

"The Worth of Souls"

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An Advent Reflection including the carol, *O Holy Night*.

Luke 1:28-56

December 20, 2020

Please read the Bible passage. You can find it [here](#).

Who Matters?

Who counts? Who does not?

What sort of person is valued by others? Who gets tossed aside?

Who do we let bud ahead to the front of the line? Who gets shuffled to the back?

Which lives are worth saving? Who do we think is entitled to flourish? *Everyone!* That's what we know to say. But we also know that in his real world, it's far from true.

So what do we do?

Here's what God does.

Expecting Prophets

A prophet rarely asks for the job. No, they are pushed. The Holy Spirit conscripts them to speak God's word. Prophets are given God's perspective, God's analysis, God's judgment and God's hope.

God pushes prophets to speak all this into a community, a world, a church where God is not being listened to. There's been a widespread outbreak of amnesia about God's ways. So God lifts up a prophet to say the God-honest truth.

God can choose anyone. No experience required!

God often picks those who are not at the centres of influence, people who live in the borderlands of importance, folks who have less, who carry the world's weariness.¹

To us, these might seem surprising. But if we are paying attention to the Bible, that's what we should expect. Expect surprising prophets.

¹ Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin suggested "that often outsiders in a story may have a fuller perception of what's happening than insiders because their "outsidedness" puts them in a better position to see what's really going on." Susan M. Shaw and Regina McClinton, "Want to understand Critical Race Theory? Read the Good Samaritan story," Baptist News Global (December 11, 2020), baptistnews.com/article/want-to-understand-critical-race-theory-read-the-good-samaritan-story

Miriam

Or Mary, if you prefer. A young woman, unmarried. Living in a know-nothing one-donkey town. (Nazareth) Speaking with the drawling hillbilly-like accent of the uneducated and unsophisticated. (She's Galilean) Sitting at the back of the empire's bus. (Rome's province of Palestine) Belonging to a religion and its God which everyone else finds strange, maybe dangerous. (She's a Jew)

And from her Nazarene, Galilean, Palestinian, Jewish young woman lips, God sings out prophecy to a weary world.

Surprising! Knowing God, it's expected.

Placide

His name means "calm" in French. He's in his mid-thirties. In school, he excelled in drawing, then literature, then law. Now he sells wine. Monsieur Placide Cappeau of Roquemaure in southern France. There's not much remarkable about him. Nor, with his enduring love of literature, is it surprising when the local priest asks him to write a poem.

Except Placide is an atheist, a socialist, and very anti-clergy.

What is more surprising? The priest asking? Or Cappeau agreeing? He does.

He immerses himself into Luke's Gospel, and therefore Mary's song. Then he writes "*Minuit, Chrétiens*" (*Midnight, Christians*). Someone sets his poem to music.² It is brought into English as "*O Holy Night*."³

It's 1843. In France, this is the era of *Les Misérables* and revolution.⁴ When church officials figure out who this Placide guy is, they ban his song.

In my opinion, it's one of the more beautiful Christmas carols. Written by a non-believing, church-opposing revolutionary, for a weary world.

Surprising! Knowing God, it's expected.

² About the music's composer, many sources say that Adolphe Adam was himself Jewish (and so non-Christian). While this would add to the surprising origins of the carol, it is probably untrue. It seems that in 1930 an antisemitic essay denounced "Jewish composers" and mistakenly included Adolphe Adam among them.

³ For a history of *Minuit, Chrétiens* / *O Holy Night*, see especially www.americamagazine.org/arts-culture/2020/11/19/brief-history-o-holy-night-christmas-hymn-review, hymnary.org/person/Cappeau_P, and hymnary.org/person/Adam_Adolphe.

⁴ Victor Hugo's famous novel culminates with the 1832 rebellion in Paris. Cappeau wrote his poem in 1843. In 1848, a successful revolution overthrew the monarchy.

