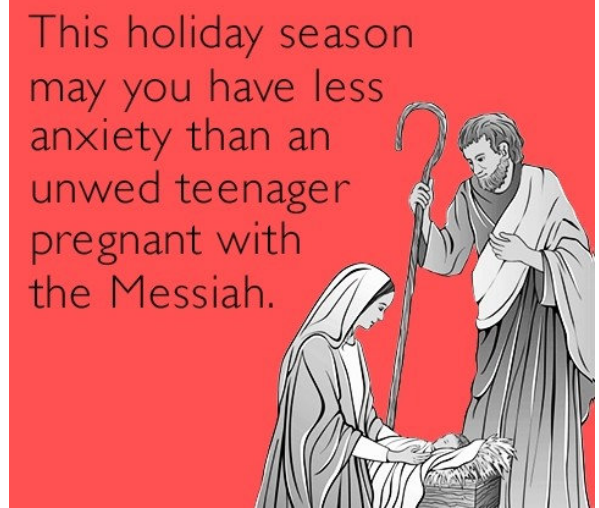


Soulful Songs and Stories

With a song and your stories, we co-create a soft place for hard conversations and a brave space for personal and spiritual growth.



Hi Soulful Song Lovers and Story Tellers,

*Biblical, metaphorical, and humanist **Songs** and **Stories**.*

Songs Celebrating the Birth of Jesus

"The First Noel," The Mormon Tabernacle Choir <https://youtu.be/Y4iXatDeY7A> 5:19

"O Holy Night," Jennifer Hudson <https://youtu.be/rfjHgrHASnU> 4:36

"Joy to the World"+, Orange is the New Black (pathos/humor) <https://youtu.be/i2wdtJE-7Is?t=7> 5:12

"Silent Night," Pentatonix <https://youtu.be/sme8N2pzRx8> 3:41

The Biblical Christmas Story: Luke 2:1–20

About that time Caesar Augustus ordered a census to be taken throughout the Empire. This was the first census when Quirinius was governor of Syria. Everyone had to travel to his own ancestral hometown to be accounted for. So Joseph went from the Galilean town of Nazareth up to Bethlehem in Judah, David's town, for the census. As a descendant of David, he had to go there. He went with Mary, his fiancée, who was pregnant.

While they were there, the time came for her to give birth. She gave birth to a son, her firstborn. She wrapped him in a blanket and laid him in a manger, because there was no room in the hostel.

There were shepherders camping in the neighborhood. They had set night watches over their sheep. Suddenly, God's angel stood among them and God's glory blazed around them. They were terrified. The angel said, "Don't be afraid. I'm here to announce a great and joyful event that is meant for everybody, worldwide: A Savior has just been born in David's town, a

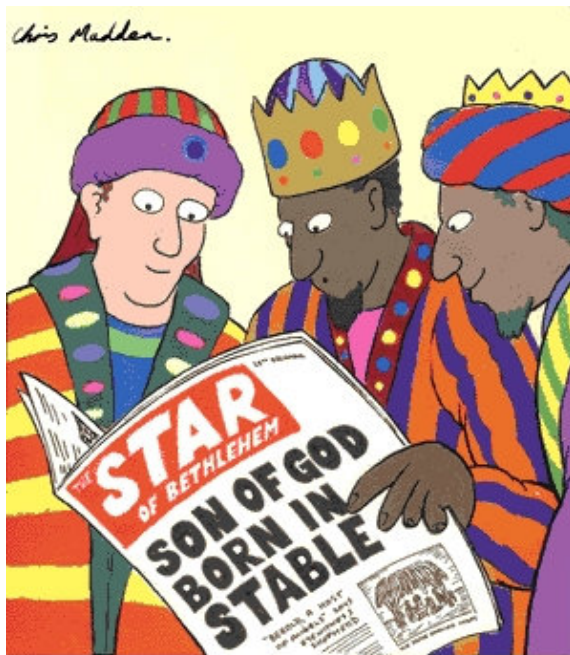
Savior who is Messiah and Master. This is what you're to look for: a baby wrapped in a blanket and lying in a manger."

At once the angel was joined by a huge angelic choir singing God's praises: *Glory to God in the heavenly heights, Peace to all men and women on earth who please him.*

As the angel choir withdrew into heaven, the shepherders talked it over. "Let's get over to Bethlehem as fast as we can and see for ourselves what God has revealed to us." They left, running, and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger. Seeing was believing. They told everyone they met what the angels had said about this child. All who heard the shepherders were impressed.

