

The Christmas Story: Scripture and Spirituals

Inspired by: *What a Morning: The Christmas Story in Black Spirituals*

January 3, 2021

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Good morning!

Welcome to worship and welcome to 2021! I am Rev. Kelley Becker, the senior minister of Disciples Christian Church. Happy New Year! Congratulations! It's official! You have perfect worship attendance for 2021. Let me know you are worshipping with us and I will be sure to record it in your permanent record!

We made it! 2020 is in the past and a new year is before us. There is a lot about 2020 I am happy to leave behind. I bet the same is true for you. One nice thing that has carried over into 2020, though, is the Christmas season. In the church year, Christmas isn't just one day...it's 12! So, since we are still celebrating Christmas, I thought, why not take another look at the Christmas stories?

Our Coordinator of Family Ministries, Callie Rivera, shared a book with me called, *What a Morning: The Christmas Story in Black Spirituals*, selected and edited by John Langston, illustrated by Ashley Bryant, and arranged by John Andrew Ross. I liked the book so much; I was inspired to use it as a template for this service. Celebrating Black culture and Black excellence is a great way to welcome the new year! So today, we will use scripture and the spirituals highlighted in the book to worship in the style of a traditional lessons and carols service.

Black spirituals are not only expressions of African American heritage, to be enjoyed by African Americans, they are expressions of faith, history, and beauty for all of us to appreciate and learn from. I hope experiencing the stories of Christmas through the lens of these spirituals will give us a new perspective from which to consider the familiar texts associated with Christmas. I hope they will give us something new to "ponder in our hearts" as we continue to experience Christmas.

I am joined this morning by Elvie Ellis. Mr. Ellis was born and raised in Oklahoma City. He is a graduate of University of Oklahoma where he earned a bachelor's degree in vocal music education and a master's degree in adult and higher education. During his time at OU Mr. Ellis was involved with a number of campus

organizations and was also named the 2012 Homecoming King - he was the first African American at the university to receive that honor.

Since his time at OU, his work has been both here in Oklahoma and across the pond in London. In May 2019, he was invited to be a featured soloist in "The Best of...Rock Musicals" directed by Hugh Wooldridge, in London. Here in Oklahoma, he has been seen as Riff Raff in The Rocky Horror Show, Charles Clarke in Titanic, Bunsen in Disney's Newsies, and Phinneas T. Lightspeed in Curious George: The Golden Meatball, all at Lyric Theatre of Oklahoma. Outside of theater, Mr. Ellis loves leading worship, doing mission work in Haiti, dabbling in graphic design, and coordinating summer camps for young people. We welcome Elvie Ellis to worship this morning. I am grateful for our Director of Music Ministries, Alex Rivera, whose hard work made Mr. Ellis' presence with us possible.

Thanks for joining us this morning!
Let's begin by joining our hearts in prayer:

In the year ahead,
God of New Beginnings,
stretch our souls
and move us
into new awareness
of the human family,
their needs and longings of our neighbors.

Make these into
our needs, our longings
so we continue to move
from our small selves
to a deeper sense of community
where our resolutions reflect
our interdependence.

Help us recognize the
possibilities you have offered
to us as your people,
so we can commit to practice

the Hope that happens
when we gather gratefully
in your Name and we hold up to you
this fragile, precious world.

Grant us grace, compassion, and courage
in this year ahead
to sow the seeds of justice
and to gather peace in our day.
Amen

The Christmas stories in the gospels of Luke and Matthew are rooted in the history and traditions of the Hebrew Bible. As we read them, it is important we try to see these stories through the lens of a people whose history was fraught with occupation and oppression by foreign powers. The ancient Israelites, whose stories are in the Hebrew Bible, and the people for whom the authors of Luke and Matthew in the New Testament, were writing, desperately needed to be saved, but not from an angry God, from their human oppressors.

It is not a stretch to imagine how their stories resonate with Black faith communities in ways that white faith communities still struggle to understand. You see, in predominantly white churches, we naturally tend to see ourselves in these stories as either the victims or the heroes. We imagine ourselves as Mary or Joseph, or one of the shepherds, certainly not a Roman soldier or King Herod, no, never a villain.

But imagine being Black in the United States in the 1800's, while the nation was being built on the backs of Black bodies who were enslaved, separated from their families, beaten and used; or in the 1900's while Black people were lynched, denied the right to vote, segregated, and legally treated as less than white people. And even in the 2000's as Black people make up a disproportionate number in our prisons, are disproportionately negatively affected by COVID-19, gun violence, the criminal justice system, and poverty. Keeping these things in mind, I hope we can consider "the something new" these texts and spirituals might have to say to us today, at the dawn of this new year.

Isaiah 9:1-6 served originally as a prophecy for the coronation of a Judean king, probably King Hezekiah. It celebrated the rise to power of a king in the tradition of King David. In the Christian tradition, this text has been used as a prophecy looking toward the birth of Jesus.

Isaiah 9:2-6

The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.

³You have multiplied the nation,
you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you
as with joy at the harvest,
as people exult when dividing plunder.

⁴For the yoke of their burden,
and the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor,
you have broken as on the day of Midian.

