

## “Good News to the Unfaithful”

Lisa Clow is a Christian singer and songwriter. Not too many Christmases ago she was struggling with a number of life issues: hurting, depressed. Well, let her tell her own story.

“I was struggling. It had been a long year and a half. Finances were stressful, I miscarried twins, and on top of it I was battling a deep relational bitterness. My church was having their annual service where they kick off the Christmas season with carols and special songs and I, for once, was not singing. I told them that I wouldn’t be able to sing, but what they didn’t know is that I was too overcome with shame to stand on stage before my church.

“That Sunday morning, I stood at my seat as they began to sing ‘O Come All Ye Faithful’ and the first line of the song just clobbered me. It hit me like a giant wave of guilt. ‘O come all you faithful, joyful and triumphant!’ I remember hearing those words and thinking, ‘I have been so unfaithful. My joy has dwindled, and I am a triumphant...failure.’ And I didn’t sing the rest of the service. I drove home, my mind still churning, ‘Is that really who is invited to come to Jesus? The faithful? The joyful? The triumphant? If so, then I am hopeless.’

“Thankfully, later that afternoon the Holy Spirit reminded me of Jesus’s invitation in Matthew 11:28: ‘Come to me all who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest.’ Rest found in his life, his death, and his resurrection, not my own. That evening, I had a strong conviction to write a song for myself and for the weary, the broken, and the ashamed.” She did. She wrote the words to a song that night.

Fellow songwriter, Bob Kauflin, saw the title of her song and read the lyrics, and asked if he could work with her on it. He had been looking for Christmas songs that speak to those who find it difficult to enter into the joy of the Christmas season due to feelings of unworthiness, or need, or shame, or suffering. So the two of them worked together on it, trying to capture in simple phrases the kind of person – unfaithful, broken, weary, ashamed - who might have a hard time believing that Christ was born *for them*.

Kauflin says, for him, one phrase seemed to sum up the song, and it touches him every time it’s sung: *“Come, though you have nothing, come, He is the offering.”* They decided to end the song with a simple statement of the gospel, and the reason for Jesus coming at Christmas: *“He’s the Lamb who was given, slain for our pardon His promise is peace for those who believe”*.

As they played the song for people, it seemed to really have an effect on those who heard it. So they decided to contract with someone to produce a music video of it. They thought at first of just recording Lisa singing the song. But then someone suggested that they invite people into the studio to listen to the song, and capture their responses live as they listened. So that’s what they did. The video they recorded is made up almost exclusively of people from a particular church who are processing the song, most of them for the first time, as it relates to their own experiences. A stillborn child. A strained marriage. Feelings of shame. Legalism. Loss. Loneliness. Or simply having a heart that weeps with those who weep.

Bob Kauflin, one of the composers, says that seeing their responses as Lisa sings communicates

even more clearly that Jesus wasn't born for people who have it all together. He was born for those who have nothing. This is the song, and this is the video. "O Come All You Unfaithful." I know most of you have seen it before. We have sung it here in church. But may it speak to us again of Jesus' invitation to come to Him – no matter how we're feeling, or what we're experiencing in our life at this time. (*Play the video*)

As I've shared before, once I heard this song, it just etched its way into my soul. I think it captures the heart of Christmas so powerfully and poignantly.

*The Christmas season is not a jolly time for everyone.* For those who are homeless. For parents too poor to buy their children the gifts they'd like to give them. For those in an unhappy marriage, or those separated or divorced. For those dealing with their own, or a loved one's, serious illness. And of course, for those grieving the death of someone they love. Perhaps 4 years or so ago, out of the blue, I got a phone call from a boyhood friend, a guy I graduated with at McCaskey. I hadn't seen him since high school days. (About 150 years ago!). He and his wife had moved back to the Lancaster area, and he looked me up. We re-connected. Christmas two years ago Nancy and I had dinner with them in their home. The next April, Lou passed away. I'm sure Millie still grieves that empty spot at the table when her family gathers.