Mary kept all these things to herself, holding them dear, deep within herself. The shepherders returned and let loose, glorifying and praising God for everything they had heard and seen. It turned out exactly the way they'd been told!

—*The Message*, Eugene Peterson



The Three Wise Men found the Baby Jesus by following the Star of Bethlehem.



MUSIC CELEBRATING THE SEASON

“Silent Night, 3 Variations,” Jacob Koller https://youtu.be/CWeTS_omimM 3:32

“Angels We Have Heard on High,” Tomoko Asaka <https://youtu.be/VJUVhuVMxWI> 4:05

“Evening Prayer,” Ola Gjeilo/UUCSR Choir & Dan Pratt (attached) 7:11 3:29 ▼

“Hot Buttered Rum,” Tommy Thompson/Mary Chapin Carpenter https://youtu.be/iS6AnG_KaGQ

“EMBRACING THE BASTARD JESUS,” REV. IRENE MONROE

One of my Sunday school teens, Jamal, asked me several Advent seasons ago if the church was going to hear the usual Christmas sermon about baby Jesus being born in a manger. Because if so, as he pointedly said to me, “I ain’t feeling it, Rev.” He wanted to know, “What did Jesus’ birth have to do with him and his family?”

Born of a “virgin”—in Mary’s day that meant a young teenage girl—Mary was pregnant before marriage with Jesus. In the economically distressed area of the Bronx where I was first sent as a pastor, the church I served was just across the street from a housing project where there were many baby Jesus stories of young black mothers like Mary.

While Mary’s pregnancy is lauded in Christian tradition as immaculate and the miraculous work of the Holy Spirit of God, in many feminist Christian circles Mary’s pregnancy raises a suspicious eye. These communities question society’s attitudes then—and now—about unwed mothers having children outside of the institution of marriage.

According to Jewish Law, these children of unwed mothers are called mamzerim (Hebrew for bastards), and are subject to a variety of restrictions and discriminations; thus, do not share the privileges of God’s children. For example, the Jewish text Deuteronomy 23:2 says, “A bastard shall not enter into the congregation of the Lord; even to his tenth generation shall he not enter into the congregation of the Lord.”

And because Mary’s pregnancy came at a time when she was an unwed woman, Jesus’ birth came at a difficult time along the human timeline. As an adult, Jesus was viewed as a religious threat to conservative Jews because of his iconoclastic views and practice of Jewish Law, and viewed as a political threat to the Roman government simply because he was a Jew. However, as an infant, Jesus being born in the non-traditional Jewish family was also about



the struggle for human acceptance.

Similarly, in my congregation, Jamal was born during a difficult time along the human timeline. Born as a black male into a society where the police profile and hunt black males as if on an urban expedition, Jamal was also born into a non-traditional family.

Called and treated as a bastard by society because his mother gave birth to him while a teenager, Jamal bears the sins not of his mother, but instead he bears the sins of society's treatment of him and his mother as an illegitimate family.

In many feminist Christian circles, an acceptance of Mary's pregnancy is not only the exaltation of the lowly, but it is also the exaltation of the different and diverse human configurations of the beauty of God's family.

Acceptance of Mary's pregnancy as an unwed mother upholds the ethos that no child, no matter what his or her station in life might be, should be left behind. And it also symbolizes that those relegated to the fringes of society—the bastards—are the very ones that Jesus' birth symbolizes and stands for.

Although Christmas is mostly thought of in

terms of feasting and celebrating, Jesus' birth is about the celebration of all families. Similarly, when I think of the birth of Jesus, one of the themes that looms large for me is homelessness, and how that social issue connects to the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people.

Why homelessness? Because many of us, myself included, do not really have a home to go to where we can sit at the family table and be fully out. Or, if out, we are not fully accepted, because we are the bastards—the illegitimate ones—in our families. As with Mary and Joseph during the time of Jesus' birth, we travel from inn to inn to find there is no room.

Our birth mirrors that of Jesus. It comes at a time when there is neither room nor tolerance for us at a difficult time along the human timeline. As we celebrate this holiday season, let us enjoy our time. Let us make home, if not with biological families, then certainly with beloved friends.

