

Advent Worship: Songs and Singing

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If there is a time of year for strong feelings about music—in or out of the church—December is it, when we are surrounded by songs and sounds. Those sounds may transfix or confuse, thrill or aggravate, inspire or distract. Yet here we are, called to prepare worship, to trust the Spirit's presence in words and in art, and to journey with communities as they hear, tell, and enact a story, and we know that music looms large.

Like seasons, music occurs in and over time; it comes and goes. It changes our perception of time. Music unfolds; sometimes we'd like it to last longer or to be finished more quickly. Music and poetry contain room and make space; they walk through the door to be among us, even as they invite us in. Music probes our inner selves as well as the public space of community. For five people, music may work in fifty ways, in communal reach and personal resonance. It is laden with meanings; it is both mysterious and exact. Music does what it will do and bids us to attend, whether song or symphony, inscribed or improvised, authored or anonymous. What does music in worship offer to the people of God for the unfolding of seasons of Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany?

An image that springs to mind for this triple season is one of space: an immense room made into three sections by columns (not walls). The columns invite sight, sound, and movement to flow and echo among the sections. Such a fluid space might be a counterpoint to the calendar. Scripture and story move us sequentially from Advent to Christmas to Epiphany. The songs of these seasons, like all our rituals, take us through that progress:

Come, thou long expected Jesus ...
Away in a manger ...
What star is this ...

Songs may also have fluidity, as though swirling around columns and echoing through the immense triple space these seasons create. After all, the lectionary's texts, stories, and wonders are journeys through time, yet multi-directional. The adult Jesus speaks in Advent before being born at Christmas. Mary sings during Advent of the mighty put down from their thrones, even as Christmas and Epiphany arrive in the shadow of a tyrant very much in power. But we don't need the lectionary to confirm what we know in the life of faith: that yearning, new life, and sudden light are often interwoven. There are Advent glimpses of Epiphany light, and Advent yearning may not dissipate when the page is turned to Christmas.

Turning the pages and scrolling the databases of our hymn collections, we usually find Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany sections, with songs organized by topics to

complement scripture, preaching, ritual, or the over-arching journey. These songs are often textually specific—to waiting, birth, light, or biblical characters and settings—and *musically* specific, in mood, expression, and ethos. That precision lands them in the topical sections of hymnals. It also lands them in all-too-familiar territory, when with the ever-circling years come 'round the ever-circling questions of “Christmas carols or not” or other questions about music in December. Those questions can feel tired, as stale as last year’s Advent calendar chocolates. We reach for easy answers (“no Christmas hymns until after the fourth Sunday of Advent” or “Christmas carols are beloved and expected this time of year”), but we know it’s more complicated. Songs in worship at any time of year are a complex of theological-homiletic-artistic-pastoral-communal meanings. Songs in worship are claimed by the community, and for preparers of worship this means that the question is not just “What shall we choose?” but “What shall we sing?”—two related yet distinct questions.

In fact, the questions—and strong feelings—are usually phrased in terms of *singing*.

Less likely: “When will you play Christmas carols?”

More likely: “When will we sing carols?” or “We sing Advent hymns during Advent.”

It is not just generic phrasing for an even more generic idea of “music in worship.” It shows the instinct toward singing as a human activity: the need to give voice to the language of the soul, to take part in beauty, to make the sighs and sounds too deep for words. Pre-worship song choices are also in-worship enactments: we read *and sing* words. Ritual is not abstract choice or “on paper”; it is participation, the instinct to *to do*. So questions about songs are questions of embodiment, and asking what we sing during these seasons leads to deeper questions:

What happens when we sing certain songs?

What work are songs doing in the liturgy and in us?

What causes songs to chime, to ring true?

What kinds of spaces do they make?

What prayers do they evoke?

What glimpses do they reveal?

Consider an archetypal Advent hymn: “O Come, O Come Emmanuel.” If you know it, find it in your inner ear now—not the quick mental keyword search we naturally do with familiar hymns (*Emmanuel-equals-God-with-us, rejoice, thine Advent here, heaven’s peace, shall come to thee—put it in the bulletin*) nor a quick characterizing of the music (*a solemn song since we’re weeks away from joyful Christmas*) nor the quick reminders of habit (*we usually sing this one on Advent 1; three verses is “enough”*). Make time for the song itself, right now: find it, hum it, sing it (even if you are singing along to a recording or video), in real time, several stanzas ...

pause for music

That is the way to choose songs for worship: not just reading them, but *hearing them and singing them*. That way, we attend to their unfolding. Otherwise, it is like choosing visual art by glance instead of gaze.

We just proved it by taking time with “O Come, O Come Emmanuel.” Did it respond to any of those deeper song questions above? Maybe it brought to mind well-loved worship, reliable year-by-year. Maybe it kindled energy for planning this year’s Advent worship. Perhaps text and music were a strange, all-too-relevant contrast to this day’s headlines, evoking a needed prayer. Perhaps time felt altered, reality different—the glimpse of Something Else we have when art captivates us. Or maybe this hymn has never “worked” for you; tune or text, maybe it seems dull, stale, uninteresting. We should never forget that these are also responses to music. We should also never forget that all these responses, to this and other songs, are likely present in our congregations.

