

Well, something's lost, but
something's gained,
in living every day.¹ *Amen.*

Dear friends, the Christmas
season occasions *story*. And
by our gathering in this
sacred and sparkling space,
we make forever from the
fleeting.

On this holy night, we
meet with family and friends at dinner
tables and in these very pews to hear Luke's narrative
of Jesus' birth; to sing tales of the shepherds' courage;² and to
exchange the stories of *our* lives. For in the moving mystery of
our faith, the tender moments two young parents share at the
birth of their first child will become not only a story of *their*

love, but the story of *our*
love – of *God's Love* born
into the world anew and
forever ... inexhaustible,
inextinguishable,
ultimate **Love**.

Both Sides, Now

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen
Sunday, December 24, 2024

We participate in the
power of these Christmas events when we kneel together and
whisper them across candlelight. Joining this community of
remembrance brings our tradition's shared memory into being;
we again make a home with God, as God renews a home with
us, *among us, in us*. See, these devotions bear *Immanuel* by two
essential means: first, *within* the story we know so well; then, in
what happens *with* that story, a revelation still underway as we
visit the manger across the seasons of our lives.

In that storytelling spirit ...

Before the summer of 1987, I started mowing my neighbors'
Louisiana yards to earn money.³ By the beginning of seventh
grade that August, the enterprise yielded financial access to the
“realms-of-glory”⁴ at 1400 North Fruitridge Avenue in Terre
Haute, Indiana ... the *Columbia House Record Club*.⁵ Postcards
and listings tucked into every magazine and Sunday newspaper
promised new Club members could choose 8 or 12 albums for
just a penny, all part of their sugar-plum, “introductory offer.”



Perhaps anticipating my later theology, I recognized that expectant moment required me *to choose*, to select among “CDs, LPs, or Cassettes”⁶ a single format and to eschew all others for all time. Having tallied pros and cons on one of my dad’s legal-sized yellow pads, I took my lawn-care proceeds to the old Wright’s Sound Gallery off Mansfield Road,⁷ bought a mid-tier Pioneer receiver, a Sony carousel player, a pair of Advent Baby IIs,⁸ and I joined Columbia House as a committed ambassador of the Compact Disc.⁹

“... And if you think it too light to connect the shared appreciation of a pop song with the birth of Christ ... well, then, I urge you to listen to more Joni Mitchell ...”

That Christmas, I remember my maternal grandmother [she quite recently recalled in this pulpit] sitting me down at her kitchen’s Formica counter: “Honey, I understand you are interested in *CDs*. I have never given a Certificate of Deposit as a gift, and the request feels a little bold to your Gran.” God bless Granny, for the ever-increasing ranks of my compact discs continue to confound:¹⁰ less accessible than

The Spotifys, yet neither as cool nor acoustically rich as vinyl, my sprawling collection sparked little interest from anyone ... until a shining pandemic moment.

See, it came to pass in those days that Joni Mitchell pulled her catalogue from streaming services in support of her countryman, Neil Young.¹¹ Her righteous protest prompted my son [in high-school at the time], to ask me one evening, “Do you have any Joni Mitchell CDs?” I delivered an understated “Of course”¹² – a little too swiftly to hide my bursting enthusiasm for this moment an avocational lifetime in the making. Michael recounted to me his love of the album *Blue*,¹³ and, “from later,” the song “Both Sides, Now.” He enjoyed having Mitchell’s music on his phone, but her leavetaking from Spotify left a hole in his playlists.

With happy memories of the mixed tapes¹⁴ and Sony Walkmans [Walkmen?] forever on *my* hip at his age, I not only understood his hope, I delighted in it, deeply.¹⁵ Yet, predictably, I also over-helped. Adjusting my glasses, I professorially corrected: “‘Both Sides, Now’ appears as the last song on *Clouds*, which came out in 1969, two years before *Blue*, not after.”

A little bruised that I underestimated him (and embarrassed for me that I felt I had to explain something so elementary), he countered, “Umm, I know, but I’m talking about the version from *Both Sides, Now* – the *album* that came out much later.”

“The one with the orchestra?”

“Yes!”

“Oh, well, you want to listen to the *real* one.”

“Actually, no, I don’t,” he stood his ground. “I mean, I love the original, but I like the newer one *because the song comes true*.¹⁶ by then, she really has seen clouds from both sides. She’s older, and now she’s known love – known life – from both sides.”

... *because the song comes true*.