This isn't to say that if Christ is in us we can't have joy in our suffering, when life deals us hard knocks. We can. But there's still that human sadness that's part of life. Sometimes with all the hype about Christmas, the impression we get is that the norm is for the Christmas season to be festive, happy, bubbling over with smiles and laughter, and if that isn't the case for you, there's something wrong with you. "It's the most wonderful time of the year!" "It's a holly, jolly Christmas, it's the best time of the year!" "Happy holidays, happy holidays" "Have yourself a merry little Christmas, let your heart be light."

But for some people Christmas is *not* the most wonderful time of the year. It's the toughest time of the year, and the song most appropriate might be "Blue Christmas". It's not a holly, jolly Christmas for the people of war torn areas like Ukraine and the Gaza strip, or those in North Carolina who've lost their homes to flooding, or to soldiers serving their country in some far away place in the world.

It's okay if the holiday season is not encompassed with laughter and cheer! But the good news is that there is a Savior who says, "Come." "Come to me all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).

And this song reminds me that *Jesus came and welcomes not only the faithful, but the unfaithful too.* He welcomes those of us who have failed to keep promises we made to God. He welcomes those of us struggling with temptations. He welcomes those of us who feel guilty and ashamed.

Not too long ago I became aware of a website called "Ministry Watch". It's a watchdog group that seeks to expose abuses within the Christian community, to encourage honest and transparency for churches and Christian leaders. It regularly reports on pastors and church

leaders and Christian organizations that have broken trust with the people, and fallen into immoral or illegal behaviors. Doing what Ministry Watch does is important in an effort to ensure integrity within the Christian movement, but it can get kind of depressing! And I've often thought, "What about these men and women who have been unfaithful, who have fallen or failed morally and spiritually? Is there anyone there for them in their guilt and shame?" Over the past few years several prominent pastors who I have respected and learned from have resigned from their churches because they crossed a line – no blatant criminal activity – but they just crossed a line they shouldn't have. Does Jesus welcome them in their unfaithfulness? Does Jesus welcome those whom they may have hurt? Does Jesus welcome *us* in *our* unfaithfulness? *Yes!* "*O come, all you unfaithful.*"

One of the beautiful things about the Christmas story is that the baby Jesus was not born in a palace, and the announcement of the Messiah's birth was not sent "special delivery" or "overnight express" to the chief priests and scribes in Jerusalem! Remember who were blessed with the first announcement of His birth? *Shepherds*. Ordinary, "blue collar", hardworking common folk!

"And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord'" (Luke 2:8-11). These common-folk shepherds got the news of Jesus' birth first, then hurried off, and *came* to see the newborn baby, Jesus. Baby Jesus was too young to welcome them, to say to them, "Come", but I bet He would have if He was old enough to talk!

*And you know, too, that in Jesus' ministry as an adult, He invited people to follow Him, and befriended people, who weren't the brightest and the best!* Matthew, a despised tax collector, employed by the Romans. Simon the Zealot, a trained killer who wanted to overthrow Roman authority. Simon Peter, at times a self-confident buffoon who was good at putting his foot in his mouth.

Jesus broke the rules to connect with people: He associated with Samaritans, a class of people the Jews hated. He befriended a Samaritan woman at a well – a lady with a bad reputation. He ate with non-churched people shunned by most religious leaders. Jesus didn't just say "come" to people who had it all together, but He welcomed those who knew they didn't have it all together.

Jesus *came* to save us. Jesus said: "The Son of man came to seek and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10). 1 Timothy 1:15 says: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners."

*Jesus came to forgive and cleanse, to heal and restore.*

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There's a beautiful Christmas message in this song!

O come, all you unfaithful  
Come, weak and unstable  
Come, know you are not alone

O come, barren and waiting ones  
Weary of praying, come  
See what your God has done

Christ is born, Christ is born  
Christ is born for you

O come, bitter and broken  
Come with fears unspoken  
Come, taste of His perfect love

O come, guilty and hiding ones  
There is no need to run  
See what your God has done

Christ is born, Christ is born  
Christ is born for you

He's the Lamb who was given  
Slain for our pardon  
His promise is peace  
For those who believe

He's the Lamb who was given  
Slain for our pardon  
His promise is peace  
For those who believe

So come, though you have nothing  
Come, He is the offering  
Come, see what your God has done

Christ is born, Christ is born  
Christ is born for you

Christ is born, Christ is born  
Christ is born for you

**Merry Christmas!**

