

“Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming”

Isaiah 11:1; Song of Songs 2:1-2; Philippians 2:6-7

Rev. Nollie Malabuyo • December 9, 2018

Dear Congregation of Christ: Today is the second Sunday of the Advent season. This season, the month of December, I'm preaching on the great songs of Christmas, and how they faithfully use the Bible as their reference. Last week, we studied “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel,” a great ancient hymn rich in Old and New Testament references to the names, person and work of Jesus.

I also mentioned that many of the Christmas songs that are sung in churches are sentimental like “O Little Town of Bethlehem; narrative like “Once in Royal David's City,” and folksy like “Away in a Manger.” Very few of these songs tell us about the doctrine of God assuming human form, or why God sent the Son of God to earth, or the prophets foretelling the coming of the Messiah. Instead, they are mere retelling the birth story, and even in this retelling, they can't get it right. In “The First Noel,” we sing a combination of shepherds, a star and wise men coming to the manger, which is impossible. In “We Three Kings,” the wise men become “kings,” and the Bible says that there were three gifts, not three kings. And does it really snow in Bethlehem in “See Amid the Winter's Snow”? We are better served when we listen to Handel's Messiah, an oratorio based *entirely* on Scripture texts.

And make no mistake about this: All non-Christian “happy holiday” songs have nothing to do with the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ to save his people from their sins. These songs are about merrymaking to tame the long, bleak, dark nights of winter. When we lived in Anchorage, we enjoyed cross-country skiing, sledding, saw snow sculptures in the park, and other activities. Still, life was a struggle in a place where we had cold, snowy days seven to eight months a year.

So today, I chose the hymn, “Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming.” Though it is unknown to most of us, we will try to learn how to sing this beautiful hymn today. This hymn was originally published in Germany in the 1590s by an unknown Roman Catholic hymnwriter. Being Roman Catholic, the writer focused on Mary, whom the hymnwriter praises as the “rose of Sharon” in Song of Songs 2:1, *“I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys.”* This is a wrong interpretation of this verse. Why?

The Song of Songs is a love song between a husband and wife. Why would God include a love song in his Word? Because the Bible is centered on the Person and Work of Christ, and this song is a type of the beautiful, loving relationship between Christ and the Church. The Old Testament often refers to God as a Husband to his people (Jer 31:32), while the New Testament often refers to Christ as the Bridegroom and the Church as his Bride (Eph 5:25; Rev 19:7).

In this verse, the wife is the one speaking. As a type of the Church, she states her love to her husband, a type of Christ. She humbly speaks of herself as a common rose or lily in a valley full of other flowers. Sharon is the name of a plain on the northwestern part of present-day Israel (Isa 35:2). Therefore, the “rose of Sharon” and the “lily of the valleys” in Song of Solomon 2:1 cannot refer to

Mary. So, Protestants changed the focus of the hymn from Mary to Jesus. Later, many pastors interpreted the rose of Sharon as a picture of Christ.¹ Some hymns were even written extolling Christ as “the Rose of Sharon” and “the lily of the valley.”

However, this interpretation is not convincing. Since it is the wife, not the husband, who’s speaking in Song of Songs 2:1, I’m persuaded that the “Rose” of this song refers to the Bride of Christ, the Church.² In fact, in the next verse, the husband responds in adoration of her beauty as “a lily among thorns.” If the Song of Songs is a picture of the love between Christ and the Church, then the “rose of Sharon” is a picture of the Church. So I will ignore the hymn’s references to Christ as “the Rose of Sharon.”

