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Dear Friends,

We are entering the only season in which everyone seems to play and listen to religious music. On the radio, in malls and stores, probably even in elevators, from mid November until the end of December one hears vocal or instrumental versions of songs most of us have known from early childhood.

It is the only time all year when the great divide which separates our culture from the Christian faith is flagrantly ignored. And the music of the season plays a major (and, I suppose, sometimes a minor) role in that temporary realignment.

**Words, music, and memory** And it is not just the music, but the words and music together. For most of us there are few Christmas classics which have no words associated with them. Words and music together are something different than either of them by themselves. A hymn sinks in deeper, and is more strongly rooted in our memory and consciousness, than just about anything that we say or hear. I would be hard-pressed to offer a verbatim repetition of anything that I have ever preached on Christmas Eve, but I can sing most of the hymns and carols—and often more than just the first verse—with very little effort at all. And when an editor goes about to change the words, I notice, and rarely with delight, at once.

On Christmas Day we go caroling at Bergen Regional Medical Center shortly after the morning Eucharist at St. Elizabeth's. (We leave from the parking lot at 11:30 am, and prior attendance at the service is not required.) Often we sing to patients who are well on their way to making the transition from this life to the life to come—there are often people in the room whose connection with their immediate environment seems tenuous—eye contact is rare, and it is not clear even how much of what is happening is accessible to them.

Until we start to sing “Silent Night.” That carol, more than almost anything else that we offer, seems to make its way through whatever doors have closed between the outer world and the inner person of the patients in that room. Patients hitherto seemingly not tracking begin to mouth the words or even sing along. Sometimes they sing, not in English but the language of a childhood lived long ago and far away. Often they smile, sometimes with closed eyes, and occasionally they sway to the music or move their hands almost as if they were conducting an orchestra and choir that they see before them. At that moment a hymn about silence becomes the light in the darkness.

Of course, I cannot promise that this scene will be repeated this year, but I invite you to join us and make the offering yourself. Few things seem to be able to make their way through whatever barriers have been erected by age, deterioration of nerve cells, and what we used to call the hardening of the arteries as effectively as Christmas music. And perhaps that is because, as one carol observes, “where meek souls will receive him, still the dear Christ enters in.”<sup>1</sup>

**The power and gift of transformation** We sing many elements of our liturgy—throughout the year—because by singing, the words and the music become more fully part of who we are. What we sing seems to go in much more deeply than what we hear or even what we speak. And one of the core purposes of coming to church is so that the word of Christ may dwell in us richly (see Paul’s observation to the Colossians (3:16)). Paul goes on in that same verse to say that the way to have that word deeply rooted in our consciousness is to continue to sing together “psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.”

We sing for our spiritual growth, as individuals and as a community, not to perform for others. Singing is not a break from hearing scripture, praying, and reflecting on the word of God, but it is another way of opening ourselves to the working of the Holy Spirit so that our hearts might be transformed and our lives renewed.

When the choir sings, they make an offering to God; they are not performing for the congregation. That act of offering usually occurs simultaneously with the congregation in the pews placing in the collection plates their financial offerings. And so the choir’s singing reminds us that we offer not just our money, but our best efforts at beauty and harmony to God. Our custom of not applauding derives from that sense that the offering is to God, not to us. To show your appreciation, join in the singing of the next musical portion of the liturgy.

**What are we uploading?** Part of what makes the singing of our Cherub, Junior, and Youth Choirs such a blessing is that we get to watch them growing in their spiritual lives right before our eyes. Words, phrases, and tunes learned in childhood stay with us, and shape us, for all our lives. So along with all of the other stuff which gets loaded into our young people by the culture, we do a good thing when we ensure that there is something good and holy going in too. I hope they will all grow up always knowing that with God they are “no more a stranger or a guest, but like a child at home.” That is, of course, the final line of Hymn 664, “My Shepherd will supply my need,” a metrical setting of the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm.

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<sup>1</sup> Hymn 79, “O little town of Bethlehem, stanza 3. This text was written by Phillips Brooks on the occasion of a visit he made to the Holy Land right after the American Civil War. Brooks served as the rector of an Episcopal parish in Philadelphia, then as the rector of Trinity Church, Copley Square in Boston, and finished his life as the Episcopal Bishop of Massachusetts.

