

## Welcome

It's become a tradition every Christmas to argue about certain harmless holiday takes. When do you put up your Christmas tree? Is Die Hard a Christmas movie? And should we cancel "Baby It's Cold Outside"?

The song is almost 80 years old; it originally debuted in 1947 as a duet that songwriter Frank Loesser and his wife would perform at their annual Christmas party.

The song features a couple who's finishing up a date, and the man is trying to convince the woman to stay longer, while she insists she has to go home.

Fans of the song enjoy the playful banter between the two. The back and forth is harmless and flirty, they insist.

Critics of the song in recent years have pointed to the man's unwillingness to take No for an answer as emblematic of the larger problem of men ignoring women's autonomy over their own bodies. No means no, critics insist.

But some other feminist critics in recent years have reevaluated that criticism. They see the song as opening up space for liberation, insisting that, in the time the song was written in the 1940s, women had even fewer rights than they had today, and cultural expectations around women's behavior in public were draconian.

It was actually a pretty big deal, they insist, that the man is having a conversation with the woman in the song. That her feelings do seem to matter, and that their banter is playful and flirtatious.

So... who's right?

Here's the thing: I think both parties are, here. The song is definitely more than a little creepy in our day and time, and the way the man tries to pressure the woman is pretty gross. (When the song was originally published, the two parts were identified as 'Wolf' and 'Mouse', so... yeah.)

But it's also true that, by the dating standards of the 1940s-50s, this song was a huge step in the right direction.

We might say the *spirit* of the song is no longer in step with the *text* of the song. We can feel that dissonance in the annual debate.

It's a dissonance that can only happen when a text is beloved enough to stick around long enough for the culture to change around it.

So... would you be surprised to learn the Bible has a number of texts like this? Texts that, in their day were liberative and life-giving, pushing the culture into which they were delivered closer to who God created us to be.

But then we actually *listened* to those texts and grew and changed... and of course the texts didn't because they're static. Unchanging. They're artifacts of an older time.

When we encounter these texts, our temptation is to ignore them, or maybe domesticate them. After all, maybe especially at this time of year, we want faith to be simple, flat, nice and happy. The same way we don't really want to fight about Christmas songs.

But when we pause to attend to these texts, to why they make us uncomfortable, we can discern the spirit behind them. We can begin to see why they were a source of liberation and hope then, and imagine how they orient us toward liberation and hope today!

## Message

Today is the first Sunday of Advent, which is the beginning of the Church year. During Advent, we take four Sundays to prepare ourselves for Christmas. We prepare by remembering what our spiritual ancestors experienced as they waited for the arrival of God's promised champion.

We know that champion arrived as Jesus on that first Christmas. But we also know Jesus isn't done with the world, that he's going to return. So just like our ancestors prepared for Jesus to arrive that first Christmas, we're preparing for his return one day.

This year, our Advent series is called WORST CHRISTMAS SONGS EVER. We're taking some of the Christmas songs that get a lot of (usually justifiable!) hate and asking what we can learn from them. Why do people hate them so much? And how did they get so popular in the first place? Along the way, we'll find sitting with these songs might be an invitation to prepare our own spirits for the Christmas celebration.

Today, we're beginning with "Baby, It's Cold Outside," that song that, when it comes to dating culture and consent, was progressive in its day but these days feels regressive and creepy.

This can be how the Advent season feels - it's a season of preparation, of fasting and prayer. But there's not much room for preparation and prayer in the Christmas season. Stores are champing at the bit to put Christmas decorations up - this year I caught a few before Halloween! Rather than a season of fasting and preparation followed by a couple of weeks of feasting, we just do two straight months of glutting ourselves.

If y'all have been around long enough, you know this is one of my favorite soapboxes. I think this is a place the church has a real opportunity to be an antidote to toxic traits in our culture.

Fasting and feasting are meant to be paired. Feasts require preparation. Otherwise, they hurt more than they heal!

What ends up happening is that the feasting becomes a numbing behavior. We're celebrating to *avoid*, not celebrating as a way to *resist and overcome*.

Let's take a look at a couple of passages that, a little like Baby It's Cold Outside, don't feel like they really fit into our contemporary Christmas celebrations.

Turn with us to Psalm 80.

This one is a little strange. It requires us to reexamine one of our favorite Christmas decorations - the cherub.

These days, we depict cherubim (the plural because it's a Hebrew word) as cute lil babies with wings. But in the Bible, Cherubim are huge monsters. They are hybrids - usually lion or eagle bodies with human faces. Sometimes they're covered in eyes.

And the role of Cherubim is to guard the gateway between God's realm and ours. So God put two cherubim at the gates to Eden after we were exiled. The Temple featured two massive cherubim carved from stone, standing outside the entrance to the holy place.

And there were two cherubim on the lid of the ark of the covenant. Because the ark was where God's physical presence on earth lived. God literally hung out between the cherubim.

And the weird part is that the cherubim on the ark didn't face out, toward us. They faced in. Toward God.

As though they weren't so much keeping us out as they were keeping God in. (If you've seen *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, you know why. God's physical presence is enough to kill mere humans.