And let this season serve as a marker that invites us to find home for the holidays and beyond. •

—*The Witness*, Dec 2004, excerpted, www.j.mp/etbj7



Music of Comfort and Joy

“Comme au premier jour,” Andre Gagnon/737guam <https://youtu.be/ySJhhJu7ISM> 3:55

“Hymn to Freedom,” Oscar Peterson/Oscar Peterson, Piano; Ray Brown, Bass; Ed Thigpen, Drums <https://youtu.be/tCrrZ1NnCuM?t=16> 6:37

“Ashed to Air,” Gautam Srikishan, <https://soundcloud.com/floatingfast/ashed-to-air> 2:24

“Hikoki-gumo,” Sumika <https://youtu.be/IGug9C6LMsY> 3:30 & <https://youtu.be/s6KDeYtBpG4> 2:30

“Budapest Concert, Part VII,” Keith Jarrett (2016) https://youtu.be/hHYJ_IdHJGo 5:24

“Merry Christmas Mr. Lawrence,” Ryuichi Sakamoto <https://youtu.be/2PAf5xRBjNo> 4:40

“A Gift,” Nancy L. Dahlberg



It was Sunday. Christmas. Our family had spent the holidays in San Francisco with my husband's parents. But in order for us to be back at work on Monday, we found ourselves driving the 400 miles home to Los Angeles on Christmas Day.

It is normally an 8-hour drive, but with kids it can be a 14-hour endurance test. When we could stand it no longer, we stopped for lunch in King City. This little metropolis is made up of six gas stations and three sleazy diners, and it was into one of these diners that the four of us trooped—road weary and saddle sore.

As I sat Erik, our 1-year-old, in a high chair, I looked around the room and wondered, “What am I doing in this place?”

The restaurant was nearly empty. We were the only family and ours were the only children. Everyone else was busy eating, talking quietly, aware perhaps that we were all somehow out of place on this special day, when even the cynical pause to reflect on peace and brotherhood.

My reverie was interrupted when I heard Erik squeal with glee, “Hithere.” (Two words he thought were one.) “Hithere” he pounded his fat baby hands—whack, whack—on the metal high chair tray. His face was alive with excitement, eyes wide, gums bared in a toothless grin. He wriggled, and chirped, and giggled, and then I saw the source of the merriment...and my eyes could not take it all in at once.

A tattered rag of a coat—obviously bought by someone else eons ago—dirty, greasy, and worn... baggy pants—both they and the zipper at half-mast over a spindly body—toes that poked out of would-be shoes...a shirt that had ring-around-

the-collar all over and a face like none other... gums as bare as Erik's...hair uncombed, unwashed, and unbearable ... whiskers too short to be called a beard, but way, way beyond a shadow, and a nose so varicose that it looked like the map of New York.

I was too far away to smell him—but I knew he smelled—and his hands were waving in the air, flapping about on loose wrists.

“Hi there baby; hi there, big boy. I see ya, buster.”

My husband and I exchanged a look that was a cross between “What do we do?” and “Poor devil.”

Erik continued to laugh and answer, “Hi, Hithere.” Every call was echoed.

I noticed waitresses eyebrows shoot to their foreheads, and several people sitting near us “ahemed” out loud.

This old geezer was creating a nuisance with my beautiful baby.

I shoved a cracker at Erik, and he pulverized it on the tray. I whispered “Why me?” under my breath.

Our meal came, and the cacophony continued. Now the old bum was shouting from across the room: “Do ya know patty cake?... Atta boy... Do ya know peek-a-boo?... Hey, look, he knows peek-a-boo!”

Nobody thought it was cute. The guy was a drunk and a disturbance, I was embarrassed. My husband, Dennis, was humiliated. Even our six-year-old said, “Why is that old man talking so loud?”

We ate in silence—all except Erik, who was

running through his repertoire for the admiring applause of a skid-row bum.

Finally, I had enough. I turned the high chair. Erik screamed and clamored around to face his old buddy. Now I was mad.

Dennis went to pay the check, imploring me to “get Erik and meet me in the parking lot.”

I trundled Erik out of the high chair and looked toward the exit. The old man sat poised and waiting, his chair directly between me and the door.

“Lord, just let me out of here before he speaks to me or Erik.” I bolted for the door.

I soon became obvious that both the Lord and Erik had other plans.

As I drew closer to the man, I turned my back, walking to sidestep him—and any air he might be breathing. As I did so, Erik, all the while with his eyes riveted to his best friend, leaned far over my arm, reaching with both arms in a baby’s “pick me up” position.

In a split second of balancing my baby and turning to counter his weight I came eye-to-eye with the old man. Erik was lunging for him, arms spread wide.

The bum’s eyes both asked and implored, “Would you let me hold your baby?”

There was no need for me to answer since Erik propelled himself from my arms to the man’s.