A Thrill of Hope

Placide's song was brought into English by John Sullivan Dwight. He was a Unitarian minister and school director in Massachusetts.⁵ He translated it quite loosely, but much of the sense remains the same.⁶

There is a swell of excitement and delight. Something is happening that is changing everything. *It is the night of our dear Saviour's birth.*

His law is love. Love the Lord your God with every bit of you. Love your neighbours like they are you. Love your enemy too. Love one another.

His gospel is peace. Shalom is that Hebrew word. Yes, it means no fighting, but also wholeness, completeness, balance. All is well.

That's his good news. So, with *a thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices.*

Who rejoices? Remember my questions when I started. Who matters? What sorts of people count?

Chains Shall He Break

John Dwight published his translation in 1855. In his United States, even in states where slavery was banned, a new law was requiring people to help recapture those who had escaped their chains. The Civil War was 5 years away. Emancipation had to wait a decade, civil rights a century, and the end of White Supremacy including in our Canada . . . we don't know yet.

For this weary world, John Dwight wrote of our Saviour:

*Chains shall he break, for the slave is our brother,
and in his name all oppression shall cease.⁷*

These drink deeply from theologian Mary's song.

*God has shown strength with his arm.
God has scattered those with arrogant thoughts and proud inclinations.
God has pulled the powerful down from their thrones and lifted up the lowly.
God has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty-handed.*

⁵ hymnary.org/person/Dwight_John

⁶ A good article about these changes, is Bob Kauflin, "'O Holy Night' Revisited," Worship Matters (November 11, 2014), worshipmatters.com/2014/11/03/o-holy-night-revisited. It includes newly-written verses that reflect better Placide's originals.

⁷ Here's a more literal translation of Placide Cappeau's original words:

*The Redeemer has broken every bond
The Earth is free, and Heaven is open.
He sees a brother where there was only a slave,
Love unites those whom iron had chained.*

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/O_Holy_Night#Lyrics

Who matters? Who counts?

Surprising! Knowing God, it's expected.

The 2020 Uncovering

It's been a wearying year for an already-weary world.

Of course, many know this better than I do. They carry our world's worst. They have for a long time. The pandemic makes things tougher. It also tears off the cover from over things many of us would rather not see.

Who matters? Who counts?

Essential workers' lives, who get paid a minimum wage they can't live on.

Homeless lives, who get bullied away from public places.

The lives of frail elders who are entrusted to us, and we cut corners to pay dividends, and cut inspections to lower taxes.

Migrant workers' lives, who leave home to work for their families, and die here feeding ours.

The lives of people who live in countries that can't afford to sign multimillion dollar vaccine deals.

Black lives.

Indigenous lives.

The lives of people who are Trans, Lesbian, or Gay.

The lives of people who are addicted, people who are mentally ill.

The lives of those on the other side of political divides.

The lives of my enemies.

Who matters? Who counts?

Mary, do you know? Yes, she knows. She's a prophet.

Placide, do you know? Yes, he knows. God speaks through him.

What a Soul Worth?
Jesus answers.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a pastor in Germany, and he wrote this during the early days of the Nazi regime. He wrote this, and it gets at what Jesus means for every living soul.

Christ has taken on this human form . . . so that we would be like him. In Christ's [becoming a human being] all of humanity regains the dignity of bearing the image of God. Whoever from now on attacks the least of the people attacks Christ, who took on human form and who in himself has restored the image of God, for all who bear a human [face].⁸

If we say or, worse, if we act like anyone does not matter, does not count. . . . If we imagine that a life isn't worth living any more, or worth living at all . . . If we decide someone is not essential, or not cost-effective, or unworthy of attention, or undesirable, or unwanted, or forgettable. . . . If we do this, Jesus shows us to be telling lies.

He appeared and the soul — each and every soul — felt its worth.

Who matters? Who counts?

Knowing God, it's always surprising . . . and that's to be expected.

Let's listen to *O Holy Night*.

Please listen to *O Holy Night*
You can find this version by Canadian singer Ben Caplan here:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7PdZGY_JDnQ

⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Discipleship, trans. Barbara Green, Reinhard Krauss (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2003), 285.