

## **Unto Us**

Rev. John Allen

I think just about everyone has some song that is indelibly linked with the Christmas of their childhood.

Some song that when you hear it you are transported to Christmas past.

For me, it came of an album that was in regular rotation in our house, sung by a group called the Roches.

And the song that I can never get out of my head is their version of “For Unto Us a Child is Born” from Handel’s Messiah.

*/sing/* For unto us a child is born. Unto us. A son is given. Unto us a son is given. And the government shall be upon his shoulders... /

Whenever I hear that song, I feel like I am back in our living room on Laurel Drive, with the advent wreath burning on the window sill, and the Christmas tree shining in the corner.

It's amazing the way that music can connect us to our memories.

It is also amazing the way that music shapes our experience of scripture. Because now I am incapable of reading these words from Isaiah without hearing them set to music.

Which is why it wasn't until I heard my seminary professor read this text that I realized the words "wonderful" and "consoler" went together

I was in seminary before I realized that Wonderful and Consoler went together.

*/sing/* Wonderful. Counselor. The mighty God. The everlasting Father. The Prince of Peace.

But, adjectives notwithstanding, the one phrase from this text that always stood out to me, even way back when I was a kid, were the words “unto us.”

Just like I always found it odd that the angel announced to the shepherds. “Unto you is born this day a savior.”

The idea that this child, Mary’s child, this one little kid, fussing in a manger, sleeping beside animals in a barn, was born, for us. For all of us.

It’s quite a gift!

And it pulls you and me right into the middle of the ancient story. Over 2,000 years ago, a baby was born in a backwater town called Bethlehem. And that baby, was God’s gift. To you.

The child, Mary's child, the one of whom the angels sang. God's gift.  
To you.

The one who sent wise-ones on a journey halfway across the world,  
following the light of a distant star, the promised one. God's gift. To  
you.

Which sounds really lovely. And it is.

But have you ever gotten a gift that ended up being a lot of work?

Like a really temperamental houseplant, or a home-brewing kit, or a  
puppy, or any kind of pet.

It's really exciting in the moment. Such a big exciting gift. But slowly it  
starts to set in just how much work from you this gift is going to  
require.

That is the kind of gift we are getting in Jesus.

Did you hear what the prophet Isaiah foretold. What kind of child this would be who has been born unto us?

I mean, even a regular baby would disrupt our normal routines.

Never-mind this one one who is prophesied to tear town tyrants from their thrones, shatter the yoke of oppression, and use the weapons of war as fuel for a celebratory bonfire.

A child who Isaiah says will become our new wonderful counselor, who will take the governance of the world unto himself.

Oh, and his reign, it will never, ever, end.

It might be enough to send us scrambling for a gift receipt.

These prophecies from Isaiah are such an important compliment to the Christmas Story, because whatever our sweet and tender images

are of a gentle newborn dozing in the manger, the prophet is here to remind us that God coming into the world as a child is a dramatic cosmic event set to reorder everything.

Now, I'll confess, sometimes it's hard for me to encounter this power at the heart of the Christmas story. Because, what usually happens in this season is I put on the Roches, turn up the volume, and am transported back to some idealized memory of Christmas past, a charmed childhood, a glistening tree.

For many others, the familiar sights and sounds of this season bring forward less welcome memories. Memories of loss. A stark realization of who is not here this year. Or a holiday that never quite seems to live up to our expectations.

This time of the year is nothing if not potent. It has the power to lift our spirits higher than almost any other time of the year. But it also can be uniquely fraught with sadness.

Which is why it would be a mistake to celebrate Christmas exclusively with nostalgia.

Because while the beauty of Christmas can certainly connect us to the best of the past.

At it's heart, Christmas is meant to give us hope in the worst of the present moment.

When I hear these words from the prophet Isaiah, yes, I am rocketed back to some beautiful memories, crackling fires and crumpled wrapping paper.

But these words —and the story of Christmas— are not confined to memory.

So if Christmas is a time for you when grief cuts fresh, or where nothing ever seems to live up to expectations, or where stress threatens to overwhelm beauty, and joy seems hard to come by.

Of if it feels like the world is too far from the peace Christ was supposed to bring. And if it feels like the yoke of the oppressor is as strong as ever and most of the tyrants are self-assured.

Then these words from the prophet are not merely the soundtrack of our past, but the song of a new future.

They are not the recounting of a gift that came to us on a silent night long ago, but a gift that God might give to us, now. Today. In the midst of this world. In the middle of your life.

The people walking in darkness  
have seen a great light;  
on those living in the land of deep darkness  
a light has dawned.

For unto us a child is born,  
to us a son is given,  
and the government will be on his shoulders.



And he will be called

Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,

Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Unto us.

Unto us.