Let us now reflect on the words of the song in three points, based on this interpretation: **first, A Rose from David; second, A Rose Saved from Sin; and third, A Rose from the God-Man.**

A Rose from David

Most of today’s versions consist of three verses. The first stanza says,

*Lo, how a Rose e'er blooming
From tender stem hath sprung!
Of Jesse's lineage coming
As men of old have sung.
It came, a flower bright,
Amid the cold of winter
When half-gone was the night.*

The hymn refers to the prophecy in Isaiah 11:1 of the coming Messiah, “*There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.*” But he correctly says that Jesse represents Israel as he is the father of King David. Because of their rebellion against God, God punished Israel by sending the Babylonians to conquer Israel, destroy the temple in Jerusalem, and sending the people into exile. That’s why Jesse’s tree has become just a mere stump.³

In the Old Testament, the prophets foretold of a Son of David who would be the Messiah or the Christ. When God made a covenant with King David, he promised to David that his son Solomon would build the temple, and Solomon “*shall be to me a son*” (2 Sam 7:13-14). But the writer of Hebrews re-interprets this passage, applying it to Christ. Our text in Isaiah 11:1 is clear that the “stump of Jesse” is Christ because in the following verses, 2-5, this Branch of Jesse will be Spirit-filled and reign in justice and righteousness. Jeremiah 23:5 also says, “*I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.*”

¹ So Matthew Henry’s *Complete Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 1708-10.

² Craig S. Keener, “Who is the Rose of Sharon, the Lily of the Valley? — Song of Solomon 2:1-2.” 8/22/2011. <https://www.craigkeener.com/who-is-the-rose-of-sharon-the-lily-of-the-valley-%e2%80%94-song-of-solomon-21-2/>.

³ See “5 Reasons Why ‘Christmas is Pagan’ is a Myth” for the different dates proposed when Jesus was born. <http://www.twoagespilgrims.com/doctrine/5-reasons-why-christmas-is-pagan-is-a-myth/>.

Therefore, Jesus was often called the Son of David in the New Testament. In the genealogy of Matthew 1, Jesus is called “the Son of David.” Zechariah, the father of John the Baptizer, prophesied that the Child to be born of Mary will be called “*the Son of the Most High*” and will inherit the throne of his father David (Luke 1:32). Jesus himself attests that the Old Testament says that Christ will be a Son of David of Bethlehem (John 7:42). Therefore, many of the sick whom Jesus healed called him the Son of David.

When Jesus entered Jerusalem before he was crucified, the people acclaimed him, “*Hosanna to the Son of David!*” (Matt 21:15) The Hebrew word “hosanna” is an appeal, “O save!” Therefore, the people were appealing to Jesus as their Savior.

A Rose Saved from Sin

The second stanza then reveals that a Savior will be born of Mary, a virgin woman:

*Isaiab 'twas foretold it,
The Rose I have in mind:
With Mary we behold it,
The virgin mother kind.
To show God's love aright
She bore to men a Savior
When half-gone was the night.*

Jesus was born of Mary to “*save his people from their sins*” (Matt 1:21). Mary was a “virgin,” a woman who had no sexual relationship with her husband Joseph until after she gave birth to Jesus (Matt 1:25). The Holy Spirit did what was “impossible” to man: creating a human being without the union of a man and a woman (Luke 1:37).

The angel who visited Joseph told him that the name of the child would be *Iesous*, the Greek name for “Jesus.” This name comes from *Yehoshua*, or “Joshua,” which means Yahweh, the LORD, saves. In what ways does Jesus save his people from their sins? In two ways: in *justification* and in *sanctification*, two big words that are the foundations of the doctrine of salvation (1 Cor 6:11).

Scriptures say that those who have faith in Christ alone as Savior are justified before God. No one is justified by doing good works such as going to church, being baptized, giving alms, or going to pilgrimages. But good works such as these are the fruits of faith in Christ. And no one is justified by faith in someone or something else, such as the Jesus of other religions, Buddha or Allah. No one is justified by having mere faith, like most people speak today, a faith that does not rest in Christ. By faith alone in Christ alone, God declares us righteous or *justified* before him in his heavenly court.

