

# ***“Who Is This?”***

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***If Jesus is the King of Glory, he deserves all the new songs we can create.***

***Psalm 24; Luke 2:1-7***

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## ***Mimi...Pops...Christmas!***

It’s astounding what a 30-pound bundle of human will do to you. It’s been quite a week at our house. For those who don’t know, our son and his family live in Hawaii, so we visit them in the summer and they come to us in December.

Arlo’s birthday was Monday, which created a strange sort of day for me because I also preached a funeral to a full house Monday evening. The first twelve hours of the day toggled back and forth between writing a meditation for Pam Corder and celebrating Arlo’s birthday with a visit to the fire station (thanks, Tim Schowalter!), birthday cake and ice cream, and special time on our new church playground, which Arlo and his parents love.



On Tuesday afternoon we visited the science center, where we got the above picture in the kaleidoscope. It’s actually surprising to me what this kid does to my heart. Why is everything he says and does so wonderful? “Mimi...Pops...Christmas!” “o-KAY!” “Oh yeah, baby!” When we sit down at a meal to pray, he says, “Hold hands?” At the end of the prayer, “Hey, man!” (Amen.)

You know why what he does matters. It’s because of who he is. He’s my grandson. And if he has a birthday, it’s about the only thing that will take precedence over or adjust my schedule while writing a funeral service. It’s why Jesus’ birthday rises to the top of our priority list this week. It’s about who he is.

## ***This King***

Psalm 24 is a whole song for people with grandparent-like emotions. According to Jewish tradition, it was written for one of two similar occasions. The ark of the covenant from the time of Moses represented the presence of God among his people. Constructed according to God's own directives, it was topped by two gold angels. Inside were Aaron's rod, a vessel containing some of the manna that fed the Israelites, and the original stone tablets on which were inscribed the Ten Commandments.

The ark went ahead of the Israelites through the Jordan River into the promised land, accompanied their troops into battle, and then rested for hundreds of years in a glorified worship tent at a place called Shiloh. You can imagine the joy when King David brought it into his city to a new temporary worship center, and later when his son Solomon brought it into the permanent and glorious temple. Nobody knows what happened to it after the Babylonians invaded Jerusalem in 587 BC.

Psalm 24 was written either when the ark entered Jerusalem under King David or when it was transferred to Solomon's temple. I suspect it's the latter. Last week's Psalm (98) seems more appropriate for what seemed like a chaotic mob scene of jubilation when David danced with all his might. This psalm seems more appropriate to a carefully planned and choreographed occasion as Solomon would have planned. It's titled "A Psalm of David." With all the physical preparations David made for the building of the temple it is not surprising that he would write music for the special occasion.

Either way, it's almost impossible for us to imagine the awe, the joy, the celebration, as the ark entered. Had you been a visitor, you would have asked, "Who is this?" as you witnessed the parade for someone spectacularly unusual. The ark is not a piece of furniture. The ark represents God himself entering the city.

You need a very special song for that day. How does one capture in words and notes all that needs to be said and felt at the once-in-all-lifetimes moment when the whole nation is most tuned into God? David is most qualified for that task.

In verses 1 and 2, he sets his moment in time and that special place in the context of eternity and mind-bending mystery. It isn't just that ark or that temple that matters on that day. "The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it." Without our increased awareness of the magnitude of the universe, David sets his stage on the most immense and unknowable physical infinity – the seas. This God we worship is responsible for that as well.

It's a reminder of the smallness of our own holiday celebrations, when we limit them to presents or rituals or even Christmas worship services. Who and what is being honored here is so much more cosmic and inscrutable than any of that. We bow in awe before the one who made and owns every mountain and sea, every person and molecule, everywhere.

In verses 3-6, David focuses on the occasion for this psalm. The ark is literally making the journey upward toward the house of worship, where it will disappear behind the curtain and most Israelites will never physically see it again. But they will follow its path into “the mountain of the Lord” for sacrifice and festival and worship.

Who is worthy? The typical Christian answer, especially for those shaped by Reformed theology, is “No one.” We believe in total depravity, and the standard Christian answer is, “I’m a sinner, and all my righteousness is filthy rags.” That understanding of our sinfulness is both Old and New Testament.

It’s a valid theological point, and it sets us up for the gospel, but it’s not the point that David makes here in Psalm 24. The idea of being “pure in heart,” even as sinners, is also both an Old and New Testament concept. Jesus said, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.”

Also there’s the idea that we should examine our obedience and our submission before barging into worship is both Old and New Testament. Paul says we shouldn’t take communion “unworthily” or we invite God’s judgment.

The danger is that you turn this into an excuse to judge someone else’s worthiness. Don’t go there. As you prepare for Christmas, check your own hands and your heart. How can you ascend into the presence of the Lord if you have deliberately disobeyed him, if you are not among those who are seeking him?

In the final section, verses 7-10, David personifies the gates of Jerusalem, telling them to open wide. Commentators differ whether he speaking to the gates or the gatekeepers. Either way, the focus is on a welcome worthy of the King of glory. He is strong and mighty, the LORD of hosts. This ancient city that David had conquered and made his own – and the Lord’s own – needed to open wide for the King of Glory, who created everything and rules the world.

