

A Reflection  
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## **Making Music for Christmas**

Luke 1:67-80

This is the time of the year when some of us turn on our televisions and make the annual pilgrimage back to Whoville to relive the tale of "How the Grinch Stole Christmas." One of my favorite parts of the story comes near the end, when the Grinch has reached the peak of Mt. Crumpit with his sledfull of stolen goods. He puts his hand to his ear in anticipation of hearing all the Whos down in Whoville crying Boo-hoo! "And he did hear a sound rising over the snow. It started in low. Then it started to grow . . ." Many of you know the rest. It wasn't a sad sound. It was actually merry. "Every Who down in Whoville, the tall and the small, was singing! Without any presents at all! He hadn't stopped Christmas from coming! It came! Somehow or other, it came just the same!"<sup>1</sup> No matter how much the Grinch took from the Whos, he couldn't steal their song.

Life in general, and Christmas in particular, would be incredibly barren without music. Take away our carols, our cantatas, our instruments, our hymns, our pageants, and so on, and what's left is a much more hollow version of the holidays. Imagine coming into this house of worship, especially at this time of the year, and having only silence, or perhaps the spoken word, but not the word in song. Take away our music, and you've removed part of our congregational soul.

Long before anyone started composing Christmas music, songs celebrating the arrival of a Savior were well underway. Take this morning's Scripture passage from Luke. Our soloist is an old priest named Zechariah. Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth have received news from the angel Gabriel that though they are getting along in years, they will have a son whom they are to name John. John will have a crucial part to play in God's plan of redemption. Through his prophetic ministry, John will prepare the people for the coming of the Lord's salvation.

When Gabriel first announced this news to Zechariah, he had his doubts, and because of his unbelief Zechariah was stricken speechless. So here we are. Zechariah can't speak. The pregnant Elizabeth goes into hiding for a few months. Things grow quiet. We wait to see what will happen next.

Soon Mary receives a visit from Gabriel telling her that she too will give birth to a son, to be named Jesus. Mary makes an extended visit to Elizabeth, and they share their joy with each other. From there, Luke whisks us away to Elizabeth's due date. John is born. Several days later, he's circumcised and named. That's when the proud father, Zechariah, gets his voice back. After nine months of nonverbal gestures and handwritten notes, he can finally speak again. And the first thing he does is start singing.

Verses 67-79 are sometimes called Zechariah's Song. It's essentially a song of praise celebrating God's mercy. Zechariah sees God's saving mercy displayed not only in the birth of his own son, John, but most of all in the yet to be born Jesus. So what better way for Zechariah to bless the Lord than to open the hymnal, stretch those vocal cords, and lift up his voice in praise. "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has

redeemed his people. He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David" (vv. 68-69).

Have you ever noticed how the opening chapters of Luke's Gospel just wouldn't be complete without music? There's lots of singing going on here. Mary sings in expectation of the birth of Jesus. Zechariah sings at the birth of John. The angels sing at the birth of Jesus. Simeon sings when Joseph and Mary come to present Jesus at the Temple. These opening chapters begin to read like Luke's version of American Idol. If you like music, you'll love Luke's account of the coming of Christ.

Luke reminds us that the arrival of our Savior isn't just something to be remembered, something to be preached, or something to be taught. It's also something to be sung. It's good news with a beat. This gospel can definitely carry a tune. And to this day, we're still carrying this gospel tune in the life of the church. That hymnal in the pew rack in front of you is a visible, tangible reminder that God's people always have been, and always will be, a singing people.

"Praise be to the Lord." That's the way Zechariah's song begins. In one sense, that's really the beginning and the end of every song we sing, as individual Christians and in our life together as the church. God has given us music for many reasons, but surely at the top of the list is praise.

Then listen carefully to what Zechariah says later in his song. He says that God has been faithful to his promise to bring deliverance, "to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days" (vv. 74-75). The language of serving God is also the language of worship. In other words, the ultimate purpose of God's salvation is so that we may worship and serve God. Put simply, we are saved to praise God. And music is one of the key things God has given us in order to be his saved people.

As we head toward Christmas Day, I encourage you to journey with a song on your lips. You may not be a musical genius. You may struggle just to whistle on key. You may have a beautiful singing voice. You may not be able to carry a tune in a bucket. Whatever the case, don't worry, you don't have to be a soloist. All you have to do is add your voice to the heavenly chorus that's already underway, praising God for his saving grace in Christ.

I don't know where he got his figures, but what Donald Hustad says rings true: "Somehow, about forty percent of churchgoers seem to have picked up the idea that 'singing in church is for singers.' The truth is that 'singing is for believers.' The relevant question is not 'Do you have a voice?' but 'Do you have a song?'"<sup>2</sup> The way to get a song is to know the Savior we're singing about. He is Christ the Lord.

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Seuss, *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* (New York: Random, 1957) n.p.

<sup>2</sup> *Quotes and Idea Starters for Preaching and Teaching: from Leadership Journal*, ed. Edward K. Rowell (Grand Rapids: Christianity Today/Baker, 1996) 184.