

NATIVITY OF OUR LORD: LESSONS AND CAROLS | DECEMBER 24, 2021

MICAH 5:2-4 | ISAIAH 35:1-6 | JEREMIAH 22:13-16; 23:5 | ISAIAH 11:1-6 | ISAIAH 52:7-10 | LUKE 2:1-20

When you hear the phrase “lessons and carols,” you likely think of King’s College Cambridge.¹ Stained glass windows, arches towering up toward the heavens, and cherubic choristers singing God’s praises. For over a century, their setting of lessons and carols, beginning with a single voice singing “Once in Royal David’s City” and culminating with the cosmic prologue of St. John’s gospel, has been a beloved part of many people’s Christmas celebrations.

The magnificence of that service belies its modest origins. In the 1870s, the city of Truro in southwestern England was made a cathedral city and Rev. Edward White Benson installed as its first bishop. Unfortunately, the city had no church worthy of being called a cathedral and so one had to be built from scratch. While his colleagues were ensconced in their expansive basilicas, Benson was installed in a wooden shed next to the brick mason’s yard. And it was Christmas Eve of 1880 that Benson and the clergy of this temporary shack of a cathedral began what we now call lessons and carols.

The lessons that we’ll hear this afternoon are not the ones that were read in Truro that night, nor are they the ones you may have heard from Cambridge this morning. Instead, we’ll be hearing a sequence of readings entitled, “Good News for the Poor,” focusing on the witness to Christ in the lives and witness of the prophets.²

And it’s the prophets that we need to hear from. With rich and beautiful imagery, the prophets reveal not just how but why God has come among us in Jesus Christ. To “strengthen the weak hands and make firm the feeble knees.” To “decide with equity for the meek of the earth.” To “execute justice and righteousness in the land.” So that “all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.”

In Christ, we see the heart of God poured out for all people. But we see it first and most clearly among those who have least cause for celebration. The poor and unhoused. The unemployed and overworked. The hungry and abused. The forgotten and those who have no one to pray with them. It is in their redemption and flourishing that we first encounter Christ and see the salvation of God.

¹ “History of A Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols,” King’s College Cambridge, accessed December 7, 2021, <https://www.kings.cam.ac.uk/chapel/a-festival-of-nine-lessons-and-carols/history-of-a-festival-of-nine-lessons-and-carols>.

² “Christmas,” The Church of England, accessed December 7, 2021, <https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/worship-texts-and-resources/common-worship/church-year/times-and-seasons-0>.

Christmas is cause for celebration. But the prophets remind us it is also cause for reorientation. The issue is not whether God can dwell among us but whether we have the moral capacity and conviction to recognize God's transforming action among us.

While visiting refugees on the island of Lesbos earlier this month, Pope Francis identified this prophetic readjustment as the key humanitarian issue of our time. Speaking in a temporary camp because a permanent detention center was still under construction³, Pope Francis put it this way:

I ask God to rouse us from our disregard for those who are suffering, to shake us from an individualism that excludes others, to awaken hearts that are deaf to the needs of our neighbors. I ask every man and woman, all of us, to overcome the paralysis of fear, the indifference that kills, the cynical disregard that nonchalantly condemns to death those on the fringes!⁴

The prophets would surely agree.
Christ is born. God is here. The fringe is now the center.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

³ The Associated Press, "Pope Francis Returns to Lesbos, Greece and Pleads for Action on Migrant Crisis," *NPR*, December 5, 2021, sec. Religion, 3, <https://www.npr.org/2021/12/05/1061607883/pope-francis-lesbos-greece-refugee-crisis>.

⁴ "Pope Francis in Lesbos: The Root Causes of the Migration Crisis 'Should Be Attacked,' Not Migrants," *America Magazine*, December 5, 2021, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2021/12/05/pope-francis-lesbos-greece-migration-refugees-speech-241969>.