

Calling It Like It Is

'Tis the season. . . .

. . . .to be jolly, fa la la, la la la, la la la. . . .

Yes, it's a festive season for sure. But upon closer examination from our Christian tradition, also 'Tis the season. . . .

. . . .to look amidst the darkening nights for that light shining in the darkness. . . .

. . . .to: I wonder as I wander out under the sky,
How Jesus the Savior did come for to die.
For poor on'ry people like you and like I...
I wonder as I wander out under the sky.

In researching this song, I found that:

"I Wonder as I Wander" is a Christian folk hymn, typically performed as a Christmas carol, written by American folklorist and singer John Jacob Niles. The hymn has its origins in a song fragment collected by Niles on July 16, 1933. While in the town of Murphy in Appalachian North Carolina, Niles attended a fundraising meeting held by evangelical [Christian]s who had been ordered out of town by the police. In his unpublished autobiography, he wrote of hearing the song:

A girl had stepped out to the edge of the little platform attached to the automobile. She began to sing. Her clothes were unbelievable dirty and ragged, and she, too, was unwashed. Her ash-blond hair hung down in long skeins. ... But, best of all, she was beautiful, and in her untutored way, she could sing. She smiled as she sang, smiled rather sadly, and sang only a single line of a song.

The girl, named Annie Morgan, repeated the fragment seven times in exchange for a quarter per performance, and Niles left with "three lines of verse, a garbled fragment of melodic material—and a magnificent idea". Based on this fragment, Niles composed the version of "I Wonder as I Wander" that is known today, extending the melody to four lines and the lyrics to three stanzas. His composition was completed on October 4, 1933. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/I_Wonder_as_I_Wander)

Amidst the many Christmas carols and songs of the season that pervade our lives in December each year, are a few like this one that are a pause from the bedazzling frivolity that are characteristic of so many of them. Don't get me wrong. I love the huge variety of Christmas music that fills this season. My family will attest that the large selection of holiday recordings at our house begin playing the day after Thanksgiving and continue into the first part of January.

As a Christian though, I'm grateful for this season of Advent when we take a longer view of Christmas and it's significance in our lives and in our world. Believe it or not, Advent is a longer time period in the church calendar than is Christmas itself. Advent with its 4 Sundays before Christmas day can be as long as 27 days whereas Christmas is limited to 12 days, beginning on Christmas day.

Even the Bible itself is more concerned with the preparation for the coming of Jesus than the accounts of his birth. While all 4 gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—have accounts about John the Baptist, of whom we just read Matthew’s take, only 2 of the gospels—Matthew and Luke—reference the birth of Jesus.

Every year we get swept up in assembling the cast of characters that make up the holy creche or nativity scene—the star, the angels, the shepherds, the stable animals, the wise men, Joseph, Mary and baby Jesus. Much artwork and sculpture have gone into beautiful and inspiring renditions or depictions of these parts in the nativity drama.

Interestingly, not so much artwork has made it into popular parlance depicting the one of whom we read about this morning—John the Baptist. Apart from specialty stores, you’ll be hard-pressed to find artwork and sculpture portraying John for sale in the stores alongside those that sell nativity sets. “For John wore clothing of camels’s hair with a leather belt around his waist and his food was locusts and wild honey.” (Mt. 3:4) Clearly John is one from the margins, outside the mainstream. He is a wild and wooly character. And his message is from that outside-the-mainstream perspective—from the margins.

In a word, John was calling for repentance. It’s not necessarily a bad word—repentance. But for some, I dare say, it can be a word that conjures up some negative feelings and emotions because of the condemnatory way in which it may have been used and experienced.

Perhaps you’ve seen the editorial cartoons over the years where there is a person standing on a street corner holding a sign that says something along the lines of “Repent! The end is near.” It’s a kind of doomsday double whammy. First off, the end of the world is declared to be imminent. And second, you may not be as ready for it as you could be. Repent! The message is to straighten up and get on track because there is not much time left in which to do it.

The actual meaning of repentance is as simple as turning around to get heading in the right direction. Unfortunately, repentance has taken on some additional baggage when it has been paired with judgement and condemnation to the point that the motivation for repentance rests on avoiding the negative and dire consequences for not repenting.

When we’re honest with ourselves, it doesn’t take long to identify those parts of our lives that are in need of positive change. It could be bad or unhealthy habits that we have. It could be unresolved conflict with another person or group of people. It could be long-standing tension within family. It could be our own feelings of inadequacy.

John’s advent message of repentance is not a bad one then for those who are in need and who know they’re in need. It’s not a bad message unless we receive it as some sort of judgement on our unworthiness that can actually lead to hopelessness.

Seminary professor John Burgess helpfully puts it this way. “What John—and Advent—remind us is that repentance is not primarily about our standards of moral worthiness, but rather about God’s desire to realign us to accord with Christ’s life. Repentance is not so much about our guilt feelings as about God’s power to transform us into Christ’s image.” (*Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, vol. 1*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, gen. eds., © 2010 Westminster John Knox Press, p. 46)

So when John is calling his listeners to repentance, and when we hear his calling us to repentance, the call is to open ourselves to discover or rediscover that God's coming to us in Jesus at Christmas is God's gift of coming up to us to be among us, alongside us, and within us.

Advent, then, is chronologically multidirectional. Of course we look back to that special and most sacred event of Jesus' birth as a human baby inaugurating a new and complete expression of God's oneness with us. We do this part of Advent and Christmas really well. And when we gather here or wherever you are on Christmas Eve—just two weeks from Tuesday—our worship is a glorious celebration of that history-changing event.

The other direction in which we fix our gaze and attention during Advent is to look ahead in time to that ultimate future when God's fulfillment of history will be made complete in God's gift of Jesus.

This is why that Christmas carol with which I began today is so powerful. Its simple and straightforward 4-line text captures both of these aspects of this Advent season.

I wonder as I wander out under the sky,
How Jesus the Savior did come for to die.
For poor on'ry people like you and like I...
I wonder as I wander out under the sky.

Jesus the Savior *did come*. It's what we'll celebrate most intensely with the arrival of Christmas itself. Jesus the Savior did come from God.

But, when we take that line in its fullness, Jesus the Savior did come *for to die*. With those three additional words, "for to die," we have a text that points not just back to the Christmas birth of Jesus, but to the Holy Week death of Jesus, and by inference to the Easter resurrection of Jesus.

For poor, ordinary people like you and like I. God's gift of Jesus is for everyone, you and I included. Or for those troubled by the bad grammar of this text, God's gift is for everyone, you and *me* included.

And as the song opens with wonder, looking back while wandering out under the sky, it also closes with the same words, but with wonder, looking ahead into God's future while wandering out under the sky.

As our Advent observance continues for another 16 days, let's resist the rush to go back in time nostalgically, but rather may we look forward to what lies ahead, because of what we know was given to us in the incarnation.

Professor David Bartlett puts it this way. "Nostalgia is memory filtered through disproportionate emotion. Faith is memory filtered through appropriate gratitude. (*ibid.*)

With appropriate gratitude then,

I wonder as I wander out under the sky,
How Jesus the Savior did come for to die.
For poor on'ry people like you and like I...
I wonder as I wander out under the sky.