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Speaker 2 ([00:24](#)):

You're listening to The Faith & Work Podcast, where we explore what it means to serve God, neighbor, and society through our daily work.

Dustin ([00:35](#)):

Hello and welcome to the Faith & Work Podcast. I'm Dustin Moody and I'm joined today by Joanna Meyer, our Director of Public Engagement. How's it going Joanna?

Joanna ([00:42](#)):

It's going really well Dustin, I'm recording from home. So I'm sitting here admiring the Christmas decorations in my house today.

Dustin ([00:49](#)):

So I'm glad you mentioned Christmas decorations. We're recording this in early December. The episode will come out in mid-December, so we're in advent season. Joanna, I'm curious, what is your favorite and least favorite Christmas music?

Joanna ([01:02](#)):

Okay. That's a dangerous question, Dustin. Dangerous, dangerous question. So I'm really picky when it comes to Christmas music, because I grew up in a home with my mom who was raised in South Africa, which at the time was a British colony. So she was exposed through her education and the churches she attended to some of the finest traditional British Christmas music. So I grew up with festivals of readings, and carols, and John Rutter, and The Cambridge Singers. So for me, classic Christmas music is where it's at. I cannot stand Mariah Carey, or songs like I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus, gag me. That's like anathema to what Christmas really is, but give me some beautiful brass ensembles playing timeless Christmas carols, and I am in heaven. I also know my fair share of quirky English Christmas carols, like Jesus Christ the Apple Tree, which nobody's ever heard of. So if you want to expand your repertoire, go look up Jesus Christ the Apple Tree. How about you, Dustin? What are some of your favorites?

Dustin ([02:01](#)):

My response is a little weird as well. I actually do like Mariah Carey, All I Want For Christmas Is You. I feel like that's just how I enter into the season. So good for her. I try to see how long each year I can go without hearing Christmas Shoes, just because it's not on my list of favorites. But also for several years, I performed with the church in Orlando, and we had a unique arrangement of Oh Holy Night. That was just one of my all time favorite Christmas songs to play with the choir and vocalists. So a couple of favorites for different reasons.

Joanna ([02:32](#)):



That's awesome. Well, today's an exciting day because we're going to have a touch of not just Christmas music, but a conversation built around music with singer-songwriter, Sandra McCracken. Dustin, will you tell us a little bit more about Sandra?

Dustin ([02:43](#)):

Yeah. Sandra may be a familiar voice to many of you, especially if you joined us at our fundraiser back in May 2018. Sandra is a songwriter, a modern day hymn writer, and a record producer. She's a founding member of Indelible Grace Music and Rain For Roots, and has been a guest writer for Art House America, She Reads Truth, The Gospel Coalition, Christianity Today, and RELEVANT magazine among many more. Today, we'll be talking with Sandra about her work as a songwriter, as well as her two most recent albums, Patient Kingdom. Sandra, thanks for joining us on the Faith & Work Podcast.

Sandra ([03:15](#)):

Hey, good to be with you, Dustin.

Dustin ([03:17](#)):

It's been a couple of years since we caught up with you, you joined us in 2018 for our fundraiser, and life's changed quite a bit for you in the last couple of years with marriage and baby. How are things going? How's your family navigating all this season?

Sandra ([03:29](#)):

Yeah. It's been a whirlwind since I saw you last for sure. As we've all had this unexpectedly, I guess I would say this is the year of improvisation, right? But then the year before that with getting married, I guess when I was out there with you all in Colorado, it was a week or two before Tim and I got married. So that was also just such a fun time and crazy, as I looked back to think about it, but it's been really good. I'm grateful for a lot of surprising gifts this year, even in all the strangeness of 2020.

Joanna ([04:00](#)):

Thanks for making us part of your year. Here at Denver Institute, we talk a lot about the intersection of Faith & Work on this podcast. For a Christian songwriter, that intersection can seem a little bit more obvious, but how has your faith shaped the way that you approach the craft of songwriting?

Sandra ([04:16](#)):

What a great question. I think when I think about that question, I think about a lot of the old hymns. There's one that comes to mind by a pastor from Upstate New York, named Maltbie Badcock, who has this hymn that's called, This Is My Father's World. There's a line in there that's been said many times before in other places too, but he shines in all of that's fair. When I think about songwriting, I think about trying to look at the world, just walking around and making observations of what I see, and how I feel, and how I relate to others, and how I see their stories.

When I approached songwriting, I just really want to uphold God's light in the world and the way that we see it go out. So sometimes that's a country song, sometimes that's a worship song, it could be all kinds of things. But when I think about the craft of songwriting, it's looking for the elimination of God in the world.

