

Blogging toward Christmas

By [Thomas R. Steagald](#)

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Those of you who are preachers: are you working on your Sunday sermon yet? We didn't think so. Perhaps you'll find this extra lectionary post helpful in planning those other little services you have to worry about first—it's based on the Nativity readings. The writer is Tom Steagald, who will be taking us through the seasons of Christmas and Epiphany. He'll be back tomorrow to blog us on toward Sunday. —Ed.

Nativity of the Lord, Proper III

[Isaiah 52:7-10](#); [John 1:1-14](#); [Hebrews 1:1-12](#)

The Anglicans of John Wesley's day maligned him as an enthusiast. He dismissed their charge, but in fact song and praise were so central to the Methodist revival that Wesley himself enjoined his followers not to "bawl." In our own day, many of us Methodists—like other mainliners—have forgotten how to sing, distrusting or even disdaining self-forgetful praise. (The irony is breathtaking!)

It's even tougher at this time of year.

Every 12 months we lectionary types spend four weeks in the liturgical wilderness of Advent waiting for a reason to sing. But we've heard the good news so many times that it isn't really *news* at all. And modern voices are rarely tuned for genuine praise, whether it be at the announcements of the first angels, the words of the fourth evangelist or the sermon offerings of tired-from-the-holidays preachers. Even in the best of times, we don't sing much anymore—not old songs, not new songs, not any songs that have God as their subject and God's work as their object.

Doxology is difficult for the detached and analytical; it's really hard to sing with your fingers crossed. Our skepticism affects the vocal cords and pinches the nerve of praise. We find it safer to reflect on others' experiences, to interpret biblical praise in its original context, to explore the historical and sociopolitical development of Israel's convictions regarding the Christ.

Our hermeneutic of doubt allows us to understand how past generations invested Jesus' birth with theological significance without having to make a call ourselves. We get it, in other words, but we will not be gotten. We posit the truth of the gospel but refuse to hold the baby.

Yes, the narrative is interesting, and worthy of more thought and due consideration. But singing about it? Isaiah sees and hears beautiful-footed messengers urging even the ruins of Jerusalem to strike up the band. The gospel lesson is a *hymn*, for Christ's sake! But many of us demur.

This year we find our throats even drier. Our current wilderness is not only liturgical but economic, the dust in our throats the ashes of retirement funds. The ends of the earth may see God's victory in the collapse of empire, but we who have benefited from the "good times" of U.S. financial ascendancy are less able to sing than ever.

We like to consider ourselves God's people, but the Magnificat's promises—the mighty humiliated, the rich sent away hungry—put us on the wrong side of Bethlehem's tracks. Now that the mountains are brought low, can we sing the Lord's song?

Perhaps. We too are waiting for God to comfort the people, to restore the fortunes of the ruined. This Christmas season is rich with that prophetic possibility that God's restoration will come in a way we would never expect and could easily miss. The steadfast love of the Lord, if we have eyes to see it, can give us voices to sing praise to the Lord who announces salvation to ruined cities and people.