

The Christian Story: God's Promise to Creation

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Abstract

The Christian Story is God's promise to Creation. As the story goes, a woman discovers she's pregnant. This pregnancy is no ordinary human conception. It's from God. When she tells the man engaged to her, he makes plans to end the relationship. An angel speaks to him in a dream and the man begins a journey with the woman full of God's promise of Love and eternal life. Late one night the couple arrives at an inn. It's full. They lodge in a stable and the animals are blessed. People, like long lost friends get wind of this blessing, bring gifts, and then when the politics get tough, leave town.

Politics are still tough. The Church like this pregnant woman promises that God's love will live with all Creation forever and life will be so fine. Yet, the divide between rich and poor is greater now than ever before and the Earth's climate is changing rapidly. The effect is causing the extinction and endangerment of flora and fauna and forcing people from their homelands. People, who give God a home, expect a home in return. How can the Church show people she cares?

This paper looks at the importance of Song to the Christian Story. It examines Psalm 23, the Song of Songs, the Madonna's Song and the lyrics of Don Stewart, a singer and songwriter from Vancouver to illustrate how songs can be spiritual conversations that shepherd people, to the Gate where love waits, to forgive and renew all Creation.

Keywords: The Christian Story, God's Promise, Creation, Spirituality, Forgiveness, Renewal

1. Introduction

The Christian Story is God's promise to Creation and a fulfillment of Hebrew prophecy. Every year at Christmas, people celebrate the Christmas Story singing "Joy to the World! The Lord is come: let earth receive her King! Let every heart prepare him room, and heaven and nature sing... I never really thought much about these words. Until now.

Doing a little research, I discovered that the ancient Hebrew prophet Zephaniah predicted that one day God's Wrath will end and He will stop rebuking and scattering the nations. God will bless and unite all the nations of the world, singing and rejoicing with them [Zephaniah 3: 9-20]. John the Divine's vision of a New Heaven and a New Earth in Revelation 21 reiterates this promise [Revelation 21:1-5].

Why are we here, at the Orthodox Academy? The Orthodox Academy with the blessings of the Ecumenical Patriarch have called us, representatives of all the nations, to participate in Ecothee 13 to address the apocalyptic crisis facing the environment. Dr. Papaderos, the co-founder of the Academy is a renowned theologian and philosopher. He was the director here for 40 years and he and his wife Anna hosted many international guests in their home.

When Dr. and Mrs. Papaderos came to Bethany-Newton United Church for the Inter-Ecothee last year, Dr. Papaderos presented me with a CD. It was an Ode to the Revelation of John the Divine that had been performed here at the Academy to honor John's prophetic vision of a new earth and a new heaven.

So more importantly, we are here because the Orthodox Academy under the direction of Dr. Papaderos with the blessings of the Ecumenical Patriarch have set the stage for God to fulfill Zephaniah's and John the Divine's Prophecies...rejoicing and singing with us. We're not here to condemn the world. We are here to find solutions to the environmental crisis that will bring Joy to the World...so that heaven and nature will sing.

2. Songs Increase our Joy

This is my 5th time here at the Academy. I have chosen three songs from the Christian Bible and three contemporary songs to illustrate how songs increase our joy and teach us about Love and our relationship with Creation.

2.1 Psalm 23

In the Christian Bible, the book of Psalms is a book of songs. *Psalm 23* is a very well known piece of scripture. It is often sung and read at funerals. Here in green pastures a conversation takes place between a shepherd and a lamb.

The Lamb begins. "The Lord is my Shepherd. He makes me lie down in green pastures... He leads me...for his name's sake." Then in the fourth verse, the pronoun changes to you. People assume the Lamb is still singing. Yet I think this is where the Shepherd's voice joins in singing, showing his appreciation for the Lamb with these words. "Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies, You anoint my head with oil...." Then both the Shepherd and the Lamb harmonize in the sixth verse singing and rejoicing together with the words: "I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." [New International Version].

Perhaps, you envision the Shepherd holding the rod and staff and assume they belong to the Shepherd. Let's rethink this assumption. The Pronoun "You" and its adjective "Your" give the rod and staff to the Lamb and acknowledge that the Lamb's body supplies the milk, meat and oil for the table. The Shepherd and the Lamb protect each other from death and both take delight and rejoice in the other with mutual respect—singing "I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

2.2 Song of Songs

The *Song of Songs* is also a book of the Bible. It is sometimes called *Solomon's Song* because it has been attributed to King Solomon, the great King who had a thousand wives.