Second, Jesus saves his people from the power of sin and the devil. The devil is the tempter, and the Holy Spirit gives us new hearts and new minds to empower us to resist and flee from sin. In this way, he enables us to live holy and righteous lives. This is what *sanctification* means (Gal 5:16; Heb 10:14). This is why Hebrews 2:14 says that Jesus destroyed the devil’s power of sin and death through his own sacrificial death.

Lastly, whom does Jesus save from sin? It is “*his people*,” not all people, but a particular group of people, “*I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours*” (John 17:9). When he died on the cross, he died for “*our sins*” (1 Pet 2:24). When he gave his life, he gave it for “*his sheep*” (John 10:11). When his blood was shed on the cross, it was for “*the church*” (Acts 20:28).

A Rose from the God-Man

In the third stanza, the hymnwriter affirms that Jesus was true man and true God:

*This Flower, whose fragrance tender
With sweetness fills the air,
Dispels with glorious splendor
The darkness everywhere.
True man, yet very God,
From sin and death He saves us
And lightens every load.*

He is true Man because he was born of a true human mother. We read in John 1:1 that in eternity, the Word was already with God. Who was this Word? Verse 14 of John 1 answers, “*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us... the only Son from the Father.*” So the apostle Paul says in Philippians 2:6-7 that this Christ, the Son of God, came down from heaven, assuming human form, “*taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.*” He was true man in every respect, suffered temptations like all human beings, yet was sinless (Heb 2:14; 4:15).

He is also true God because he was conceived by God the Holy Spirit. Therefore, all throughout the Bible, he is referred to as God, and not just a good teacher or a prophet. In Isaiah 9:6, we read of the prophecy of a child being born, whose names will be “*Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*” In John 20:28, the apostle Thomas called him, “*My Lord and my God!*” In Titus 2:13, Paul calls Jesus “*our great God and Savior.*” And in Revelation 1:8, Jesus says, “*I am the Alpha and the Omega... the Lord God... the Almighty.*” Therefore, no one who denies that Jesus is both true God and true man in one Person can be a true Christian (1 John 2:22; 4:2).

Jesus is also described as having “*fragrance tender.*” The sacrifice of Jesus is described by the apostle Paul in Ephesians 5:2 as “*a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God,*” just as Noah’s burnt sacrifice after the flood was “*the aroma of a sacrifice pleasing to God*” (Gen 8:21). To offer himself as a sacrifice for sin is the reason why he came down from heaven to assume human form. Why did he have to be a true human being and die on the cross for sins? Because it is man who sinned, and therefore, a man has to pay for human sins. Why a bloody death on the cross? Because the penalty for sin is death (Gen 2:17; Rom 6:23), and atonement for sin is only through bloody sacrifices (Heb 9:22).

But these were only types and shadows of Jesus’ atoning sacrifice on the cross. His sacrifice was a once-for-all event, never to be repeated, because it atoned for all the sins of all his people (Heb 10:14). His sacrifice is a fulfillment of all the animal sacrifices in the Old Testament. How can one man’s atoning sacrifice cover these multitudes of sins of multitudes of people? Because Jesus Christ

is also infinite God, so his sacrifice has infinite and eternal value. In John 1:29, John the Baptizer declared the infinite value of his offering, *“Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”* Hebrews 10:14 explains its eternal value, *“For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.”*

Beloved friends: In Luke 2:9, on the dark night when Jesus was born, *“the glory of the Lord shone around”* the shepherds in the field. And the heavenly angels sang in verse 14, *“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”* This is why the hymnwriter wrote that Christ *“dispels with glorious splendor the darkness everywhere.”* Jesus came as the Light of the world (John 8:12), bringing the light of righteousness into a dark world of sin and death (Eph 5:8).

So the hymnwriter invites all people to come to Christ with repentant and believing hearts, because he *“lightens every load.”* Let us remember, not just every Advent season but always, that Christ invites everyone to be a member of Christ’s Bride, the *“rose e’er blooming,”* and rest on his grace and mercy:

“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matt 11:28-29).