Though difficult to imagine while watching Joni Mitchell strum a mountain dulcimer at age 25 or when hearing her pitch-perfectly peculiar voice range octaves during those days, by the time she wrote “Both Sides, Now” in the middle 1960s, Mitchell had endured polio that weakened her left hand; dropped out of college when she became pregnant; given her child to adoption; survived harsh months nearly homeless as an artist on the Canadian plains; and ended her first marriage – all as the Civil Rights movement swelled, the Vietnam War caught fire, and the United States readied for a rightward lurch.

For the album of the same title planned for release ahead of Valentine’s Day in the year 2000, she chose for its cover a painting of herself she made while in her early 30s.¹⁷ In the self-portrait she overlooks a Manhattan (served up) and pinches a smoldering American Spirit in the hand she holds to her head. Her elbow on the bar, her overcoat pools into the shape of a heart just below her wrist – her passions always on her sleeve, it would seem. To witness the decades, she aged herself. After all that time she picked up her paintbrush and added shadow along her jawline, deepened her jowl, and carved lines onto the face of her hand.

Her reinterpretation of the *song* “Both Sides, Now,” relatedly witnesses those years’ passage.

How many times had she sung it by then: thousands? Tens of thousands? Yet she returns to the familiar words in a new moment of her life and a new moment in the life of the world

– no less particular, no less meaningful than their original setting, yet entirely different. She sings at a lower register and fills those old ideas with new understandings, new emotions, new hopes ...

... until, in 2015, circumstance [and, I fear, cigarettes and sweet vermouth] demanded Joni Mitchell overcome a brain aneurysm to make Brandi Carlisle’s admiring conspiracy that brought the 79-year-old artist to the 2022 Newport Folk Festival.¹⁸

“... Tonight, we make forever from the fleeting “because the song comes true” – the Christmas story comes true for us again! ...”

And while all of that surprise performance exercises the tear ducts, “Both Sides, Now” brings down the house.¹⁹ Even via YouTube two years later, we can still claim our share in her resilience as she holds her cane like a scepter²⁰ – with *defiant*

optimism, a hope like steel – and she sings from her throne: “Well, something’s lost, but something’s gained, in living every day,”²¹ Carlisle raising her hand in a devoted “Amen.”²²

See, by Mitchell’s remembrance – and in sharing her memory with the world – something happens *with* that song, just as something had happened *within* it. “Both Sides, Now” begins and ends with wonder, yet, across its lyrics as across her life, Mitchell moves from “moons and Junes and Ferris wheels” to “say ‘I love you,’ right out loud”²³ – from innocence, to a marvel much harder earned. And as that movement continued for her, so it continues for all of us, too.

You know, even on the fly in my conversation with Michael those several years ago, I encountered his wisdom as a meta sort of moment, my life folding over on itself: I had filled the bubble next to “Compact Disc” during *my* youth [with “rows and floes” of heavy-metal hair], yet something new was underway in *his* youth. The two of us, a father and son, discovering this shared interest brought a surprising and delighting connection [during a pandemic, no less²⁴] that made my memories new. Encountering forever in the fleeting, the song was coming true for us, too! And if you think it too light to connect the shared appreciation of a pop song with the birth of Christ ... well, then, I urge you to listen to more Joni Mitchell.

For isn’t this how Christmas works, only more gloriously?

We come here tonight to encounter the manger again and to hear that old story anew. How many times have we told it and sung it by now: hundreds? Thousands? Like Jesus, the Infant King, we are children for an eternity and only a moment. Surely our encounter with Christmas began with wonder, and then, across all the seasons of our lives, we ready for it to find conclusion in the same – though by a new and different marveling, one harder earned by our life’s experiences.

Thereby, we do not reduce faith in this Holy One to parlor magic that vanquishes the ordinary or the difficult with only a rote incantation or the wiggle of a nose. Indeed, our encounter with the living Christ in this season or at any time of the year makes no promise to exempt us from suffering; born into our world, this divine child will come to know our human existence, an intimacy that welcomes us to the Christmas table from both sides, now: with wonder and with worry; with regret and with renewal; with frustration and with faith – and with everything between. For no matter from what or whom or where we come; no matter if we bring the pieces of this season scattered, broken, or neatly assembled: in telling this life-affirming and beautiful tale, we affirm the goodness of life and the beauty of the world – indeed, year after year, we make it so! Tonight, we make forever from the fleeting “because the song comes true” – the Christmas story comes true for us again!

On this holy night, then, unbind, uncover, and unmask the face of Christ painted into your countenance at the beginning of the world, for God loves that child: loves you like the babe born in the manger, loves you like the mother who bore him, loves you like the father who knelt and held her hand. We seek that same Love in our lives and among our families, in this parish church and among all the people of the world ... inexhaustible, inextinguishable, *ultimate Love*.

That we would see clouds this way,²⁵ *Amen*.

