

## Welcome

I'm pretty sure that song is newest Christmas classic. The only other relatively recent song to become a classic Christmas song I can think of is "Carol of the Bells", which is only a few years older, actually. But "All I Want for Christmas is You" is the unquestioned champion of Christmas songs:

Mariah first released it back in 1994, when it wasn't the expectation that artists release a Christmas album. In 2017, it cracked Billboard's Top 10, and hit #1 in 2019, breaking the record for biggest gap between release and hitting #1. When it hit #1 again in 2020, Mariah became the first artist to have a #1 hit in 4 separate decades. Then, in 2021, it made history by becoming the only Christmas song to get the Diamond Award for 10 million sales and streaming in the US. Billboard recently declared it the #1 holiday song on their Top 100 Holiday Songs chart.

So... why is this in our "Worst Christmas Songs" series? Well this is totally anecdotal, but despite this song being everywhere, I hear so much hate directed toward this song... the only thing I can assume is that it's the hate that comes with over-saturation. Which isn't the song's fault because, really, this song is sort of custom-designed to be a hit.

It's a fast Christmas song, but unlike a lot of other upbeat Christmas classics (jingle bells, Frosty the Snowman, Rudolph) it's for adults. It's about love and longing.

Unlike other adult Christmas songs (silver bells, White Christmas), it's upbeat.

Plus it's generic - anyone could sing it to anyone. And it's not spiritual, so it makes sense in more than just Church contexts.

PLUS, musically it's got a lot more going for it that you might think at first. Nathan?

[Nathan on the musicality of the song]

A big part of the reason this song is so popular is that it has staying power. It wraps itself around your brain. I think too, it hits exactly the right notes that resonate with the Christmas season, even though it's not a religious song.

At its heart, "All I Want for Christmas is You" is a song of hope. It's a song that's begging the beloved to be present to the lover, who's waiting beneath the mistletoe.

It's a song of yearning, a song of confident faith that the lover will arrive... they're just not here yet.

And in that way, “All I Want for Christmas is You” may be the perfect Christmas song. Because we too are awaiting Jesus’ return. Let’s sing with the same sort of hopeful anticipation!

## Message

Today is the third 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.

We’ve explored the deep need we have for God in our world. Last week, Sonya helped us see how Advent invites us to reject the sentimentality of the season in favor of the possibility of genuine transformation. Today, we’re celebrating hope.

Hope is one of those things we know is good. We celebrate it. But deep down, we sort of don’t want it. Because to hope, things have to be less than idea. After all, I can hope to be a millionaire. Who wouldn’t like that? But you know who doesn’t hope they’ll one day be a millionaire? Millionaires.

So if I’m hoping for God to arrive, then it means in some way I’m experiencing a *lack* of God’s presence. And who could deny that’s true?

Again, that’s why I really enjoy “All I Want for Christmas is You.” The song depicts the love standing under a mistletoe, pleading with their beloved to show up. There’s a risk, a raw vulnerability the song offers that, were it not couched in such a catchy hook, would make a lot of us deeply uncomfortable.

But this is the sort of raw vulnerability from which hope springs, and it’s the sort of hope we see in the Psalm from our reading today.

Turn with us to [Psalm 126](#).

[Psalm 126](#) is a Psalm of ascent, which means this is one pilgrims sang when they were travelling to the Temple to worship. When Amanda and I head out on a road trip, we always start out with “La Grange” by Z. Z. Top. Why? I’m not sure - it’s a silly tradition that started before we got married. But it gets us in the mood for a drive.

Songs of Ascent are similar - they get the pilgrims in the right place - mentally, emotionally, spiritually - to worship when they arrive in Jerusalem, at the Temple.

I want to reread the first part of this Psalm, because it’s sort of like a Christmas classic - an old hit that makes us feel warm and safe:

When the LORD brought back his exiles to Jerusalem, it was like a dream!

We were filled with laughter, and we sang for joy.