So here we are, worship planners with another Advent-Christmas-Epiphany before us. We are faced with the specifics of scripture, preaching, themes. We think of the realities (so-called) of congregational expectation and custom. A calendar of liturgy lies before us, which we hope to set against the wasteful, gluttonous calendar that threatens to undo us every December. The world totters, our own feet stumble, and we look to the sovereign power of God. Our task is preparing worship—including singing—that, against all odds and evidence, makes space for hope and transformation; that, against all noisy gongs around us, makes room for love and nourishment; that, against all immediate and plastic demands for jollity, takes seriously our lament, sorrow, patience, and impatience; that, against all virtual unreality and mega-falsity, claims greater reality and truthful incarnation; and that, against death, dares to imagine birth.

What might this mean for the specifics of worship preparation and song choices?

Beyond “Keywords”

The words of songs, after all, are portable theology: we carry them around in books and hearts. Hymn texts shape faith into words, with remarkable beauty, clarity, and memorability, and these are the qualities of poetry (no more fearsome a word than theology). Sometimes, though, we make prosaic choices about poetic hymns. We are after words that give strong textual underlining to scripture or sermon; sometimes we end up with words that may not go beyond a kind of surface correspondence. If, for example, a preaching text is Psalm 23, we’ll probably do more than a simple keyword song search for “shepherds” or “sheep,” since the psalm is more deeply about other things, such as companionship, nourishment, trust, or home.

So in Advent, if Isaiah 40 is a focal text for Advent 2, hymns with phrases like “prepare the way” or perhaps a larger paraphrase like “Comfort, Comfort Now My People” are possibilities. But we also ask questions, beyond those specific

correlations, about the fullness of preaching and the entire liturgy, so that songs emerge in relationship to Isaiah, not just as re-statements of Isaiah—not just what Isaiah says but what Isaiah means.

As an example, consider two possible approaches to Isaiah 40 and “preparing the way.” One could be a focus preparing a way for God’s justice and peace in the world around us. A specific Advent hymn like “Prepare the Way, O Zion” is Isaiah-specific and big-picture specific:

*his rule is peace and freedom, and justice, truth, and love
tidings of salvation proclaim in every place*

But “non-Advent hymns” (not found in an Advent section, that is) may work also. In “Cuando el pobre,” we find this stanza by José Antonio Olivar and Miguel Manzano:

*Cuando un hombre sufre y logra su consuelo,
cuando espera y no se cansa de esperar,
cuando amamos, aunque el odio nos rodee,
va Dios mismo en nuestro mismo caminar.*

or in translation by George Lockwood:

*When at last all those who suffer find their comfort,
when they hope though even hope seems hopelessness,
when we love though hate at time seems all around us,
then we know that God still goes that road with us.*

Comfort resonates in the words *and* in the gentle, poignant music, and the road is nuanced as a place where God travels with us.

Another song, “Canto de Esperanza/Song of Hope/May the God of Hope Go with Us,” includes these words by Alvin Schutmaat:

*Dios de la justicia, mándanos tu luz,
luz y esperanza en la oscuridad.
May the God of justice speed us on our way,
bringing light and hope to every land and race.*

Here, “way” is a place we are sent, and “every land and race” echoes Isaiah’s vision: “all people shall see it together.” Musically it is lively and open-ended, inviting spontaneity, repetition, adventure.

A second approach to Isaiah 40 might be interior: preparing a way within ourselves of prayer, repentance, or love. “Lift Up Your Heads, O Ye Gates” is musically grand and bold, but its language, by Georg Weissel and translated by Catherine Winkworth, has inwardness:

Fling wide the portals of your heart; make it a temple set apart

*from earthly use for heaven's employ, adorned with prayer and love and joy.
 Redeemer, come! I open wide my heart to thee; here, Lord, abide.
 Let me thy inner presence feel; thy grace and love in me reveal.*

Or, again, a “non-Advent” choice: “Spirit, Open My Heart,” by Ruth Duck, with the gentle, tender tune called WILD MOUNTAIN THYME. Those three words alone in the refrain—*open my heart*—immediately evoke Isaiah ...

*Spirit, open my heart to the joy and pain of living.
 As you love, may I love in receiving and in giving.
 Spirit, open my heart.*

... as does the second stanza, where we hear “glory” in relation to our own living:

*Write your love upon my heart as my law, my goal, my story.
 In each thought, word, and deed, may my living bring you glory.*

Of course, Isaiah 40 might be more likely preached with both approaches—and others—which means that songs like these would form an even richer conversation within the fabric of a service.

Beyond Words at All

When words are the default driver of choice, music is relegated to a secondary role. Worship planning conversations may probe lots of ideas, and words become a typical entry-point for song choices, as we ask if a song “goes with” a sermon or theme. Chosen thus, songs may “hang around” in an idea-stage on worship-planning documents and in our minds, like bulletin-boarded theological nuggets, with less consideration of music and of what might happen when songs are actually sung in worship. What energy will songs bring? What mood? How will congregational voices bring the song to life? Will the one-time singing of a song in worship make clear the theological point that, in worship planning, took an hour’s discussion to materialize?

