

December 15, 2019  
The Third Sunday of Advent, Year A  
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert  
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Isaiah 35:1-10  
Canticle 15  
James 5:1-7  
Matthew 11:2-11

Last weekend brought my two most anticipated musical events of the year: on Saturday, the Connecticut Gay Men's Chorus holiday concert; and on Sunday, this choir's Service of Advent Lessons & Carols.

These two events are more similar than is obvious on the surface. Advent Lessons & Carols voices through music the story of tribulation and restoration; we hear the promise that hope is never in vain. A Connecticut Gay Men's Chorus concert is much the same at heart, beneath all those sequined tuxedo vests.

The Connecticut Gay Men's Chorus has been rehearsing here at St. Thomas's for most of its 34-year history. Our Parish and Property Administrator, Julie Kelly, is also their General Manager. She says that for many years the rehearsal location was only carefully disclosed, due to safety concerns.

My personal gay men's chorus fandom began in the mid-1990s, with the Seattle Men's Chorus. Their holiday performances were and remain hugely popular. Back then, they placed a poinsettia on the stage for every chorus member who had died of AIDS. Again, this was the mid-1990. At the time, the chorus numbered just *under* two hundred men, and there were just *over* two hundred poinsettias. Those poinsettias were a visual reminder of the great loss that that community had experienced.

Gay men's choruses were founded as a safe refuge for their members in an often unfriendly world, and they became goodwill ambassadors for the gay community in that world. Holiday concerts always include moments silly and serious, bits naughty and nice. There is always at least one man dressed in preposterous drag. The men laugh at themselves, perhaps because they have spent time weeping. They laugh at themselves, and invite the audience to laugh along. Once a person has joined the laughter, it's not such a stretch to join the weeping.

The Seattle Men's Chorus now numbers around 300 voices. Our Connecticut Gay Men's Chorus numbers a couple dozen. Even so, at every chorus show, at least once I laugh, and at least once I weep. This year the tears came early, with the chorus's rendition of the Sara Bareilles song "Love is Christmas." I'd never heard it before, so it caught me up short. The original version is now on my Spotify Christmas playlist. It's lovely, but not as lovely as the Chorus's performance, which featured one of their regular soloists, a terrific young gay black man. Sara Bareilles wrote the song, but the chorus voices carry the weight of history. Of course, I also brought my own history to the moment. As Aaron sang and the chorus joined, I thought of blood red poinsettias on a Seattle stage 25 years ago and my own path to that concert hall.

Now that you have all that in mind, I'm going to read the words of "Love is Christmas." It's not the same as hearing them sung, but here goes:

I don't care if the house is packed  
Or the strings of light are broken  
I don't care if the gifts are wrapped  
Or there's nothing here to open

Love is not a toy, and no paper will conceal it  
Love is simply joy that I'm home

I don't care if the carpet's stained, we've got food upon our table  
I don't care if it's gonna rain, our little room is warm and stable

Love is who we are, and no season can contain it  
Love would never fall for that

Let love lead us, love is Christmas

Why so scared that you'll mess it up? When perfection keeps you haunted  
All we need is your best my love, that's all anyone ever wanted

Love is how we do, let no judgment overrule it  
Love, I look to you, and I sing

Let love lead us, love is Christmas<sup>1</sup>

I generally also weep at least once during service of Advent Lessons & Carols. As for the Chorus, the tears came early this year, during the first choir anthem, "Jesus Christ the Apple Tree." Again, this connected to my own personal history, specifically of attending my first Service of Advent Lessons & Carols shortly after finding the Episcopal Church after a particularly personally difficult year. Again, let me read the words:

The tree of life of my soul hath seen,  
Laden with fruit and always green:  
The trees of nature fruitless be  
Compared with Christ the apple tree.

His beauty doth all things excel:  
By faith I know, but ne'er can tell  
The glory which I now can see  
In Jesus Christ the apple tree.

For happiness I long have sought,  
And pleasure dearly I have bought:  
I missed of all; but now I see  
'Tis found in Christ the apple tree.

I'm weary with my former toil,  
Here I will sit and rest awhile:  
Under the shadow I will be,  
Of Jesus Christ the apple tree.

This fruit doth make my soul to thrive,  
It keeps my dying faith alive;  
Which makes my soul in haste to be  
With Jesus Christ the apple tree.<sup>2</sup>

To repeat what I said earlier, in the story of tribulation and restoration; we hear the promise that hope is never in vain. I should be clear: my weeping is not just about the tribulation; it's perhaps even more about the restoration. I suppose that's a big key to what Advent is all about: pausing to recall deep sadness, and also even deeper joy. We hear *all* this in the stories of our forebears; to *their* stories, *we* add *our own*.

Let's turn briefly to the Gospel reading. There so many ways one could take that reading, but I'm going to focus in on one bit. Last week, John the Baptist was making pronouncements in the wilderness; this week, he's asking questions from prison. Earlier in the Gospel, John seemed to have recognized Jesus as the anointed one; now, he seems uncertain. Jesus responds to his questions, but *not* with a simple "Yes!" Instead he offers something rather like, "The proof of the pudding is in the eating." In this case, the proof lies in his acts of healing. That is to say, the hope Jesus offers John arises from individual instances of tribulation and restoration.

It seems to me that this is our own entry point into the story. Every single human being possesses a complicated personal history packed full of tribulation and restoration. We carry that history with us everywhere we go. There are likely parts of it that we prefer to keep neatly boxed up. If we're lucky, we have a safe place to open that box and poke around. Even if we try to keep it closed, sometimes things just come bursting out.

For sure, this is a complicated time of year in a complicated year. Last Sunday Will Parker mentioned 12-step programs in his sermon. What he didn't mention is that many people who struggle with alcoholism or addiction experience crisis during the holidays. The broader truth is that many people *period* experience crisis during the holidays, and those who struggle with alcoholism or addiction are uniquely vulnerable.

Here's how it often goes: begin with the short and gloomy days; layer on factors such as loss and grief, job or lack-of-job distress, or mental or physical health problems; mix in a little loneliness and isolation; and then top it all off with the gap between real life and the Christmas ideal. This year, there are some extra factors: we are slogging toward the close not just of a year, but of a decade, and we're doing so while occupying a time of unprecedented anxiety for our nation and for the world. Even if we didn't experience the death of a loved one this year, there are plenty of other things to grieve.

And so, before I go farther, let me say this: if you're having a hard time right now, try to be gentle with yourself. However you're doing, try to be gentle with others.

This year, I'm especially grateful for gay men's choruses and church choirs, and for the people of faith here and hovering all around my life. And, despite its roller-coaster turmoil, I'm grateful for Advent. After all, if we all need to weep, and I suspect we all do, it helps to weep in good company.

This Advent, in this good company, we witness to one another, with our stories of tribulation and restoration; through them, we remind one another that God is Word made flesh, God with us, who spoke first and will speak last, who has not forgotten us, and who will turn our weeping into laughter. We echo the words of Isaiah:

... the ransomed of the LORD shall return,  
and come to Zion with singing;  
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;  
they shall obtain joy and gladness,  
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.<sup>3</sup>

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Sara Bareilles, "Love is Christmas."

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Poston, "Jesus Christ the Apple Tree."

<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 35:10 NRSV.