Joanna ([04:16](#)):

I love that.

Dustin ([05:13](#)):

Yeah. As you mentioned, you've written and performed for a broad range of audiences. Tell us a little bit more about what that process looks like? I'm curious how an idea goes from an idea to a song on an album or a performance.

Sandra ([05:27](#)):

When I started out song writing, I was really young, so I would journal as a little girl. Then once I was in about middle school, I remember sitting in class and daydreaming and writing. So especially in history class or in classes where there were stories, they would engage my imagination so much, and I would write in the margins, and I began writing songs. So the songs for me came up out of expression or responding to stories. Then over time become more, I think my aim now is to communicate with others, to connect to others in their story. I don't think I looked for that to become my job, I think it just was a thing that came out naturally. Then as I look back, I'm really grateful that that has been something that's also like, pay the electric bill. But that was not what I set out to do, I didn't really see that coming.

Dustin ([06:24](#)):

Well. Where did that change come from? What did you set out to do and how did songwriting and performing become the detour?

Sandra ([06:29](#)):

I wanted to be a school teacher, actually. I wanted to teach school and making music, and I think just being a mom and there are other ways that that is part of my story, I enjoy that. But I think around college, I started making recordings, and as I was living in Nashville, that's what you could do, you could have a little home studio, [inaudible 00:06:54] recordings and then it just grew from there. Grew up in St. Louis and then I've been in Tennessee since the mid 90s for quite a while.

Joanna ([07:04](#)):

You were from the right city, for someone that wants to ease your way, [crosstalk 00:07:07].

Dustin ([07:07](#)):

Right.

Joanna ([07:08](#)):

Yeah.

Sandra ([07:09](#)):

There are a lot of avenues, you don't have to just go in and get a record deal and make some money. There's just a lot of ways to be creative and to make that work. It's almost like I would draw a parallel that it's like a family farm. You have a little plot of land, and sometimes you can grow corn, and sometimes you grow wheat. One way or another, you make it work to where you can live through the Winter.

Dustin ([07:32](#)):

Yeah. What does it look like to overcome obstacles, or roadblocks, or just breaks in your creativity? I have to imagine as an artist, there's times that you're working on an album, or preparing for something where it just doesn't feel like you're getting much out of it. What does it look like to push through those times?

Sandra ([07:47](#)):

That's a good question. It's probably been different things over the years, but lately the thing that is most life giving is just time apart from productivity. So it's not just rest, but it's like, you don't have to accomplish something. If I were to sit down and study the Bible, it's different than sitting down and just listening. I think that quiet is the thing that helps me to be more self forgetful. It's like getting past all the noise in your head and sitting there long enough to just really take a deep breath and realize, it's going to be okay, like whatever. So if you're anxious about not being able to produce a song, or not being able to get your work done, that doesn't actually help you make a song or get your work done. But if you can just step back and realize we're just here, we receive the love of God. When we can really be still in that place, then the good stuff flows out, without the same white knuckled energy.

Joanna ([08:54](#)):

One thing that it is fascinating is listening to the perspective that you have on the art of singing, Sandra. As someone who makes a career with your voice, people listen to you because they admire your voice. But you've argued that singing is important in the life of every believer. I saw this quote from an article you wrote in Christianity Today that really moved me, and I'd love to ask you about it in a moment. But you said, "Singing is a part of what it means to be human. You don't have to sing solo on a stage, but all creation is invited to join in the song back to God who made us. When we sing, we engage our affections, not just our speech. When we sing, we are expressing hope with our whole being." So as a writer and a performer, how has singing been part of your spiritual formation, either privately, or in a community with a group of believers?

Sandra ([09:39](#)):

I think when I think about the traditional folk music, like the songs of the people and how people used to sit on their front porches, or at the end of the day, and pull an instrument out, and sing songs. Obviously there's a romanticism around that, that would be easy to fall prey to. But I do think that a fundamentally were made to sing, and that there's something when, if you go to church on Sunday, and you say a particular creed, or a particular prayer, you are saying it together with your words. But when you sing something together, there's something that you really have to, there's no in between, you really have to give your whole body to it.

James K. A. Smith talks about this a little bit in his book, *Desiring The Kingdom and You Are What You Love*. Just the idea that we are embodied creatures, that what we do actually shapes the affections of our hearts. When we sing, and I've noticed that, on a personal level, there have been times when I was really sad and had a hard time singing. So I would play the piano, and then eventually sneak in and try to sing. That's like a very therapeutic way to coax myself out of that place of sadness. Like Winnie the Pooh would call that place, the pit. You fell in the pit and you can't get out, and he meant to trap the Heffalump, or whatever it was. The Psalmist talks about that too, Psalm 40 when he's like, "I waited patiently, He inclined and heard my cry. He lifted me out of the..."