Yet, tradition often interprets this book as a parable of the relationship of God and humanity as if God were the Bridegroom and Humanity was the Woman, God's Bride. And for centuries, Roman Catholic tradition equated Mary Magdalene with the Woman, the Bride searching for her bridegroom, her Lord's body. Tradition says that Mary's tears keep her from realizing the truth. As the Risen Christ speaks to her and gives her the name Mary, she turns and finally realizes that The Risen Christ is not her gardener or her bridegroom. Like the Woman of *Song of Songs*, Mary's Gardener Bridegroom comes out of the wilderness. He's the One who listens for and hears her voice sing joyous notes, of proclamation. He's the one who holds onto her.

Here are a few select verses from the New International Version:

She

Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth...Let the king bring me into his chambers... Do not stare at me because I am darkened by the sun. My mother's sons were angry with me and made me take care of the vineyards... Tell me, you whom I love,

where you graze your flock and where you rest your sheep at midday.... [Song of Songs 1: 2-7]

Look! Here he comes, leaping across the mountains, bounding over the hills. My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag...[2: 8-9]

I looked for him but did not find him. I will get up now and go about the city...I will search for the one my heart loves... Who is this coming up from the wilderness like a column of smoke, perfumed with myrrh and incense...[3: 1-6]

Friends

Where has your beloved gone?

She

My beloved has gone down to his garden...to gather lilies. I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine. [6: 1-3]

He

You are as beautiful as Tirzah, my darling, as lovely as Jerusalem...[6: 4]

Friends

Who is this coming up from the wilderness leaning on her beloved?[8: 5]

She

...for love is as strong as death... Many waters cannot quench love...If one were to give all the wealth of one's house for love, it would be utterly scorned... But my own vineyard is mine to give; the thousand shekels are for you, Solomon... and two hundred are for those who tend its fruit.[8:6-12]

He

... You who dwell in the gardens with friends in attendance, let me hear your voice![8:13]

She

Come away, my beloved, and be like a gazelle or like a young stag on the spice-laden mountains.[8:14].

Song of Songs begins with the Woman as one of King Solomon's field hands, searching for love among the shepherds hoping to gain acceptance into the king's chambers. By Song 2, the Woman begins to see her lover in the form of a male deer, a gazelle, not a shepherd. By Song 3 she sees her lover as someone who is perfumed. And then in Songs 6 and 7, as she converses more and more with her lover and friends, she realizes that her lover is indeed a gazelle and a shepherd, not a king with a thousand wives. In the last song, Song 8, her beloved comes out of the wilderness holding onto her, ready to come away with her.

2.3 The Madonna's Song

Prior to the 12th Century, Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus were both seen as the same woman, the woman of Song of Songs.[Turner (2011)] *The Madonna's Song* also known as *Mary's Song* or *The Magnificat* is much shorter.

Here are a few select verses from the International Version:

My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant...From now on all generations will call me

blessed... He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors. [Luke 1:46-55].

People have been trusting this promise for centuries. Like Mary their souls rejoice when they realize that when they find their beloved Lord or Lady they will glorify God and fulfill the promise made to Abraham and his descendants. The promise is that God will bless their relationship with many descendants and so blessed they will bless the other nations of the world.

Joseph is Mary's intended bridegroom and at first like the Bride in *Song of Songs*, Mary is not so sure Joseph is the one to help her fulfill God's Promise. As the story goes...Mary like the Bride of *Song of Songs* readies herself by discussing some of the underlying issues with her trusted friends. Paraphrasing from the New International Version and popular tradition, she asks Gabriel something like this: "How can I be the Elect Lady, chosen to bring a new redeemed humanity into this world. How can I have a part in this? How can I fulfill God's promise to the World. I am Naive...a Virgin. I know nothing of the world or the business and politics of men...I have never possessed [had] a man with my power or had power over him." In the meantime, Joseph has his own doubts. He almost breaks off their engagement. In the end Mary and Joseph dispel their doubts. She sings—trusting that God will bless and reconcile the nations. [Luke 1: 26-35; Matthew 1: 18-14].

2.4 Hey, Hey That's the Way the Story Goes

Contemporary Songwriter Don Stewart has written several songs that have sparked my imagination and caused me to think about love and relationships. Relationships are hard enough to manage at the personal level and even more complex at the family, national and global level. Don Stewart attended Bethany-Newton's Inter-Ecothee Symposium last year and signed our Inter-Ecothee signature "comforter." On it, he wrote: "Love makes the World Go Round." Jump on!!

I've brought it and the alabaster jar that I brought to the first Ecothee 08 as a reminder: Love does make the world go round!