We may think of words as a primary theological carrier, but words do not do all the theological work. One way we know this is to think of a time in worship when a hymn was chosen because the words seemed exactly right and yet the worship moment fell flat because of something musical. Perhaps the music’s emotional flavor didn’t respond to the moment, or the tune was unfamiliar and the people were unprepared to sing it. Better, though, is to remember a time when music bore witness to something transcendent in and beyond the words it carried. Music can lift words or hinder them. That is part of music’s theological work.

But music, by its sheer sound and its own communicative language, is also creating theological space. It makes room for prayer, breath, and centering. It awakens energy and beauty. It kindles imagination, suggests possibility, gives glimpses. It

isn't hard to get a feel for this. Imagine a service in which the five hymns above are sung, or just imagine the songs in any recent service. Imagine or listen to the music without the words (your church musician can help you!) and note what you hear:

Is there a variety of mood? volume? character? Or does everything sound the same?

Is there a sense of rise and fall?

Are there peak moments *and* subtle ones?

Is there familiarity and surprise? Joy and lament?

Are you invited in?

Deepening Imagination

Sometimes we explain Advent at the expense of simply doing it or being in it. We tell congregations yet again that "Advent means coming." We recycle yet again last year's Advent wreath liturgy, sometimes with minimal attention to the how-where-why of it or to a real preparation of readers and candle lighters. Do we do the same with songs, plugging in the same few "familiar" ones during Advent or the same core batch on Christmas Eve? Hymns, as we know, have power and presence, and our worship preparation should include generous time and imaginative attention to how hymns or songs can take place in worship, asking those underlying questions of what might happen when songs are sung.

With Advent *and* Christmas hymns, we sometimes under-imagine or over-instruct. The repertory of Advent hymns, for instance, is incredibly rich, varied, and life-giving. A brief nod to a mere one or two of them early in the season, only to move on to Christmas songs, may deny the people of God the possibilities of singing the full prayerful and prophetic range of the Advent season. We live grief, despair, rage, and fear: dare we paper over it by side-stepping songs that can be deep wells for saying and singing—to God and to each other—our prayers, confessions, and hopes? It is also possible, in another direction, to reduce those same Advent songs to a matter of "correctness." Do Advent hymns exist to satisfy a calendar discipline, or do they exist to help us sing the language of the soul? Do Christmas carols exist for seasonal cheer and reliability, or do they exist to help us sing the mystery, beauty, liveliness, and intimacy of incarnation?

The section names of hymnals or song collections ("Advent," "Promised Coming," "Birth," etc.) may be columns revealing interacting spaces, rather than walls defining single rooms. The solemnity of "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" may be the precise song for Advent 1, with the season's long journey; it may also be the right song as we stand rejoicing at the stable door or with angels on Christmas Eve. (Remember that its words are based on the ancient "O Antiphons" that traditionally began on December 17.) It may also be imagined as the Magi's song as they (and we) follow the Epiphany star: in the shadow of all Herods, past and present, the vision of the star may call for weighty songs no less than lively ones.

Likewise, songs can offer glimpses of manifestation in Advent. The lectionary, for Advent 1 in Year B, appoints Isaiah 64: “Oh, that you would tear open the heavens and come down,” cries the prophet. It is a call for God’s inbreaking, a lament over sin, a hope for reconciliation and peace. Though it has come to be a “Christmas song,” the words of “It Came Upon the Midnight Clear” offer one glimpse of an answer to Isaiah’s plea.

After all, it isn’t a nativity song at all: no birth, no stable, no Holy Family, no Jesus. It is, in fact, a song of inbreaking: the angels’ sudden arrival and their song of glory and peace. Its five-stanzas confront the world’s misery and exhort reconciliation. The caution, of course, is the music, which risks yanking us into a “holiday” space far from Isaiah’s words. But the music can become part of a bigger conversation if the song is contextualized, woven into worship’s totality of prayer, scripture, preaching, sacrament.

Here again are the questions: What is happening when we sing these songs? What is possible? What might be imagined?

Evocation and Invocation

Songs in worship do both: they invite prayer and make prayer. In this particular triptych of seasons, music appears to assist our prayer and faith, to help us attend to story, to help us give ear and give voice. That physicality of song may, ironically, be a conundrum of incarnation. Music in this season is brimming, even bursting, with incarnation. Songs are embodied in our own singing, and they are alive with the meanings, helping us enact past-present-future and sounding beloved memory and fresh wonder. They are deeply familiar and strangely new, holy surprise and ancient wells. They are forerunners: pointing toward something else with a fullness that can be mysteriously close and disconcertingly powerful. Again we ask: What happens when we sing? What are words *and* music doing? What glimpses could they reveal?

Conclude your time in this article not by reading words but by hearing a song. Find a song for Advent, Christmas, or Epiphany:

Listen.

Hum or sing.

Remember or learn.

What is it doing?

What might it do in the place you will worship in the new liturgical year?