Suddenly a very old man and a very young baby consummated their love relationship. Erik laid his tiny head upon the man’s ragged shoulder. The

man’s eyes closed, and I saw tears hover beneath his lashes. His aged hands full of grime, and pain, and hard labor—gently, so gently, cradled my baby’s bottom and stroked his back.

I stood awestruck. The old man rocked and cradled Erik in his arms for a moment, and then his eyes opened and set squarely on mine. He said in a firm and commanding voice, “You take care of this baby.”

Somehow I managed, “I will”, from a throat that contained a stone.

He pried Erik from his chest—unwillingly, longingly—as though he was in pain.

“God bless you ma’am. You’ve given me my Christmas gift.”

I said nothing more than a muttered thanks.

With Erik back in my arms, I ran for the car. Dennis wondered why I was crying and holding Erik so tightly and why I was saying, “My God, oh God, forgive me.”



www.j.mp/agift25

h/t Jennifer Brower



“All I know is that some of the best Christmas presents I’ve ever gotten have come from secular humanists.”

THE HANUKKAH SONG

Adam Sandler, SNL <https://youtu.be/932otG1bQaY> 5:03

THE HANUKKAH STORY

David Brooks, NY Times Op-Ed, December 11, 2009

<https://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/11/opinion/11brooks.html>

Tonight Jewish kids will light the menorah, spin their dreidels and get their presents, but Hanukkah is the most adult of holidays. It commemorates an event in which the good guys did horrible things, the bad guys did good things and in which everybody is flummoxed by insoluble conflicts that remain with us today. It's a holiday that accurately reflects how politics is, how history is, how life is.

It begins with the spread of Greek culture. Alexander's Empire, and the smaller empires that succeeded it, brought modernizing ideas and institutions to the Middle East. At its best, Hellenistic culture emphasized the power of reason and the importance of individual conscience. It brought theaters, gymnasiums and debating societies to the cities. It raised living standards, especially in places like Jerusalem.

Many Jewish reformers embraced these improvements. The Greeks had one central idea: their aspirations to create an advanced universal culture. And the Jews had their own central idea: the idea of one true God. The reformers wanted to merge these two ideas.

Urbane Jews assimilated parts of Greek culture into their own, taking Greek names like Jason, exercising in the gymnasium and prospering within Greek institutions. Not all Jews assimilated. Some resisted quietly. Others fled to the hills. But Jerusalem did well. The Seleucid dynasty, which had political control over the area, was not merely tolerant; it used imperial money to help promote the diverse religions within its sphere.

In 167 B.C., however, the Seleucid king, Antiochus IV, issued a series of decrees defiling the temple, confiscating wealth and banning Jewish practice, under penalty of death. It's unclear why he did this. Some historians believe that extremist Jewish reformers were in control and were hoping to wipe out what they saw as the primitive remnants of their faith. Others believe Antiochus thought the Jews were disloyal fifth columnists in his struggle against the Egyptians and, hence, was hoping to assimilate them into his nation.

Regardless, those who refused to eat pork were killed in an early case of pure religious martyrdom.

As Jeffrey Goldberg, who is writing a book on this period, points out, the Jews were slow to revolt. The cultural pressure on Jewish practice had been mounting;

it was only when it hit an insane political level that Jewish traditionalists took up arms. When they did, the first person they killed was a fellow Jew.

In the town of Modin, a Jew who was attempting to perform a sacrifice on a new Greek altar was slaughtered by Mattathias, the old head of a priestly family. Mattathias's five sons, led by Judah Maccabee, then led an insurgent revolt against the regime.

The Jewish civil war raised questions: Who is a Jew? Who gets to define the right level of observance? It also created a spiritual crisis. This was not a battle between tribes. It was a battle between theologies and threw up all sorts of issues about why bad things happen to faithful believers and what happens in the afterlife—issues that would reverberate in the region for centuries, to epic effect.

The Maccabees are best understood as moderate fanatics. They were not in total revolt against Greek culture. They used Greek constitutional language to explain themselves. They created a festival to commemorate their triumph (which is part of Greek, not Jewish, culture). Before long, they were electing their priests.

On the other hand, they were fighting heroically for their traditions and the survival of their faith. If they found uncircumcised Jews, they performed forced circumcisions. They had no interest in religious liberty within the Jewish community and believed religion was a collective regimen, not an individual choice.

They were not the last bunch of angry, bearded religious guys to win an insurgency campaign against a great power in the Middle East, but they may have been among the first. They retook Jerusalem in 164 B.C. and rededicated the temple. Their regime quickly became corrupt, brutal and reactionary. The concept of reform had been discredited by the Hellenizing extremists. Practice stagnated. Scholarship withered. The Maccabees became religious oppressors themselves, fatefully inviting the Romans into Jerusalem.