Figure 1. Inter-Ecothee Symposium Quilt by Pauline Bruce Bethany-Newton United Church

People you love can hurt your feelings, get angry, rebuke you, blame you, forsake you and fail to appreciate all that you have given them and done for them. And when they mistreat you like this. You weep. You get angry. You feel forsaken. It is hard to imagine that you will ever find someone who will respect you and appreciate you the way the Shepherd and the Lamb love each other in *Psalm 23*.

It is harder still to imagine someone loving you enough to search for you, to wait for you to be ready and to overcome all adversity, like the Woman and the Stag in the *Song of Songs*. Or to imagine someone like Joseph who will love you and do all that he can to protect you so that God's promise conceived within you can live and bring Joy to the World. Yet people want to believe that love truly makes the World go round.

So I now turn to the songs of Don Stewart. *Hey, Hey That's the Way the Story Goes*, begins with the chorus:

Hey, hey, hey, hey, that's the way the story goes (repeat 4 times)
 She was sweet and so petite, a smile from head to toe.
 Oh yes I had it good, let me tell ya.
 And everybody knows, but so did she.
 One day she left, and she never ever returned.
 And to this day, I don't understand why a man like me got burned.
 Let me hear ya, say: Hey, hey, hey, hey, that's the way the story goes... (repeat 4 times)
 Gave my money to a stranger.
 He said he could do great things, trusted him completely, seemed like a long lost friend.
 Well, things looked good and I could tell my world soon would be gold.

But on the day we'd be rolling in dough, now did I tell you, he was a no show.
Hey, hey, hey, hey, that's the way the story goes... (repeat)

I'm not bitter, not upset, can't say there's any regrets.
I'm a fast learner, and you betta believe, that I never will forget.
Back then I was young, some say naïve.
That won't happen again and you can bet your money on that cuz I'm my own best friend.

Let me tell ya, say: Hey, hey, hey... (repeat ... fade out...) [Tender Lies (2013)]

When people we love leave us or die, we grieve. Buried deep within our souls there is a longing for a Love that never ends.

2.5 The Gate

The Gate from Don Stewart's soon to be released *Let me Be Good* album is a song that expresses this longing. Each verse builds on it.

Take a walk to the Gate
Dance with me a while
Remember when we were just a child
Come and Dance and Sing
Let the love begin
A love that will never end

The door will open
And I may not be ready
But when I dance
I will remember
The way I lived and know
It was joyous
Maybe not always
But I did live and love
And here you are with me

At the Gate
I'd like to wait
But I'll be late
So here I go
Will you dance for me
At the Gate
And over there, I'll wait
Take your time, I'll wait
On the other side of the Gate

At the Gate
I'd like to wait
But I'll be late
So here I go
Will you dance for me

At the Gate
And over there, I'll wait
Take your time, I'll wait

On the other side of the Gate (repeat 1 more time)

Take your time, I'll wait
Love you so
Gonna miss you so
Here I go
Don't cry for me
I'll miss you so
I'll miss you so

2.6 Be With Me

Perhaps the ideal lover, is the One at the Gate who trusts and waits for the one he loved as a child to follow him there, so that they will both experience what it means to be with the “other” forever. Listen to these words of Don Stewart’s song *Be With Me*.

Be With Me
With me again
Remember when we were just friends
To hold you close
Was all I asked of you

When you dance with me
I must say
That years ago I never felt this way
So young and foolish
I was so carefree

Now the time has come
And you're the one
Who fills my dreams
And so, it seems
That fate won't have it any other way

I've wasted all those
Lovely days
But old memories
Never seem to fade

Darling be with me
'Til the end of time
Be with me
If only in my mind
Be with me
That's all I ask of you. [Midnight Hour (2011)]

To be with his darling forever is the lover’s request. Living as a darling should live, with one’s beloved, is a tough assignment. What is love anyway? The Greeks have been contemplating this question since the symposia of Socrates and most likely before that.

3. Concluding Thoughts

As a Christian, I trust God’s promise to Creation: That promise being Eternal Life. I look to songs and stories that speak about love and being in relationship. I want to dwell in the house of my Lord, my God and your God, forever. I trust in God’s promises and believe that God has created humanity and has given

humanity the choice to live forever in love or to die. I choose to live forever in love, to be in relationship with people whom I love and respect and whom love and respect me for this faith in God that is growing inside of me. Thanks to them I have been forgiven my transgressions and encouraged to realize and act upon my faith. Thus, I stand before you with respect for you, willing and ready to learn from you how to better love and care for Creation so that heaven and nature will sing—so that my God and your God will sing and rejoice with us.

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