

There are several things that come as part of the deal of being born and raised in Michigan, particularly Southeast Michigan. If you grew up within 45 minutes to an hour of Detroit, some things are sacrosanct. You know that the best cure for a stomach ache is a cup of warmed up Vernors. You probably have an allegiance to one of the big three car companies—my crew are Ford people, tried and true. You are well acquainted with the long, painful struggle of being a Lions or a Tigers fan, but your loyalty is unquestioning. You know the best place to find Detroit style pizza *and* that Detroit style pizza is a thing, and when you see Little Caesar's pizza you don't automatically think hot 'n ready, you think oh those are the people that own the Red Wings. And then there is arguably the most important topic for a Southeast Michigander besides sports...music.

There are some artists that are just unquestionably *Michigan*. We are the home of Motown, so the sounds of Aretha Franklin and The Temptations are a must. You may not like rap, but you solidly own that Eminem is unbelievably talented and is a great advocate for the city. You know that KISS didn't just write Detroit Rock City because it sounded good. And I would not be a product of my corner of Michigan *or* my dad's daughter if I didn't give love to the one and only...Bob Seger. Give me that old time rock and roll, and honestly, one of my all-time favorite Christmas songs.

There is something about gruff, bearded rock front man Bob Seger's gravelly voice singing the *Little Drummer Boy* that just gets to me.

But here's the thing...the whole concept of this song is slightly ridiculous, right? My favorite meme of the holiday season, which I have mentioned before is the one that says, "Mary, exhausted, having just gotten Jesus to sleep, is approached by a young man who thinks to himself; what this girl needs is a drum solo." I mean seriously...there is nothing in Luke's gospel about a drummer rolling into the manger. So, why on earth is this song a thing, beautiful though it may be? What's even better, and Steve Quist and I laugh about this every year, our nativity scene, with it's beautiful, elaborate figures, also comes...with a little drummer boy. I kid you not, we bring him down every year and he stays in his box. But this year, we took him out because we were just so curious what he looked like. He had no drumsticks, the drumsticks were missing, and so we just have a kid with a drum. Steve eventually put pens and pencils in his hand so he looked more prepared for his solo, but we decided, he still needed to stay in the parlor...and not make it into the official scene.

Yet...I haven't been able to stop thinking about this little guy. This little guy that has sung his way into our hearts since 1941. As he has parum-pum-pummed around my mind, I just kept thinking about how the heart

of the song and this story, albeit a made up one, is the struggle of one of God's children figuring out just what on earth they have to offer to their newborn king who has come into the world to offer so much, his very life ultimately. The little drummer boy feels that a poor boy like him has nothing to offer to his king, and as I thought about it, it got me wondering about the rest of God's creation that filled the stable on that first Christmas night in Bethlehem.

Let's start with the animals, because this is a stable after all, and so whether this was the stable of an inn or the bottom floor of a relative's house where the animals slept, there were going to be animals there. We imagine a cow, some sheep, maybe even some goats. Precious parts of God's creation from the very beginning, who are there to bear witness to the birth of a Messiah, but what do they have to offer? Bleating background noise, warm bodies packed in so it isn't as cold as it could be? I mean, it isn't really up to them, but I guess you could say they offer their food and trough for the Savior's bed, making sure little baby Jesus has hay to sleep on. But are any of those things gifts fit for a king?

What about the shepherds? The shepherds who were the first to hear the news of the Christ's birth. The first ones to make their way in from the fields to huddle in that cattle stall amongst strangers they didn't know to

bear witness to the Messiah's coming into the world? What did a bunch of shepherds have to offer? A different kind of smell to offset the smell of the animals? A calming presence to the animals who might be agitated that their sleep schedule has been interrupted by a crying baby? Maybe blankets that they kept with them out in the fields to help keep warm? They're just humble guys with a job very few people respected and so what exactly do they have to offer to a baby, let alone the Messiah?

