

Every good social movement has a song. Back in the nineteenth century, there were songs for the abolition movement: "Oh Freedom," "Go Down, Moses," and "No More Auction Block for Me." In the labor movement of the twentieth century, the United Mine Worker's had their song, "Step By Step," and Woody Guthrie wrote "Talking Union." The Civil Rights movement was one long church service. They had the old spirituals and they had their own national anthem, "Lift Every Voice and Sing." Keeping up the tradition, the anti-war movement was fueled by songs as well as by illegal substances: Dylan's "Blowin' in the Wind" and Seeger's "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?" And where would the women's movement be without Helen Reddy singing, "I am woman"?

Whenever people are in peril, wherever they gather to protest, their cries come out as songs. We have 150 of them in the Book of Psalms. It must be something that is inside of us.

After I went to the doctor last week, I started working on my own song. I called it "Shingle Bells." So, I have no doubt that there is a song for every struggle and a hymn for every journey home.

The book of Zephaniah reads like the lyrics of a protest song. Zephaniah is protesting rampant corruption in the kingdom of Judah. Like a Joan Baez, he calls them out: the officials are roaring lions; the judges are wolves. The prophets are faithless and reckless. The priests are profane. And because the rulers are rotten, the people are running away, going after other gods, putting their trust in other places.

In 2600 years, not that much has changed. We fight many of the same evils today, which is why every generation needs its own protest songs. I wish all our 2016 presidential candidates would read the Book of Zephaniah, because most of the book is a warning that the day of the Lord is near; the judgment is coming. And in Chapter Three, verses 12 and 13,

we read that the only ones who will be left to tell about it are the humble and lowly, the ones who seek refuge in God, who do no wrong and utter no lies. You know what that means: unless a miracle happens, there will be no politicians in heaven!

But as for the righteous, it will be time for singing. The book that starts out with a protest song ends with a praise song. From our reading today: "Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel!" But it isn't only the people who are singing. Notice that God is singing, too. And God's song is a love song: "he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing...." In these last verses, God is falling in love with the people all over again. "At that time, I will bring you home...I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth...."

God is forever falling in love with us, and deep down, we want to go home to God. We're just having trouble getting there. Working too hard at the office, fighting too much with

our spouse, worrying about our kids, stressing about our finances, caring for elderly parents, nursing an addiction, coping with grief, dealing with depression, living with chronic illness, grieving the loss of friends: there are a lot of things that get in the way of letting God bring us home. Maybe it would help if we had a song, a song that would get us through the struggle and help us stay focused on the journey so that we can get home.

We probably all have a favorite Christmas carol that stirs up our longing for home. My favorite used to be "O come, O come Emmanuel and ransom captive Israel that mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear." Moving a lot and living all over the country, I could relate to that feeling of being in exile and wanting to be home or to have a home. But now that I think about it, there is something too passive about this hymn, something that suggests that all we can do is wait for Christ to come and lead us home.

The problem is that we're not getting any younger, the world is not getting any saner, and just waiting is getting harder. We can't just sit in lonely exile. If we want to get home, we'd better get on the journey. So my new favorite Christmas song is the one we sing on Christmas Eve: "O come, all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant, O come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem." In other words, get up and move, make an effort. You have to come, if you want to behold him, "born the King of angels..."

But what if we can't all come? What about the ones who are left out there, not able to or not knowing how to come home? How can we convince them to come along?

As I look back on it, it seems to me that the journey we've been on this year is a journey of helping others get home, home to shelter, home to community, home to God. So this season I've been singing another song, one that isn't in our hymnals: Good King Wenceslas. I've been singing it because, of

all the Christmas carols I know, it gives me an idea about what to do for the people who need help getting home.

First let me tell you about good old King Wenceslas. He was really a Duke who lived in the tenth century in Bohemia. His father was Christian. His mother was the daughter of a pagan tribal chief. When his father died, his mother became regent in his place, but his saintly Christian grandmother took over his education and upbringing. That made his mother so mad that she arranged to have her mother-in-law strangled.

So when Wenceslas was old enough to take over the reigns of government, he sent his murderous mother into exile. As Duke, Wenceslas was a pious, humble, well-educated leader who by all accounts worked to improve the religious and cultural life of his people. But his foreign policy didn't set well with a group of pagan nobles allied with his younger brother. So they murdered him.

Wenceslas was immediately hailed a martyr and a saint and a cult of devotion grew up around his memory. His brother had his relics transferred to a church in Prague and not long after that, the pope bestowed on the dead duke the title of "king." He became the patron saint of the Czech people.

Now the story we sing about him in the carol was written in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by an Englishman, John Neale. It's a fictional story, more or less in line with the ancient stories that were told about him, about how he would get up from his bed every night and go out in his bare feet to all the churches around and give alms to the widows and orphans and those in prison.

In our carol, Wenceslas and his page set out to bring a feast to a poor man living on the edge of the forest. But it is cold. The snow is deep and a bitter wind is blowing. When the page gets tired and can't go any further, the good king tells him to walk in his footsteps and the way will be easier for him.

The moral of the story is found in the last verse: if you bless the poor, you yourself will find blessing.

Wenceslas is the archetype of the good king, the one we are always looking for, and the one I'm afraid we will never get to vote for. But we don't need to. We already have a good Lord and we are already learning to walk in his footsteps. And that makes our own journeys so much easier.

Nineteenth-century critics of this carol complained that the tune, which was originally for a song about spring, was too upbeat and joyful for such a somber theme. But those critics don't know what we know about becoming friends with the poor on the journey. When we reach out to help them get home, it is a joy. When we bring them along, we can't help but break out in song. So let's sing: Good King Wenceslas.