You know those "Beware of Dog" signs people have in their yards? So people walking by know they're in a danger zone?

The Cherubim are like a living "Beware of GOD" sign.

So with that in mind, look how Psalm 80 opens:

Please listen, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph's descendants like a flock. O God, enthroned above the cherubim, display your radiant glory -- Psalm 80:1

We read this, with our sweet lil angel baby Cherubim, and it feels exciting. Encouraging. Like the Psalmist is summoning man's best friend to come bounding in to save the day.

But an ancient Hebrew calling on the God who Dwells Among the Cherubim knows God isn't a dog. God is closer to a wolf - unpredictable, dangerous. Definitely not domesticated.

It's hard, I think, for us to experience God as dangerous. The closest many of us may get is wondering if the reason we hit all red lights this morning or had to park further away is because we didn't pray before dinner or were unkind to a partner or coworker. Sort of a cosmic, karma thing more than a dangerous God.

Why are we talking about a scary God, an undomesticated God when it's Christmastime?

In his famous children's novel, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the land of Narnia is trapped in a frozen winter by an evil witch. The denizens of Narnia lament that "it's always Winter and never Christmas" -- probably the definition of hell for a kid.

The Jesus-figure of the book is the lion Aslan, and he's famously described as dangerous.

"Safe?" said Mr Beaver ... "Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you." -- C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*

Friends, I want to suggest to you, here at the beginning of the Advent season, that we want a God who is dangerous, a God who is more wolf than dog, one who won't hesitate to take a stand against evil and injustice.

Those very hardships in our world that make us want to hide inside the Christmas celebration and just sing happy songs till our cheeks are frozen in rictus smiles - those are the things we *want* God to oppose.

Can we pause here and join the Psalmist in invoking the God who is seated among the Cherubim? The God who won't be domesticated by any of us, but who still confronts evil and battles injustice?

## Song

Much like the old school dating perspective we find in "Baby It's Cold Outside," the idea of an angry God feels like an outdated image - it belongs to the Pilgrims and the Old Testament (like psalms and our next reading). But this undomesticated God is one who challenges us to take evil in the world serious. And this God challenges us to take evil in our own hearts seriously too.

Turn with us to Isaiah 64.

This is from a section of Isaiah that was written a century or so after God's people had returned from Exile. They were destroyed by Babylon, then 70 years later allowed to return and rebuild. This is another 100 or so years after *that* and things just don't feel like the good ole days.

All of this, God's people have interpreted as punishment from God for not remaining faithful to their covenant. For nearly 300 years, their priests and prophets have said, "God was right to abandon us. We weren't faithful. We didn't act as God's people. So of course God finally left us to our own devices."

But surely, they're thinking... surely enough is enough? Surely God might give them a second chance? So, much like the Psalmist, the prophet here is invoking the God who dwells among the cherubim. The dangerous God. The Wolf God. Listen to his words:

Oh, that you would burst from the heavens and come down!  
How the mountains would quake in your presence!  
As fire causes wood to burn and water to boil, your coming would make the nations tremble.  
Then your enemies would learn the reason for your fame!  
When you came down long ago, you did awesome deeds beyond our highest expectations.  
And oh, how the mountains quaked!

...Yet no one calls on your name or pleads with you for mercy.  
Therefore, you have turned away from us and turned us over to our sins.  
And yet, O LORD, you are our Father. We are the clay, and you are the potter. We all are formed by your hand. Don't be so angry with us, LORD.  
Please don't remember our sins forever. Look at us, we pray, and see that we are all your people. -- Isaiah 64:1-3, 7-9

You can't stay mad forever, God. We get it: we deserved what we brought on ourselves. But we're sorry - genuinely and truly. We are clay and you are the potter. Make something with us again!

Friends, I find it incredibly powerful that our Advent journey begins in this place: not joy, not peace, not celebration, but hope.

Conviction that God is not finished with us.

Advent begins in a place of darkness. But Advent insists the darkness is not the end. There's a candle burning because we know dawn is coming.

So friends: if this is where you are, please *be here*. You don't have to be okay. You don't have to have a perfect family. You don't have to have everything in your life or your job or your church (ha!) figured out.

You can have more questions than answers.

You can be angry or sad or anxious or afraid.

None of these is the opposite of hope. In fact, hope requires us to not quite be okay.

Because hope says that God is not finished with this world. War and violence and bigotry and oppression don't get the last word.

Hope says God is not finished with *us*. Our sin doesn't have the last word. What someone else has done to us doesn't have the last word.

We don't have to be someone we're not for God to be with us. Because God is Emmanuel, God with us.

We can invoke the God who Dwells among the Cherubim, the God we know will tear open the heavens and descend to make all things new.

God is not safe. But God is good. We can trust that.

## Communion + Examen

Jesus shows us how God loves us and makes us new.

As we enter Advent, where am I experiencing joy, peace and hope?

Where am I experiencing pain, despair or anxiety?

How can I be honest with God about those experiences this week?

What does hope look like for me this Advent?

## Assignment + Blessing