

Christmas Carols

I'll be the first to admit that as a minister, I'm definitely not "high church" in my approach to liturgy (the forms and words we use in worship) and to worship generally. I believe that too often people's experience of worship has involved too much form and too little experience. The pageantry and rituals of church too often simply get in the way of people's spiritual expression, diverting them from the possibility of embracing the holy in worship time.

Now I also admit that I may be too sensitive about this. Perhaps I go too far with this notion. I hope not. Here at Knox we who plan worship try to make sure that there is enough regular form to our worship services that people can know what to expect. It does include some degree of ritual. We try to make that fairly consistent week to week, perhaps changing some of that seasonally.

I'm thinking of things like lighting the Trinity candles, singing our way into worship and into prayer, ending with a sung benediction or a sung Amen, and lighting candles on the Advent wreath. It's a fine balance for us to try to find in worship – enough regular form for folks to be comfortable and know what to expect, along with enough new experience for folks to be energized and engaged with what is said and done.

The point that's important to me is to help people like you others – those who come regularly, newcomers and visitors alike – feel comfortable, connected and engaged with what unfolds during worship, and to take part as actively as they wish, even to feel the touch of the holy during the hour-and-a-bit that we're together. It's not really high-church versus low-church, but rather it's trying to find just the right mix of consistency and newness.

Christmas music during Advent, however, is one place where I clearly go against high-church principles. I lean a long way toward engaging worshippers with enjoyment and good messages, rather than sticking to the strict forms and seasonal principles of the traditional church (the "high church"). Some of my colleagues in some other churches would (and do!) chastise me for having Christmas carols sung in worship during the Advent season – those four weeks leading up to Christmas.

You see, it's liturgically incorrect to sing carols in Advent. Advent is before the Christmas season, focused on preparing for Christmas, but not yet celebrating it. So to sing Christmas carols in Advent is to short-circuit that preparation. It lets us get to the joy of Christmas, so the argument goes, before we've properly had a chance to go through the anticipation and waiting and deep pondering that's supposed to occur through these preparatory weeks. For the liturgical purists, including some of my colleagues in ministry, it's just plain wrong to leap ahead and sing carols before Christmas.

I understand that. I get it. I just don't think it has to be an either-or situation.

We do need a chance for our spirits to have a time of waiting and anticipating, thinking long and hard about what it means for us to embrace once more Jesus coming into the world and into our lives in the unexpected and surprising person of an infant. That's what Advent can and will do for us, if we let it. And that's what I hope to offer in the worship services of the Advent season.

At the same time, we can sometimes discover that joy in worship is in too-short supply. Even while we're waiting, while we're living in that in-between and not-yet time of Advent, we can open our spirits to the joy that is to come. A wonderful way to do that is through music, and some of the Christmas carols do a great job of bringing joy to our hearts. In fact, the theme of the third Sunday of Advent traditionally is "Joy". Why not use music, the most easily accessible worship experience for opening us to joy?

It doesn't have to be either-or; it can be both-and. We can be in that contemplative, growing-in-awe sensibility of Advent, and we also can sing our voices hoarse with the beloved and joy-filled carols of Christmas at the same time.

So "Bah! Humbug!" to the liturgical purists out there. Let's sing!

