

John F. Carter
St. John's Episcopal Church
Christmas Eve 2009
The Nativity of Jesus

SING TO THE LORD A NEW SONG!

“The Maker’s hand flung stars across the night
with angels bursting forth from galaxies
new music singing from the spheres in harmonies
that blessed the dancing of the first-born child.”

1987 Madeline L’Engle

**A warm and hearty welcome to all of you on this holy
and beautiful night!**

**You may not know it, but each of you has brought an
imaginary musical instrument this evening ... a penny whistle,
tuba, oboe, didgeridoo, drum, guitar, kazoos and clarinets,
harp and harpsichord... whatever kind of instrument you want,
perhaps one you *always* wanted to play but never quite got to.
Let’s also suppose that you play this
instrument *magnificently*, beyond your wildest dreams, and
that you have no fear, none, of playing in front of others, and
that each of you will play a solo tonight right here. “Be not
afraid!”**

May I suggest that your solo would feature feelings about *what Christmas is like for you this evening*? Some of the solos would be happy and fast, some hyper, others stressed out, others a little slow, bluesy, mad or sad, and some really jazzy. Whatever your solo might be *it is perfect and will be accepted* and applauded by the rest of us with enthusiasm.

We come here this evening with memories from the past and visions for the future. Our solos are already being played even now in our memories, dreams and hopes. Whatever your “solo” might be this evening is fine. Let it be and let it play!

In its beauty and power to reach deep into our hearts, Luke’s story about the birth of Jesus is a miracle in its own right. Familiar as it is, there may be a few surprises in it for us. For example ... “Son of God”, bringer of peace, Savior, a “good news” person: we associate all these ascriptions with Jesus. But did you know that someone else had these titles also? Well, you’ll never guess; it was Caesar Augustus, the supreme leader of the Roman Empire who ruled over Bethlehem and all of Judea. How could a child born into poverty, whose parents had no money for a room to sleep in and spent the night in an animal stall; who had no crib, and was wrapped in strips of cloth ... how could such a helpless baby share the same titles as the mighty Emperor?

Rome claimed that Caesar was God in order to legitimate its regime of suppression and exploitation, law and order. Luke’s stunningly powerful story of Jesus’ birth is a cheeky response to the bullying and brutal grandeur of Rome. Jesus, “The Son of God”, parodies Caesar’s claims to divinity. The “good news of peace” does not come through Caesar’s military conquest. The true peace comes to all, the poor and the mighty. It is a peace of compassion, justice and inclusiveness. Jesus offers a vision of peace the world longs for and each of us needs.

In the dark of night, the angel of God joyfully informs the homeless and disrespected shepherds, “Do not be afraid; for see ..I am bringing you good news of great joy for all people: to you is born in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.” Luke’s nativity narrative parodies Caesar, but also delivers a message, a gospel, a really joyful “good news” that will change the course of history and reshape the topography of the listening human heart. Luke’s parody of imperial power is mirrored by the parody at Jesus’ death “where we see the king crowned with thorns upon the throne of a cross.” (William Loader)

A true story: Charles was just a boy of 12 when his father was arrested and sent to debtor’s prison. He was forced to take lodgings nearby, pawn his books, and work in a blacking factory. His class background and sensitivity made work among the factory laborers awkward and painful. He felt humiliated and developed nervous fits. During this period he observed grave social injustices, men, women and children living in the most impoverished urban ghettos. Psychologically wounded, young Charles was haunted for the rest of his life by what he had felt and seen. And yet, without this traumatic experience, this education in life of the poor, we would not have his later works; *David Copperfield*, *A tale of Two Cities*, and of course, *A Christmas Carol*. The story of the transformation of Charles Dickens’ own life is as amazing and miraculous as that of his creation, Scrooge.

As you may recall, after all his nocturnal travels with the three ghosts, Scrooge wakes up on Christmas morning astonished and ecstatic to be alive. Neither looking back lugubriously or ahead fearfully, he arrives in the NOW, and rediscovers abundant life.

Scrooge’s story of conversion and reform appeared on the English landscape six days before Christmas in 1843 during an era when capitalism and the industrial revolution were creating a vast underclass of paupers. There were many child laborers who worked long hours in sweat shops. The

Church of England had been in decline for decades and had little to offer in the way of social and economic remedies or prophetic witness. Dickens' Scrooge helped change that.

After Dickens' death, one critic stated that *A Christmas Carol* was regarded as a "new gospel" and observed that the book was unique in that it actually made people behave better. "In the spring of 1844, *The Gentlemen's Magazine* attributed a sudden explosion of generosity to the poor to Dickens' novella." We have stories of personal transformation and generosity like these in our times too.

Perhaps we have an "inner" Scrooge, who is pessimistic or negative or stingy. ((An Aside: A recent "scientific" study showed that unhappy or "negative" people are better thinkers and decision makers than are happy persons. This study finally provides a vindication of gloominess, which is long overdue!)) I believe this scrooge part of us thirsts for transformation into a more loving, compassionate, generous and more peaceful person. We gain much hope from Scrooge's transformation.

When angels appear in Luke's gospel, like ghosts, they spook and terrify first Zechariah, then Mary and then the shepherds in the fields. These messengers of God seem to come out of a sacred dream world. Fear is followed by great joy.

Like Tiny Tim, Jesus is born into poverty. His mother and father are poor. Mary and Joseph with no money, no room at the inn, spend the night in an animal shed and wrap the infant Jesus in strips of cloth.

In this story, *Jesus himself is the good news*. He is the good news that ... out of practically nothing, materially speaking, comes one who turns the tables on the Caesars of this world, who steals and transforms hearts for love's sake,

who would take all our individual “solos” (remember them?) and create a stupendous symphony. Our voices, who we are, and who we are becoming, join the music of the meadows and the spheres.

“Then shall all the trees of the wood shout for joy!”

Sing to the Lord a new song,

Sing to the Lord, all the whole earth.”

(Psalm 96)

Luke 2:1-20

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

⁸In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ¹⁴“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!” ¹⁵When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to

one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.”¹⁶ So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger.¹⁷ When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child;¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.