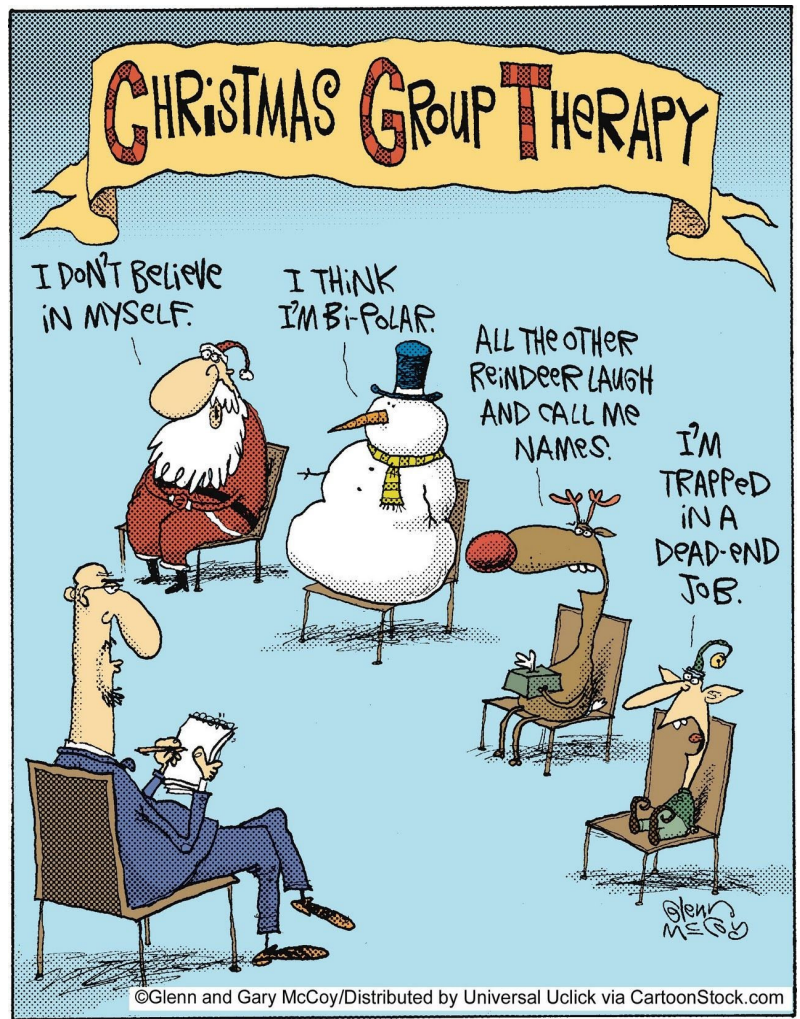
Generations of Sunday school teachers have turned Hanukkah into the story of unified Jewish bravery against an anti-Semitic Hellenic empire. Settlers in the West Bank tell it as a story of how the Jewish hard-core defeated the corrupt, assimilated Jewish masses. Rabbis later added the lamp miracle to give God at least a bit part in the proceedings.

But there is no erasing the complex ironies of the events, the way progress, heroism and brutality weave through all sides. The Maccabees heroically preserved the Jewish faith. But there is no honest way to tell their story as a self-congratulatory morality tale. The lesson of Hanukkah is that even the struggles that saved a people are dappled with tragic irony, complexity and unattractive choices.



"I would like a god who loves only good people like me, and will give me whatever I ask for."

I'm dreaming of a
nondenominational,
gender-neutral,
non-discriminatory,
eco-friendly,
socially-responsible,
gluten-free, vegan
Christmas.



Wishing you the best of songs and stories; may they soar above the season and into the New Year.

Namasté,

Alice and Steve



This

Christmas

end a quarrel.

**Seek out a forgotten
friend. Dismiss suspicion,
and replace it with trust.**

**Write a love letter. Share some
treasure. Give a soft answer. Keep**

a promise. Find the time. Forgo a grudge.

**Forgive an enemy. Listen. Apologize if you
were wrong. Try to understand. Examine your
demands on others. Think first of someone else.**

**Be kind; be gentle. Appreciate. Laugh a little. Laugh a
little more. Express your gratitude. Gladden the heart of a
child. Welcome a stranger. Take pleasure in the beauty and the
wonder of Earth.**

Speak your love.

Speak it again.

Speak it yet

Once again.

Howard W. Hunter