holy/Click. All is/Click. All is/Click. Click. Click. Click. (If you’ve never played a record on a record player, you have no idea what I’m talking about. But if you have, you do.)

John the Baptist stands at the Jordan River bellowing a gospel of repentance. He calls those gathered around him a pit of snakes. A brood of vipers, crawling around on their bellies. *Get clean*, John is saying. *Straighten up and fly right* is the way my mom would put it. It doesn’t matter who your family is, or what Wikipedia says about you. Your bank account, your status, the honorary titles affixed to your name don’t matter a bit. You’re a snake. A snake (!) he says! Your clean record doesn’t change who you are: a people in need of reform. *Repent*, John hollars. *Turn towards God. Make things right with God and with your neighbor.*

He holds the crowd’s rapt attention. *What should we do*, they want to know? *How can we fix this?*

“Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” Tax collectors should be honest and fair. Soldiers should be honest and kind. In so many words, John is reminding them of what Micah before him said: Seek justice; love kindness; walk humbly with your LORD.

The Messiah is coming.

Repent.

Turn around.

Kris Kristofferson tells about a turning around moment he had in the early 1970s. The song “Why Me, Lord?” appeared on the 1973 album “Jesus Was A Capricorn.” This is his biggest hit.

*Tell me Lord, if you think there's a way
I can try to repay
All I've taken from you.*

*Maybe Lord, I can show someone else
What I've been through myself
On my way back to you.*

* * *

We could say that John the Baptist is keenly interested in us moderns finding our “way back” to God. And we do that by finding Jesus. Listening to him. Walking with him. Watching him. Following his example. Centering our lives in his life.

John the Baptist is speaking to a people who felt a little lonely in the wilderness, an insecure people who felt they just might have lost their way. John the Baptist—through the centuries—is speaking to us.

Perhaps some among us need to make amends. Still others of us need to stop putting off the important things we keep putting off. Some of us need to reprioritize, take stock, spend a few hours praying and listening. Some of us need to get over ourselves and think about somebody else for a change; we need to find a way to serve something other than our own interests. Bob Dylan sang on his album *Slow Train Comin’* that you “gotta serve somebody.” Who’s it going to be? Choose wisely. Some of us need, simply, to breathe a bit more slowly. Laugh a little. Take it down a notch. “*Rejoice in the LORD always*, Paul said, *again I say rejoice!*” Is that what repentance might look like for you?

All of us would do well to turn off the noise, pause, take stock, give thanks, listen to the words of the carols we sing.

Nothing points me to the manger better than Christmas music.

- The new songs from the Camaroon: *He came down that we may have love.*
- The old songs: *O little town of Bethlehem how still we see thee lie.*
- The lullabies: *Away in a manger, no crib for his bed.*
- The lamentations: *In the bleak midwinter, frosty wind made moan. Earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone.*

Weather the records we play on the soundtrack of our season are scratched or not, no matter if I’m singing on-key or warbling discordantly off, the songs turn me always to the manger, always to the path that leads across a midnight clear. The songs remind me of faithful shepherds and a fearful but trusting Mary and Joseph. Everybody playing their part: the inn keeper, the angels, the wise men. And maybe, just maybe, even me.

Our Advent songs and carols remind us that we are heading towards Christmas.

*While though the tempest loudly roars,
I hear the truth, it liveth.
And though the darkness 'round me close,
Songs in the night it giveth.*

No storm can shake my inmost calm,
While to that rock I'm clinging.
Since love is lord of heaven and earth
How can I keep from singing?¹

While we are waiting, come.
While we are waiting, come.
Jesus our Emmanuel,
While we are waiting, come.²

AMEN.

Luke 3:7-18 ⁷John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. ⁹Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

¹⁰And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" ¹¹In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." ¹²Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" ¹³He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." ¹⁴Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

¹⁵As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

¹⁸So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

¹ Pete Seeger, *How Can I Keep from Singing*.

² "While We Are Waiting," *Glory to God Hymnal*.