What does it look like for you to “open wide” and welcome the Lord? One reason I’m convinced the ark of the covenant was lost and never retrieved is because it was God’s plan to displace and replace a wood and gold box with himself in the person of Jesus Christ. He is the King of Glory.

That’s why it’s so surprising in retrospect that Bethlehem didn’t receive him. But the Bible never condemns the innkeeper or the town who “didn’t know who he was.” The bar is far higher for us, who have 2,000 years of perspective. You may not be Herod, who tried to kill him. But are you the innkeeper, who ignored him?

### ***Shepherds, Schubert, Luckadoo, Corneliusen, and Lyerly***

The entrance of the King of Glory, the Creator of all things, and the Lord of the world, inspired great songs – before and after his birth in Bethlehem. We Christians see

Psalm 24 as being a Jesus-song, in retrospect. Jews sang this psalm weekly in the temple. Christians have traditionally sung it for Ascension Sunday – when heaven itself opened its gates to Jesus on his return to heaven.

I like Psalm 24 as a Christmas song. It's a call for heaven and earth to recognize and welcome its King of Glory. It reminds me of yet another Christmas song written by Emily Elliott, a nineteenth century Anglican rector's daughter: "O come to my heart, Lord Jesus, there is room at my side for Thee."

Christmas is still inspiring great music. Our choir will be singing a new piece today. Its sources span the centuries, but today will be its premier. Let's look at those who had a hand in its composition.

The first one originates in sixteenth century England, one of many folk songs written to teach illiterate masses the story of Christmas. It is the subject of my favorite Christmas trivia question: "Where does the comma go in the song, 'God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen'?" It follows "Merry," because the song is actually addressed to the Bethlehem shepherds who were fearful on the night they were visited by angels. The angel was telling them to "Chill." In biblical language, "Fear not." In carol language, "God rest ye merry."

Fast forward to 1792, when an anonymous hymn was published in London. "O Sanctissima" was based on a "Sicilian Mariners' Hymn," a plea for the Virgin Mary to protect sailors at sea. It would later be repurposed in the German carol, "O Du Froliche" (O Thou Joyful), the English recessional hymn, "Lord Dismiss Us with Thy Blessing," and the Civil Rights hymn, "We Shall Overcome."

In 1825, a prolific young Austrian composer named Franz Schubert wrote yet another song that is part of today's anthem. Schubert had 1500 musical compositions to his name before he died at age 31. One of those was "Ave Maria." Protestants tend to avoid this song as a prayer to Mary, but actually only the second verse invokes Mary. The first verse is simply a rephrasing of the angel Gabriel's words to her in Luke 1: "Hail, Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you."

Then we arrive in in the middle of the Twentieth Century, when a member of our congregation named Tommy Luckadoo was born to a father who was a huge fan of "The Bells of St. Mary's," the second film featuring Bing Crosby as Father O'Malley. Crosby sings "O Sanctissima" in Latin. Tommy not only heard that version in the film, but also sang it as a young adult in his church choir.

Also in the middle of the Twentieth Century, Peter Corneliussen was born into a pastor's home. Peter never thought he would become a minister, but he loved the organ and church music from boyhood. He has served as our Music Director and Organist for two decades. I have often been amazed at his ability to compose music not

only based on a Scripture or story but on the ability of specific singers and instrumentalists.

Peter expresses his philosophy of music writing this way: "I am always trying to find ways to let heaven break through the hard shell of our earthly cares, tragedies, disappointments, difficulties, and sadness. I believe music has the power to punch through that globe separating us from the love of heaven reaching out to us. We are often blocked from the love and joy that the song of angels brought the shepherds so long ago."

Now to the present century. A baby girl was born into this congregation who has developed an early proficiency in the cello. Peter loves finding ways for her and other young people to use their talents. Lauren Lyerly's mentor, Sally Ross, has told her that she believes the cello is the closest sound to the voice of God one can get musically.

Also in this century – this decade, in fact – the son of Peter (and Lisa) Corneliussen fell in love with, and was engaged to, the daughter of Tommy (and Mary) Luckadoo. Garrett and Emma will be married later this year. So when Tommy Luckadoo asked Peter to put "Ave Maria" and "O Sanctissima" together, Peter's creative mind went to work. He combined those compositions with "God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen," wrote in a solo cello part for Lauren Lyerly, and offered our choir a new anthem for today's worship service.

So this Christmas Sunday asks, "Who is Mary?" Let's not run from her as Protestants. We may not see her as an intercessor, but she is indeed the One that God chose to bear his son. He is the one who saw her as someone with "a clean hands and a pure heart."

This day also asks, "Who is Jesus?" If he was only a baby born in an insignificant village to a couple fleeing the embarrassment of a pre-wedding pregnancy, we wouldn't still be talking and singing about him two thousand years later. But if he is indeed the "King of Glory," the Lord of all the earth and everyone in the world, then he is worthy of our worship, our trust, our obedience, and all the new songs we can create. Amen.