“... we can still claim our share in her resilience – a defiant optimism, a hope like steel – when she sings from her throne: ‘Well, something’s lost, but something’s gained, in living every day’ ...”

Endnotes

- ¹ Mitchell, Joni. “Both Sides, Now.” *Clouds*, Warner Brothers Records, 1969.
- ² I regret losing “Mary’s fidelity” and “the magi’s journeys” in this short list, but the symmetry that the series prefers bumps them out of the text and into this endnote.
- ³ I was rocking it, too. I had eight or ten yards, most of which I mowed every week for \$10-20, each. That was \$100+/week burning a hole in my pocket with only my uncle’s Crutchfield catalogues and the “Fun Factory’s Super Gifts & Gimmicks” advertisement pages from my comic books to occupy my daydreaming.
- ⁴ As in “Angels from the realms of glory,” the Montgomery Christmas hymn.
- ⁵ I had it down to an art, man: the double-CD sets counted as 2 toward the minimum commitment, though they cost as little as 25% more than a single-disc album. Occasionally, a desirable box set would count as 3 or more, but cost only \$22.98. For something like \$75, I would net 18-20 CDs, cancel my membership, and start a new one at my next address. Given that I moved every semester and summer – *nine* times – by the beginning of my senior year in college, I have hundreds of CDs emblazoned with “CRC.” I could deign to accept Columbia House’s mark, but I could not stomach BMG’s all-too-conspicuous attribution in place of the bar code.
- ⁶ In 1986, I owned two LPs: Kenny Rogers’ *The Gambler* and Queen’s *The Game*. I also owned five cassettes: (listed in the order of listens by that time) A-Ha’s *Hunting High And Low*; Tears For Fears’ *Songs From The Big Chair*; Bruce Springsteen’s *Born In The USA*; Bon Jovi’s *Slippery When Wet*; and Depeche Mode’s *Black Celebration*. Though that modest collection may seem a small amount of sunk cost, realize that the number of listens to each one of those tapes had to be in the thousands – which I claim with no hint of hyperbole (back in those days, we didn’t have a Spotify “Wrapped” to do the counting for us! We judged by our hearing deficits and how much of an album’s title we could still read on its cassette).
- ⁷ I had been saving for a stereo of my own, rather than fighting with Crystal Gayle, Julie Andrews, and the *Dirty Dancing* soundtrack for airplay on my mother’s (unusually nice for our house) Yamaha setup. Wright’s was good to me over the years.
- ⁸ Incredibly, these Advent speakers have made it through all my moves for the last 35 years. Appropriately, Michael now has them in his dorm room.
- ⁹ Perhaps because of this decision’s consequence and my investment’s relative cost, I consider 1987 the zenith of my adolescence’s musical season. Once more in the order of how many times I listened to each between 1987 and 1989: Guns N’ Roses’ *Appetite For Destruction*; Def Leppard’s *Hysteria*; U2’s *The Joshua Tree*; R.E.M.’s *Document*; Bruce Springsteen’s *Tunnel Of Love*; Whitesnake’s *Whitesnake*; Depeche Mode’s *Music For The Masses*; Motley Crue’s *Girls, Girls, Girls*; and Aerosmith’s *Permanent Vacation*. By 1991 or ‘92, additional 1987 releases The Replacements’ *Pleased To Meet Me*, Dinosaur Jr’s *You’re Living all Over Me*, and The Cure’s *Kiss Me, Kiss Me, Kiss Me*, had caught up with all but GNR, Def Leppard, and U2 (and, again, the number of times I listened to each of those albums must have reached the thousands before the arrival of 1990), with an honorable mention to Prince’s *Sign O The Times*, highlighted by the absolutely unstoppable “The Cross,” my choice for Greatest Deep Track Of All Time.
- ¹⁰ An avocation I still enjoy, I find peace and gladness in the listening and the learning and the reading and the sorting and the filing.
- ¹¹ Cills, Hazel. “Joni Mitchell Joins Neil Young In Protest Against Spotify.” *NPR*, January 29, 2022.
- ¹² Our tastes have meaningful overlaps and meaningful differences, and I value both. We share an admiration for the solo singer-songwriter, though I’m more Springsteen/Elvis Costello and he’s more Joni/Claire; he digs emotional songs that include guitar, and I prefer (distorted) guitar songs that include emotion.
- ¹³ I 1,000% bought every Joni Mitchell album Columbia House advertised in their print listings and, in time, that their phone operators could locate in their back catalogue.
- ¹⁴ Despite the considerable windup that remains in this sermon, do note that this illustration provid-

ed me with forty-seven different rabbit holes I wanted to take, and I mostly resisted until these endnotes. I mean, mixtapes? That reference alone points to 20 rabbit holes. And put me toe to toe with anyone in the curation and quality of The Mixtape, including Jon Cusack's character in that movie. Indeed, though I customarily blame my hearing loss on Skid Row's set opening for Bon Jovi at Shreveport's Hirsch Memorial Coliseum in the fall of 1989, the injuries more likely came from listening to mixtapes on my Walkman while I mowed yards.