I mean, man, that's life right now, right? It's like, we fall in the pit, he pulls us back out. I think singing is one way of, it's like that lifeline that pulls us up, and yeah. So it's been a gift to me, not in a vocational way, as much as it's just at a very basic level. You're so right, it's like the human experience that we share, whether or not you consider yourself a singer. It's something that's fundamentally human.

Joanna ([11:40](#)):

Yeah. It's so strange in this season where that sense of being physically at church together and singing together isn't possible. I remember early on my church here in Denver encouraged us to sing along with the live stream. Every week it was like, come on, you can sing, even though you're at home. They stopped saying that. I think something has happened in our lives where we've given up on some of those routines that have been vital in the past to our experience of faith. What do you think it looks like to reclaim singing praise in this season where we're not corporately gathering with other Christians?

Sandra ([12:12](#)):

I think it can be acknowledged that there's going to be some loss from that. That we could acknowledge before God that we miss this, and that this is what we're made for, and that we're in a time when that's actually not accessible to us. It's not permanent, like I think about Psalm 126 when God's people are in exile, and the people that are their oppressors are telling them they want them to sing these old songs. They're like, "We don't want to sing the songs. We don't want to sing the songs of being at home, and we won't do it for you." There's this defiance, but it's a season, it's not the final word on these people, it's that they are in exile for a period of time.

Trusting that, trusting God in the times when we are in the fog, or in the wilderness, it is exactly what faith is. It's like the things that we cannot see that we put our hope in this. I think just even the practice of singing by yourselves, or pushing in to do that on the Zoom calls, I think there can be shared intimacy on these Zoom calls that we are on the digital connections. The spirit of God is still at work in these times, and he is not bound by the technology, and he is not bound by our limitations. He's not surprised or like, what am I going to do now? The spirit is already ahead of us. I think if we look for those glimmers of hope, they're all around us. There've been some neat stories of that even in our community, where it's like a word, or a thought, or a song, and just God continues to wave us together. He will do that, and he's committed to that as our final destination.

Dustin ([13:48](#)):

So Sandra, I'd love to talk about your recent album, Patient Kingdom. It's been a personal favorite of mine and my family's over the last couple of months. You released this back in October. So I'm curious, just how did this album come about?

Sandra ([14:00](#)):

The title song, so about three years ago, I started compiling songs to make an album of songs that would push back against anxiety. Because I've just talked to so many people that have sleepless nights, and just a lot of things that we've been carrying. This was well before 2020. These songs, I wanted joyful songs, I wanted songs that would affirm what we know to be true. So the title track came along, it was actually in just this batch of demos that we made from a songwriter retreat in Vermont. I came across that title again in this demo, and I was like, "Oh man, this is like the centerpiece." This idea, the Patient Kingdom is the centerpiece for where we are.

Patient Kingdom is an album that we were supposed to be in the room together, the musicians were traveling all to Nashville. It was supposed to be in April 2020, and just completely changed. So we recorded it in our separate apartments, or home studios, in four different states, and compiled it with the effort of hoping that the end result would be that it would still feel like we were in the room together. I was really pleased, I mean, it was like an improvised experience trying to get there. But I think in the end, we were able to see that come to fruition in a way that I was just like, "Man, I'm just so thankful. Anyway, so yeah, I did. It was able to stay on schedule and still come out in October, but in a completely different way than we thought.

Joanna ([15:32](#)):

What Dustin didn't mention is the album has been his secret weapon this year in soothing his infant son.

Dustin ([15:38](#)):

Yeah

Sandra ([15:38](#)):

I love it.

Joanna ([15:39](#)):

The sound track is Ellis' life

Dustin ([15:42](#)):

So far, at least. Yeah. I appreciate you sharing how it all came together, musically and production wise, but there's so much of the album. You mentioned writing an album for people who are facing anxiety, or dealing with issues of anxiety. There's so much of the album and particularly the theme of patience that feels so timely right now. I just want to read a couple of lyrics from songs, "Thirst no more you say, there is a fountain ever flowing where the waters are not spent. Here, you and I, we trade our sorrows for the love that will not end." Then on the song, You Are With Me, "My heart is heavy and tired in this valley. Mountains grow higher and higher, but I can't find you. I'll keep lifting my eyes, I know you're with me." So Sandra, I'm curious, what are you hoping people take away from this album, at least right now?