And the other nations said, “What amazing things the LORD has done for them.” Yes, the LORD has done amazing things for us! What joy! — [Psalm 126:1-3](#)

We’re going to talk about that rawness, that vulnerability that invites hope. But first, I think it’s important that the Psalmist begins with a recounting of what God has done for God’s people.

God brought the people back from Exile! God ended their long alienation. It was *like a dream*.

Look: it’s easy to sentimentalize Christmas. To laugh at the Norman Rockwell paintings. But what we love about Christmas is this promise:

Peace on earth and good will to all people. God’s favor resting on all we who were weary and longing.

The Psalm opens by saying, “Remember when God did that?”

Can we pause here in our worship and do the same?

## Song

Part and parcel of hope is that raw vulnerability we hear in “All I want for Christmas is You.” It’s that risk of standing under the mistletoe, knowing it’s entirely possible your beloved doesn’t reciprocate your affections and may decide now’s a good time to get a refill of punch.

In the Christmas movie, this is usually the time we’re all squirming uncomfortably in our seats. Because this level of vulnerability makes us deeply uncomfortable, doesn’t it?

When we’re feeling raw, we don’t like to show it. We cover it up, call it “putting on a *brave* face.”

When we see it in someone else, we tend to change the subject or excuse ourselves. Hide from their vulnerability.

Neither of those sounds very brave, actually.

Because it's actually in the raw spaces hope manifests.

That's certainly true of the psalm. As we continue to sing, we realize these folks headed to the Temple aren't singing about the good ole days because they're fat and happy. No, quite the opposite. They're hurting, worried, anxious. And they're wondering when God is going to show up.

Listen to their vulnerability:

Restore our fortunes, LORD, as streams renew the desert.

Those who plant in tears will harvest with shouts of joy.

They weep as they go to plant their seed, but they sing as they return with the harvest. — [Psalm 126:4-6](#)

I love the metaphor here of sowing and reaping - that when we choose to be raw and vulnerable, God is faithful to honor that vulnerability. We sow tears and reap joy.

A note here - this sow/reap language has been co-opted by prosperity preachers. They turn sowing into a financial investment - give money to the church and God will make you rich.

You can see though, that this song couldn't be further from that idea. What's being sown here are the tears of our painful circumstances. The metaphor is profound. After all, there's a difference, isn't there, between sowing seed and just letting what happens happen? There's a difference between a garden and a wild field.

What does it look like for us to sow our tears?

I've come to believe that planting tears looks like taking our grief seriously. Our world has a seemingly endless stream of sources of sorrows. From global news to the invisible hand of the economy to what others do to us to our own personal habits and shortcomings, we could spend quite a while listing out the things that cause us grief.

And usually our grief doesn't spring from a single source. It's complex, complicated.

Planting our grief isn't burying it out of sight and out of mind. It's doing the difficult work of sitting with it, examining it, discerning what of it belongs to us and what needs to be released. It's doing the hard work of listening to our grief and hearing how we are being invited to heal.

Whew... talk about vulnerability. Nobody wants to do that. Because... what if we're left there all alone in our pain? What if we learn life is just hard?

This is where the psalm's promise matters: the promise is that, when we sow our tears in faith, God too will be faithful to bring about a harvest of joy.

God doesn't leave us in our pain. God doesn't ignore our grief, our worry, our pain.

Rather, God is present to us, honoring our pain. Can we trust that? Can we choose to be vulnerable with God as we approach Christmas?

God turns the planing of tears into a harvest of joy. What will God do with your pain?

God turned slavery into liberation. What will God do with your pain?

God turned exile into homecoming. What will God do with your pain?

God turned crucifixion into new life. What will God do with your pain?

## Communion + Examen

God reminds us that he too knows the planting of tears to harvest the joy of resurrection.

What are you hopeful for as we approach Christmas?

What pain, fear or anxiety have kept me from God or others this season?

What does spiritual vulnerability look like for me this week?

How can I invite God to shape my hope in this next week?

## Assignment + Blessing