¹⁵ My son now hosts a radio show – “Keep On Walkin,” a reference to Denzel Curry's “Walkin” – at his college's station, a weekly point of long-distance connection I treasure.

¹⁶ Dang, he is so right. My children's wisdom overwhelms me. I am so proud of them.

¹⁷ Rather than performing primarily her own work for the long-player, she chose a collection of records from the 30s, 40s, and 50s – songs made famous by crooners like Nat King Cole, Etta James, and Billie Holiday. Against an orchestral backdrop, she interprets the compositions as a chanteuse, presenting an arc punctuated by a rerecording of “A Case Of You” at the end of Side 1, and “Both Sides, Now” at the end of Side 2 (and I believe “sides” and their significance were still in her head, even if they were already an anachronism by 1999-2000).

¹⁸ Admittedly, a lot happening in this sentence. Learn more here about the “Joni Jams” leading to Newport. I deliver this transition apace because I trust listeners/readers have *some* sense of that event.

¹⁹ Seriously, I've cried like a gajillion times watching this video. “Okay, I'll do this one,” and her laugh ... I fall apart! And when she hits that first note perfectly, though at an unexpected depth ... more tears. Then the way she grabs the arms of that chair and starts to lift herself toward the audience when she sings, “Something's lost, but something's gained ...” Expletive! As Michael named, “the song comes true.”

²⁰ Okay, so I am adding this endnote on Friday, December 27, the sermon now a few days' preached and the holiday week nearly in the

books – and I nearly spit my teeth out of my head when the best church usher on planet earth sent me The New York Times' *The Daily's* Christmas Day podcast ... on dadgum Joni Mitchell! I found the synchronicity cool until I heard them use the word “scepter” for Mitchell's cane. I mean, I know, I know, the “throne” image I use is obvious enough, but I dared a dash of pride in my choice of “scepter.” Oh, well – tip of the cap to Mr. Morris and Ms. Weiss for their exploration of the related vibes in Mitchell's comeback and catalogue and consequence on the universe's psyche. We approached the subject from different perspectives and for different audiences and occasions, of course, but I hope they would find as much glad connection in this sermon as I found in their piece.

²¹ Mitchell, “Both Sides, Now.” Before Christmas Eve, Michael and I shared a rich conversation about whether the song ultimately proves optimistic. Given Mitchell's revisiting its text over the course of her life, both of us felt strongly convinced of the optimism that happens *with* the song, yet, we recognized the ambivalence that remains in the last line of each verse. That uncertainty reaches crescendo in the concluding couplet: “I really don't know life, I really don't know life at all.” For me, the line I quote at the beginning of the sermon and here tilts the scale toward optimism: yes, “something's lost” in the vulnerability that life demands, “but something's gained,” too, and what we gain makes even the hurt beautiful. Therefore, I hear Mitchell returning to wonder at the end of each verse and, finally, at the end of the song.

²² Kudos to Carlisle for making this magic come to pass. I'm not much for the ecstatic stuff in Sunday church, but I will proudly make my “Amen!” at a worthy concert. And Carlisle's instinctive reaction makes clear this is a rock-n-roll moment, no matter the folk-festival setting.

²³ Mitchell, “Both Sides, Now.”

²⁴ Holy moly, it was so hard. I am proud of the resilience the pandemic strengthened in our family, and it's difficulty still hurts to remember.

25 Mitchell, “Both Sides, Now.”



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Sunday Schedule

- 8 am** Holy Eucharist, Rite II, *spoken*
- 9 am** Coffee & Community Hour, full “Community Breakfast” on the first Sunday of most months
- 10 am** Holy Eucharist, Rite II, with organ, choristers, and choir. Includes Children’s Homily & Nursery. Morning Prayer on the fifth Sunday of the month. Online at trinitychurchboston.org/live-worship, youtube.com/@trinitychurchboston, and facebook.com/trinitychurchboston
- 11:15 am** Formation for All Ages
- 5 pm** Holy Eucharist, Rite II

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Tues/Thurs.

- 8:30 pm** Online Compline join us on Zoom at bit.ly/tcbTTcompline or dial in with **1-646-558-8656** and enter Meeting ID **206 654 379**

Weds.

- 5:45 pm** Choral Evensong in the Church, led by the Trinity Choristers



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