



A CHRISTMAS

GIFT

By Shawna Smith

It was Sunday, December 21st, the day after Candlelight had been held at Samford's Wright Center. The plan was for Dawson's Sanctuary Ensemble to sing a version of Candlelight at the Bibb County Correctional Facility.

As we arrived at the correctional facility, we were confronted by tall, razor-wire-topped fences enclosing a cluster of tan concrete and metal buildings. Our group of 20 slowly shuffled through security, hampered by the facility's small entrance that struggled to accommodate a group of our size. Once inside we were led to the chapel, a utilitarian room with beige walls and a few glass block windows. The front of the chapel was decorated with tinsel garland and a 12-foot Christmas tree adjacent to the stage.

We quickly found our way into the choir loft to practice before the inmates arrived. Our program included many song selections that we had just sung 24 hours before for Candlelight. I couldn't help but mentally acknowledge the physical difference between the two venues, the grandness of the Wright Center that could seat 2500 people versus the unassuming chapel that could accommodate just 200 people. Fully expecting to hear the swelling tones of the orchestra, I had to smile when instead the opening notes came from a single electronic piano. The powerful sound of the more than 400-voice choir from the night before was replaced with our more modest number. Still, there was anticipation and excitement among the group about the performance and a strong desire to deliver the best version of these songs of hope and truth that we could.

Our guests arrived dressed in tan uniforms, filing in calmly and orderly until the room filled completely. They were a receptive audience showing appreciation through applause, "amens" and the frequent proclaiming of a very distinctive HAL-LE-LU-JAH by one audience member. In response, our little choir sang as big and as well as we could. Audience participation noticeably increased when we began singing "Jesus, What a Wonderful Child." It was hard to tell whether the audience or the soloist was enjoying the song more. The music that we sang sparked many smiles, enthusiastic clapping, and visible excitement. This created a shared energy that knit the performers and audience together as one community of worshipers.

In a spontaneous shift from the scheduled program, the director introduced to the audience the suggestion that they should sing with us on a song he would teach them on the basis that "singing isn't for singers, singing is for worshipers." The faces of the audience went from shy reluctance to all in participation within a span of a few seconds. The song titled "Someday" is sung as a round, but with different vocal parts, rhythms and words. In surprisingly short order, the room was divided into three different vocal groups and the parts "learned." There was no small amount of laughter as each section did their very best to sing their part in conjunction with the choir. The sound that resulted from this joint effort was astounding and while I cannot attest to the tunefulness of the melodies sung, I can absolutely affirm that there was a joyful noise produced as everyone sang the words "Someday, peace and joy and happiness, no more sorrow, gotta be ready when He calls my name, Someday."

The remainder of the program had its moments of reflection and solemnity. The words sung reminded us that regardless of whether we felt unworthy, forgotten or weighed down by regret, everyone could come to Jesus. As we sang 'I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day,' our voices echoed like tolling church bells. Listening to the high and low voices calling back to each other—'peace on earth and goodwill to men'—I realized that, in that moment, in that room, the words were true. There was peace on earth and goodwill among the believers assembled there.

Within a brief 24-hour span, we offered two performances in two very different venues before two very different audiences. Yet one truth remained unchanged: Jesus was present and worshiped in both places. In Candlelight we sang the words "What Can I give Him, I'll give Him my heart." We could have exchanged the words with "I'll give him my acts of service, kindness, and care to others." That night, four days before Christmas, we offered to those assembled a gift of music, an offering of worship, and a reminder that they were loved and not forgotten by their Creator and Savior. In giving, we found ourselves the recipients of joy.



Shawna Smith and her husband Daniel have been members of Dawson since 2018, and are the parents of Vivian, Lydia, Emelia and Vincent. Shawna is active in the Music & Worship Ministry singing in the Sanctuary Choir and Sanctuary Ensemble, as well as, assisting with the Middle School Choir and Chapel Choir Puppet Ministries.