⁵For all the boots of the tramping warriors
and all the garments rolled in blood
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.

⁶For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named

Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

⁷His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.
He will establish and uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time onward and forevermore.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

The following spiritual, *My Lord, What a Morning* has its roots in African American churches in the 1800s. Hymnody scholar Eileen Southern writes, “While many spirituals may have been conceived on plantations in the southern United States, free African Americans also composed them ‘in the independent black congregations of the North, where black congregations, freed from the supervision of white clergymen, could conduct their religious services as they wished’ *My Lord, What a Morning* appears to have been one of those composed in the North.”

Eileen Southern, “An Origin for the Negro Spiritual,” *The Black Scholar [Black Music]* 3, no. 10 (Summer 1972), 11.

My Lord, What a Morning

The story of Jesus’ birth in the Gospel of Luke, was written amid Roman occupation of Israel. The author wrote a generation or two after Jesus’ birth. By then, the second Jerusalem temple had been destroyed and Luke’s community was losing hope that anyone could save them from the oppression of Rome. Luke’s story of God working among ordinary people was written to encourage his community, to renew their hope in God and in the one those early Christians believed was sent by God to be their savior, the Messiah.

Luke 2:1-7

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. While 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.

The spiritual, *Mary Had a Baby*, was a personal song of Black people who were enslaved, originating from the South Carolina coastal island of St. Helena, an often-used port for slave trade. The song was first sung as a call and response as

slaves gathered for worship in the 1700s. It's been passed down in Black churches for generations.

Mary Had a Baby

It's a beautiful story. But if it ended there, how would people even know this baby had been born? In another example of God using the ordinary to do the extraordinary, some essential workers were called to "go tell it."

Luke 2:8-20

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." ¹⁶So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Like many spirituals and folk songs, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* does not have a concise origin. The song likely dates back to the mid 1800s and was passed by people who were enslaved from plantation to plantation. The song was made a Christmas classic by a Nashville-born collector of spirituals named John Wesley Work, Jr. Work's love for music started as a child. His father was the director of their church's choir, and though Work Jr. studied Latin and history at Fisk University, he organized singing groups as well. It was the Fisk Jubilee Singers who first introduced this song to white audiences.

Go, Tell It on the Mountain

The author of the Gospel of Matthew told a very different story of young Jesus. There are no details of his birth and no angelic choir singing in the sky in Matthew's story. Instead of being visited by neighboring shepherds on the night of his birth, Jesus was visited by strangers from far away. By the time they arrived, Jesus was probably more of a toddler Jesus than a baby Jesus. In the story, these strangers see and understand things about Jesus that the people around him had yet to see or understand. In Matthew's story, the people who should see, don't. The people who shouldn't understand, do.

Matthew 2:1-2

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ² asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising and have come to pay him homage."

Roland Hayes was a renowned tenor and composer. He was the first African American male concert artist to receive wide international acclaim. He, too, attended Fisk University and toured with the Fisk Jubilee Singers. Also a composer, in 1948, he published *My Songs; Aframerican Religious Folk Songs Arranged and Interpreted*, a collection of African American spirituals. *Sister Mary Had-a But One Child* was among them.

Sister Mary Had-a But One Child

In ancient times, especially in the near east, the people believed that when something unusual happened in the sky, it was an announcement of divine activity. The star the wise men followed led them to what God was doing among the people.

Matthew 2:9-12

they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹ On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him

homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Behold That Star was written by Thomas Washington Talley, a professor of chemistry at Fisk University. He was also an ethnographer. In 1922, he published *Negro Folk Rhymes*, a collection of Black traditional songs from rural Tennessee. According to the Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture, "this successful publication was the first serious collection of folksongs from Tennessee, the first compilation of black secular folksong, and the first to be assembled by a black scholar." Talley was also a gifted musician. He sang bass and toured with the New Fisk Jubilee Singers. He was director of Fisk's Mozart Society and for a time conducted the Fisk Choir. Seeking a Christmas spiritual for the Jubilee Singers to perform and finding none that was suitable, he composed "Behold That Star." [http://folio.furman.edu/projects/anthems/pdf/Behold That Star.pdf](http://folio.furman.edu/projects/anthems/pdf/Behold_That_Star.pdf)

Behold That Star!

I look forward to next week when we talk more about the story of the strangers from the east as we say good-bye to the Christmas season and celebrate Epiphany. As I prepared for this service, I was reminded that our history, even the parts that are hard to talk about, provides the framework around which we can build a more equitable, just world. So much of who we are and who we are called to be can be found in the faith traditions of our Black siblings. I hope our attention to the rich expressions of faith found in Black spirituals will help us to know one another better and to love one another more completely. And I hope 2021 will bring many opportunities for us to learn and grow together.

There is a lot more to the work of racial reconciliation than listening to music. We must act. I pray you will commit, with me, to the work of dismantling the systems that support racism in this country. There is work for all of us. In the coming year, we will explore together what the work of justice looks like for each one of us. And I believe we can start right here, in our church. Each week we gather around the communion table and we say there is a place for everyone. Our work begins by living out what we talk about. I am excited to do that with you. I am excited about everything we will do together this year!! Invite your family and friends to join us! I promise, we welcome them warmly!