Then we have Mary and Joseph. Here we have two wildly young children of God who have seen very little of the world. Mary is probably 13, maybe 14 years old, Joseph maybe in his 20's, and their entire life plan has been thrown out of whack with this baby who is coming into the world before they're even married or settled. Who knows what they knew about raising a kid? Who knows what they knew about raising *God's* kid? They can offer a crazy family situation where I'm sure there were parents and in-laws who weren't necessarily on speaking terms with either of them because of this whole "alleged immaculate conception" thing. Mary can offer a tainted reputation and sidelong glances that will probably always come Jesus' way because he's that kid Mary and Joseph had ya know...wink...when they were engaged. Joseph can offer a carpenter's salary and way of life, a few life skills to get Jesus going once he grows up

and sets out on his own? Not really Messiah level shower gifts. The hope that Mary and Joseph can at least promise is that they will love Jesus with all they've got and care for him and provide for him as best they can, but none of that promises an easy road.

And that brings me back to our little drummer boy and his question of what he has to offer? I think in all of our romanticism of the Christmas story, we forget that that night in Bethlehem was chaotic and filled with anxiety, worry, and a lot of noise. We think that Jesus came into the world surrounded by light and peace and all gifts the world could offer and because of that...we tend to gravitate to stories like the little drummer boy because...he's us... He is our frail, messy, human selves trying to imagine what in the world we have to offer our Messiah who is coming to offer us grace and forgiveness and unconditional unimaginable love and eternal life and in the face of that, what in the world can we offer in return? We put ourselves in the shoes of that little guy and think if we were there, we wouldn't know what to offer either in the face of what we're experiencing, and yet...he also brings us a beautiful reminder...what we have to offer is the frail, messy, human self that we are, that God lovingly created exactly as we are, with all of our foibles, fears, talents, and gifts. We think if the little

drummer boy can offer a tiny little drum solo then maybe...just maybe...we have something that we can offer to our Savior.

And the truth of the matter is...yes...we absolutely have something to offer our Savior and at the same time...we absolutely don't have to give a gift in return to receive the amazing love that Jesus brings into the world. We can show up empty handed, hands literally devoid of drumsticks, and it doesn't matter. God doesn't say, well then I guess no gift of the Savior for you. God looked at the animals of the stable, at the shepherds of the field, of two lost and overwhelmed kids and said, here is your Savior, your Messiah, and he is going to love you with all he has to the very end of his days and on into eternity, you don't have to do anything to receive that, it's just there. God does the same thing tonight...looks at this beautiful, messy, fragile, wonderful amalgamation of creation and says, here is my Son, your Savior. He is my love, given for you, *freely* given for you. So, no, you don't have to show up tonight at this manger scene with anything to offer...

However, that doesn't mean that you don't have a *world* of things to offer to God, and I think we all need that reminder. All those things the members of the nativity had to offer? Warmth, a calming presence, a mixed up family, they might seem small, but they were so very necessary for that little guy. No gift, no drum solo is too small or insignificant for God.

Tonight, each of us has the gift of our heart and our love to give in return.

To take the love that we receive here in this tiny baby and take it out into the world that he came to save. Every person you meet is a person Jesus loves and so you can offer the gift of love in return. Whatever work you do, with your hands, your heart, your body, your feet, every single gift and talent we have can be used in some way to brighten and make God's world better.

What better gift to a Messiah who gave his life for the world than to continue to make the world a better, safer, kinder place? We have hope to give, in a world that is rife with cynicism and despair, we can dare to hope, to say that there is good in the world and we know there is because we have witnessed it in the love of our God? Honestly, simply just being here, being the you, the real, true, authentic you that God created, that is the greatest gift you could bring to the stable tonight; to show up daring to be yourself, fully, completely, and wholly because that is the person God sent Jesus for in the first place. You belong here, you have a place here, right in this stable beside the Messiah, with more to offer than you can ever imagine, which is why...for the first time...we're going to let him out of the box. He belongs there, because he has something to offer, just like all of us. Tonight, we place him there amongst the animals and angels as a reminder that here, with our Lord and Savior, we have a place, we have something to give. **AMEN!!!**