

# CHRISTMAS BELLS



# WOODEN BELLS

by David Diggs

In most of Haiti, Christmas has yet to be commercialized. I guess there's not much money to be made in a country where half the people earn less than \$60 a year.

Some businesses in Pétion-Ville, the wealthiest suburb of Port-au-Prince, are giving it their best shot. In upscale boutiques and the American-style grocery stores that have sprouted up in recent years, windows are frosted with spray-on snow, and Christmas lights now hang in the palm trees out front. On the roof of one of the larger grocery stores sits a glowing Santa in his reindeer-drawn sleigh.

Sleighs and reindeer are rare in the tropics, and most Haitians still don't have a clear idea who Santa is. But the patrons of these stores are generally wealthy, cosmopolitan Haitians who travel to the U.S. frequently. Nearly everything available in these stores has been imported from the States. So, it makes sense to import our commercial Christmas marketing culture as well.

Some things get lost (or added) in the translation, though, sometimes with amusing results. Several years ago I was wandering through one of these grocery stores, enjoying the cool air-conditioned air. Above the schmaltzy Christmas music that was piped in to spread Christmas cheer, I kept hearing a bell. Someone was clearly wandering up and down the aisles of the store ringing a bell. I eventually turned a corner and spotted the bell ringer.

Evidently, the store had employed a tall, thin, young man to dress up in a Santa suit and wear a white beard. I was astonished by the sight of this lean, Caribbean Santa, so it took me a few seconds to figure out why he was walking around the store ringing a bell. Then it dawned on me. The store's management must have seen Santa in the U.S. collecting money for the Salvation Army. They concluded that Santa always went about ringing a bell.

A mile or so away is another store that sells crafts made by poor Haitian artisans. There, among the baskets and paintings, they have a unique kind of Haitian bell for sale. Unlike Santa's bell or silver bells or sleigh bells, this bell is made not of metal but of wood. It doesn't ring or really make much noise at all; and that is the point, for inscribed on each bell is this Haitian proverb: "No one hears the cry of the poor or the ringing of a wooden bell."

There is great truth to this proverb, yet at Christmas we celebrate a far greater truth, that God is not deaf to the cry of the poor. In Christ, God not only heard the wooden bell but became the wooden bell. Love was made flesh in the form of a baby, born in a stable to a poor, Third World woman.

Like a wooden bell, the long-awaited Messiah was neither heard nor understood. He led his people not into battle with a gleaming sword lifted high but went alone to a cross and was himself lifted high on Rome's rough-hewn wood.

*Wooden bell, Emmanuel, God is truly with us.*

Two thousand years have passed since the first Christmas, and a lot has been lost (and added) in the translation. How do we celebrate the real Christmas amidst the jingling and ringing and clanging and banging of the commercial Christmas?

We can start by finding ways to step away from the holiday hubbub to give ourselves space and time to listen to God. By meditating on scripture and the incarnation, we can hear God reminding us that we are not alone when we are weak, unheard, or misunderstood. This, in fact, is part of our identity as followers of the unheard God.

Secondly, we can open our hearts to the cry of others around us. By listening to the unheard, we listen to Christ. By drawing close to the poor and rejected, we draw close to Christ. We may prefer a Christ who remains aloof, who keeps his distance as some sort of super hero or a disembodied apparition, not as a neighbor with too many cats or an old aunt with bed sores in the nursing home or the troubled boy across the street. We fear a God so willing to take on our flesh and frailty. Such a God is more accepting of our own wounds and shame than we are. So, we keep our guard up and busy ourselves to keep this God at a respectable and safe distance.

But if in faith we can lay aside this fear and say to God, as Mary did when she learned that she would bear the Christ child, "I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." Then we will know this wooden-bell God to be as close and silent and vital and tender as our own beating heart.

*Wooden bell, Emmanuel, God is truly with us.*

Let us rejoice and be giddy with God's Christmas love.

Merry Christmas!