

Welcome.

Remember back in COVID when a bunch of celebrities recorded themselves singing “Imagine” by Jon Lennon as a way to... well no one is really sure, exactly. Encourage everyone, I guess?

Well “Do They Know it’s Christmas” was the OG terrible celebrity idea. It was written in just a few days in 1984 by a couple of songwriters in the UK as a way to raise money for a famine that had struck Ethiopia. They roped in a bunch of musical celebrities like Bono and David Bowie to perform the song and... it was a hit.

It raised *millions* of dollars for charitable aid. It’s been remade at least twice for other global crises (like the Ebola outbreak in 2014).

But you know who doesn’t love the song? A lot of Africans.

Because yeah... they know it’s Christmas. In fact, Ethiopia specifically knew it was Christmas way before anyone in the UK did - Ethiopia is the center of one of the most ancient forms of Christianity - Ethiopian Orthodoxy, which was founded by the eunuch baptized by the apostle Philip in the book of Acts.

And even before that, Ethiopia was a center for God’s people, going all the way back to King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba (Sheba being modern day Ethiopia). In fact, the Ethiopian Orthodox church claims to be in possession of the Ark of the Covenant, which they received from Jerusalem for safe-keeping right before the Babylonians destroyed the city in the Exile.

So all that to say, Yeah... Ethiopians know it’s Christmas.

This song points to how the sentimentality of Christmas can encourage the worst impulses in us - our ethnocentrism and self-centeredness. And that same impulse that moves us to charity in this season can turn into an ugly, colonialist paternalism.

We know that’s the exact opposite of what the Christmas story means. So today, we’re going to reject the sentimentality of songs like “Do They Know it’s Christmas?” in favor of the news that’s truly good not just for us, but for the whole world.

Jesus is here, and he brings peace, love and hope for all of us.

Message

Today is the Seventh day of Christmas. We've just passed the halfway point in our Christmas feast, celebrating Jesus' arrival in our world and our confidence that he's returning one day. During Advent, prepared by considering our faith, how God's goodness and trustworthiness enables us to celebrate Jesus' coming into the world not as an escape from pain and injustice, but as a pathway to engage that injustice with love and hope.

Now it's Christmastime. Jesus has arrived. And his arrival on that first Christmas all those years ago is proof we can trust he isn't done with us. So today we gather not just to look backwards, but to look ahead. To face all the evil, injustice, pain and despair in the world and announce with confidence that Sin and death don't get the last word.

Our series has been called WORST CHRISTMAS SONGS EVER. We took 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've discovered these songs have been an invitation to prepare our own spirits for the Christmas celebration.

So today we concluded our corporate Christmas celebration with a big, sprawling vision what Christmas is for. Last Sunday, when we gathered to celebrate Christmas Eve, we heard the angels announce, "Peace on earth and good news to all people."

Christmas is for the whole world.

Turn with us to Psalm 148.

It's appropriate in a series about songs that we would hang out in the Psalms, which are the songbook of God's people. Psalm 148 is near the end of the songbook - there're 150 psalms total. And the last five, appropriately, are dedicated to a simple concept: praise.

But what does that word mean?

What comes to your mind when you hear the word 'praise'? Our English word derives from the Latin 'to prize'. So when you're praising something or someone, you're rightly appraising (hear it?) their value.

The Hebrew word is one you already know - hallelujah. It's a singular word in the Hebrew that translates roughly to "Sing a song that praises Yahweh".

So as we read this psalm, pay attention to how many times Hallelujah shows up:

**Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD from the heavens! Praise him from the skies!
Praise him, all his angels! Praise him, all the armies of heaven!**

Praise him, sun and moon! Praise him, all you twinkling stars! Praise him, skies above! Praise him, vapors high above the clouds!

Let every created thing give praise to the LORD, for he issued his command, and they came into being. He set them in place forever and ever.

His decree will never be revoked.

Praise the LORD from the earth, you creatures of the ocean depths,
Fire and hail, snow and clouds, wind and weather that obey him,
Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars,
Wild animals and all livestock, small scurrying animals and birds,
kings of the earth and all people, rulers and judges of the earth, young men and young women,
old men and children.

Let them all praise the name of the LORD.

For his name is very great; his glory towers over the earth and heaven!

He has made his people strong, honoring his faithful ones— the people of Israel who are close to him.

Praise the LORD! — Psalm 148

Over and over and over and over... Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Praise God, praise God, praise God!

Specifically the song is commanding us to evaluate God rightly - as the one, true creator of the universe. The one true king of our world. The one, true standard by which to measure goodness, majesty and love.

And I think it matters that wrapped up in the Hallelujah command is a *song*. Singing shapes our imagination. Songs get stuck in our heads, wrapped around our spirits. (It's why it's so important we choose good songs.)

So let's sing some more songs! Let's practice celebrating God as our rightful creator and king, our one good and loving God!

Song

Songs are one of the most basic ways we form our imaginations toward God - it's why singing together has been part of how God's people worship since... basically forever.

And it's why "Do They Know it's Christmas" is such a bad song. Obviously, the song is in poor taste. Some might argue that the fact that it raised so much money gives it a pass.

But if songs have such power to shape our imaginations, should a song like "Do They Know it's Christmas?" really get a pass? The song reinforces a colonialist perspective on the world, where Jesus (and the celebration of his birth) belongs exclusively to Europeans.

But as we've already seen, many Africans - particularly in the East - knew the good news about Jesus long before Europeans.

How strange that songwriters who live in the center of what we call Christendom, songwriters who set out to write a 'Christmas' song - which indicates they're certainly familiar with the myriad other Christmas songs like "Joy to the *World*" - how strange these writers could yet pen a song that's so Euro-centric.

Beyond that, the song betrays a deeply anti-Christ sentiment. Consider the line, "Well tonight thank God it's them instead of you."

This line encapsulates the worst kinds of charity. Charity used to mean simply 'love' - it was the purest form of Jesus' life we could imagine. But today, it's become 'giving to the poor'. In this song - which was done for charity, remember, there's a sharp divide between us (the wealthy white Christians celebrating Christmas) and them (the poor Africans who probably haven't heard of Christmas). And not only is there a divide, but the song encourages us to thank God we are not in the worse position.

Could anything be further from the message of Christmas, where we celebrate that Jesus is the one who left heaven and crossed the uncrossable gap to literally become one of us poor wretches walking in darkness?

Praise be to God that we have such better Christmas music than this - songs that affirm we are all one human family, all with the same need of a savior.

As the psalmist commands - God is for everyone. We *all* sing praises to God:

Kings of the earth and all people, rulers and judges of the earth, young men and young women, old men and children.

Let them all praise the name of the LORD.

Did we leave anyone out?

Communion + Examen

Jesus' table is for everyone

How has Jesus been present to me in 2023?

Where have I resisted God's call this year?

How is God inviting me to begin 2024?

What spiritual practice is God encouraging me to focus on in 2024?