I hope that within everyone in our congregation the words of “O God, our help in ages past” (Hymn 680, based on Psalm 90:1-5) would richly dwell. It is a great text which is honest about the transient brevity of human life (“Time like an ever-rolling stream, bears all our years away; they fly forgotten, as a dream dies at the opening day.”) and places that brevity within the context of God’s eternal being (“Before the hills in order stood, or earth received her frame, from everlasting thou art God, to endless years the same.) And in the final stanza, the text brings the themes together, looking back to our history, looking ahead to our future, and then beyond to all eternity: “O God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come, be thou our guide while life shall last, and our eternal home.” Speaking to a fourth grader about these themes and ideas is unlikely to make much of an impact. But when they sing these words, the words and ideas go deep within their—and our—consciousness, take root, and then over the years grow with growing intellectual abilities, and become integrated into our identity. That God is our help and our destination becomes not so much an idea that we entertain, but core elements of the way we look at ourselves, our lives, and our entire world.

And, of course, this process is not limited to children. We know that for all of us racial and ethnic stereotypes in the media shape our attitudes towards others. We know that repeated exposure in the media to graphic, soundtrack-enhanced violence, depersonalized and heavily edited sexual behavior, and language that draws from and goes with those behaviors distorts, misrepresents, and coarsens the lives of individuals and whole communities. For ideas and images repeated often and compellingly begin to seem plausible regardless of their actual content. Not everyone in Germany in 1930 believed what most had come to accept as obvious by 1940. What begins as a big lie becomes, through unchallenged repetition, common knowledge.

Excluding or, to use another word, censoring, what is corrupting is a complicated and difficult process which contains many dangerous elements of its own. Censorship, especially on a public level, rarely works.

**We become what we sing** But we can promote our own spiritual health by making the same sort of basic choices we do for our physical well being. If we get our hands dirty, we wash them. We try to avoid places of obvious contamination. If something in the refrigerator goes bad, we throw it out. We clean up not because someone told us to and not because we are control freaks, but because we know from education, observation, and personal experience that if we do not take some basic precautions, the various germs, viruses, and toxic substances in our environment will make us sick. And we try to stay healthy by taking positive steps to strengthen our resistance: good nutrition, exercise, sleep, attention to what causes stress, and getting checked up from time to time.

Singing in church—canticles as well as hymns—is part of maintaining a healthy spiritual diet. Not everything that we eat is for our immediate pleasure. And similarly, what we sing in church is not chosen primarily to amuse or entertain, but rather to nurture. Some offerings are delightful and elaborate, some are more routine, and some are outright challenging. Adult tastes sometimes take time, experience, and the willingness to try something new in order to develop. If there is a dish we find challenging, we do not give up eating in general. Our spirits need to sing like our bodies need to eat.

I suspect that in Advent and Christmas, more than in most seasons, much of what we sing in church will be familiar to most of us. Think of how much your experience of Christmas is linked to music. Now imagine what Christmas would be for you without any of that—no “Silent night,” no “Hark,

the herald angels sing,” no “O come, all ye faithful,” no “O little town of Bethlehem.” And, of course, this list could be much longer.

Now think what you would be like if that same power which shapes your experience of Christmas were equally shaping your sense of what guides us day to day through life, what happens to us and to those we love when this life is over, what a life of justice and generosity looks like, where we find direction when things go well, and comfort when they go badly. That is, imagine having associations and words for all of those issues that are as strong, as clear, and as readily available to you as are the carols of Christmas.

The purpose of singing in church is to give each of us that wide range of deeply rooted resources—not tucked away in a book to consult, not from a phone call to a clergyperson, not from a conversation with a counselor or mentor, but already fully integrated into the deepest elements of our sense of self and our view of the world.

**Extending the best of the season** Most Christmases I hear someone wistfully remark that they wish that the best elements of the season could extend throughout the year. I sometimes feel that myself. I think the music we sing together—the hymns and canticles, and even the Great Litany—has the potential to extend that sense of holy joy and deep comfort throughout the year.

So come and sing this season, and as we move from Advent to Christmas, and then from Christmas to Epiphany, keep singing. God was not absent from the world before the first Christmas—God was here from the Beginning and will be here until the End. But God came in the person of Jesus to change everything from that time forward—not to create a holiday to which we could look back every year, but to offer a different way to live, to understand the world, and to look beyond, and not just for a day or a season, but for all our years. We enter into the joy, the peace, and the holiness of that season which is the beginning of a new trajectory of all seasons when we let that music into our hearts richly to dwell there now and for ever.

So if this season you hear Christmas music in the mall, in a store, or even in an elevator, I invite you to hear it as an invitation to come to church and to join in singing this music within the context which gives it its full depth and meaning. And then when in the rest of the world the music reverts to its pre-holiday mode, stay with us, keep on singing, and continue the journey.

The Rev. Canon John G. Hartnett