

On the wrong side of Vespers

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Last week we drove 350 miles to Smith College, where our daughter was singing with the glee club at Christmas Vespers. Each year at a pair of services, campus and community enter liminal space by hearing sacred music from student choral and orchestral groups, pondering poetry and biblical readings by students and faculty, and singing carols together.

This year it also became a setting to turn attention to other matters. As a Facebook event page put it, “You can’t sing carols if you can’t breathe.” A planned action at the Vespers services aimed to draw attention to the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner and to protest injustice on the Smith campus and beyond.

I support protest, as a tool to build awareness and as a vehicle of expression. When I read that people complained about traffic being tied up by recent protests elsewhere, I found it embarrassing. I wished they would be quiet.

I was also well aware of the limited routes to and from Smith, and I remembered how an earlier protest disrupted traffic for hours. As we drove, I monitored social media from the passenger seat, worried about living my personal parental anxiety nightmare: being late to or absent from a child's important event.

Did the protesters mean to shut the service down? Didn’t they understand how hard their classmates worked to prepare the music? Didn't they understand that Vespers supports a worthy cause, the Interfaith Winter Shelter, which will suffer without the usual significant donations? Didn't they understand that Vespers marks Advent, the time we wait for the incarnation, desperate to see God’s care for this messed-up world?

On Tumblr, one Smithie urged other students to stop clutching their pearls over Vespers. As I sat in the car twisting mine, I felt convicted by the statement on Facebook that the protesters wanted “freedom songs not choir songs.” I confessed

my own love of highbrow anthem settings of Emily Dickinson poems and the carol descants of David Willcocks, of enjoying the knowledge that Phillips Brooks, who wrote "O Little Town of Bethlehem," was a founding board member of Smith. I regretted that Christianity seemed so distant from young peoples' lives that a religious service could be compared, as it was by student protest organizers, to the lighting of the Rockefeller Center Christmas tree.

We made it to town in time, as the first service was ending. The police had re-routed traffic around the 50 or so protesters who stood outside chanting, "Hey hey, ho ho, racist cops have got to go." They never went inside, but their voices could be heard at quiet moments. As the congregation departed, they could see the young people lying in the road, staging a die-in.

During the evening service, a smaller group of protesters gathered outside in the bitter the cold. Inside the singers began in Latin, "*Veni, veni Emmanuel. Captivum solve Israel.*" From our seats in the balcony, we heard the faint voices of protesters chanting over the first reading from Isaiah 35: "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy."

The day before, my daughter and other students spent four hours rehearsing. This sounded like a big commitment—though nothing like the four and a half hours Mike Brown lay dead in the street. My anxiety about getting to Vespers amounted to nothing beside the grief of Eric Garner's family. My friendly chat with the police officer directing traffic illustrated my privilege as a middle-aged white lady and did nothing to disprove the experiences of Smith students of color.

Near the end of Vespers, the hall darkened. The chorus and glee club rose to sing "O Holy Night" by the light of their candles. They wore black ribbons on their wrists, expressing their solidarity with their classmates outside.

*Truly he taught us to love one another;
His law is love and his gospel is peace.
Chains shall he break, for the slave is our brother.
And in his name all oppression shall cease.*

This is a freedom song, I thought. But I knew where Jesus would be standing while I sat inside, safe and warm. I was on the wrong side of Vespers.

Before the benediction, Dean of Religious Life Jennifer Walters departed from the order of service. The protesters had entered the hall. She invited them forward, carrying their banners, to share one of their songs.

They sounded apprehensive at first. We listened intently to pick out the words: "We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes." Then their voices swelled, and the melody spread throughout the congregation. Feet stamped, hands clapped, and harmonies expanded. We all sang the same song.

Veni, veni Emmanuel. We cannot rest until you come.