Sandra ([16:25](#)):

I would hope people experience the comfort of God and the undercurrent of joy. That we can say how we're feeling honestly, but that beneath that, there's just this joy that is persistent. I think of it like a river, and the top of the water might be really choppy, but that undercurrent is actually moving exactly where it needs to toward the destination of the, it's moving toward the ocean, and it will get there, and that undercurrent joy is just always there. In the life of a believer, I just think that's what I'm hoping people will hear, both musically and lyrically interests in all the elements of what we've put together.

Dustin ([17:06](#)):

Yeah. We'd love to hear something from the aloe. I think you're going to play a couple lines from Patient Kingdom?

Sandra ([17:11](#)):

That'd be great. Yeah. Should I play Patient Kingdom?



Dustin ([17:15](#)):

Yeah.

Sandra ([17:16](#)):

That'd be a good one to start. Okay.

(singing).

Joanna ([19:52](#)):

Gosh, what a gift to us today. Thanks.

Sandra ([19:55](#)):

Thank you.

Joanna ([19:57](#)):

I wanted to ask a little bit about your recent Christmas album. It's a year old, and last year when you ready, you said that you hoped that the songs in the album were an invitation to a rest. There's just an irony to that in light of what was to come this year.

Sandra ([20:11](#)):

Sorry about that. I guess, we weren't asking for that, we really got it this year, didn't we?

Joanna ([20:16](#)):

You did. How does it feel a year later when you think of all that we navigated this year? What does it look like to allow that music to invite us into rest?

Sandra ([20:28](#)):

Well, man, the struggle for me is if I am trying to measure my worth on my performance, or having it together, or being in front of people, or just all the things that we put on, and none of those are bad things, but if my value is in that, then we're in trouble when all that's stripped away. Then we're just ourselves, in our rooms, on the phone, or whatever.

I think that there's a hidden gift in that, because we all have this invitation to rest in a way that is like, I think about it like God taking our face in his hands and really asking us to look at him, and to see and hear his affirmation of like, "I'm pleased with you just as you are." You don't have to do something. You don't have to produce something. You may not make any money this year. You may have a job change. I mean, all of these things that we weren't expecting this year, right? We share this because we're all in a similar disorientation. I think in that, there is just this opportunity to rest in a deeper way than maybe we were looking for. So that's the hope, and that maybe sounds like a severe hope, but I think it's a fruitful one, and I think it will be. I think it will bear fruit in time to come, as we have had to reckon with those questions this year.

Dustin ([21:53](#)):

Sandra, is there extra or different pressure creating a Christmas album where you're drawing on traditional hymns and traditional carols that people may have heard for 50 or 60 years? What was it like producing that this time last year, or releasing it this time last year?

Sandra ([22:08](#)):

Yeah. I love the old. I mean, I love the carols because they are back to that tradition of folk music, they're songs that we all know. I already have a connection to it because I've done a lot of work with old hymns. So that feels very natural to me to move in and out of this old language, that's brought into a new context. Trying to sing old words in a way that is just really in the moment. I like that practice, because I think the songs that have endured, they've stood the test, right? They're still here, and we're still singing Joy To The World, and we're still singing Hark the Herald Angels Sing, and it's on the Charlie Brown Christmas every year. It's like, this is what his line is say like, "That's what Christmas is all about Charlie Brown." I think when we get back to those places of history of poetry that's been spoken in Psalm for years, I think we're in a good place, a safe place.

Joanna ([23:04](#)):

Yeah. When I think of the Christmas story, I think of it being a story, and like so many biblical stories of lives that are disrupted, where circumstances outside their control just broke them out of their daily routine, or put them in positions of want or suffering, and that's very biblical. So this season that we're in isn't any different, we can lean into the disruption that may have helped delivering a child outside of the comforts of where she would have wanted to have that life experience happen. That just reflects this year, we can lean into that.

Dustin ([23:34](#)):

Sandra, what's your favorite song from the Christmas album?

Sandra ([23:38](#)):

Joy To The World is one of my favorites. I guess it's technically an advent song. It's the already, and the not yet. It's one of those songs that it was written by Isaac Watts in 1719. I think it was, when you think about the original intent, it was the anticipation of Christ coming, the King coming the second time. So when he says, "Joy of the world, the Lord is come, let earth receive her King." It's this looking ahead toward that, and that's where we are. So even though it's on this collection of Christmas songs, it's also one that you could sing in June. I think it's been enduring, and I'm really glad it's in the canon of Christmas songs that we all rotate, and still sing.

Dustin ([24:23](#)):

We'd love to hear it. Would you mind sharing it with us one more time?

Sandra ([24:23](#)):

Absolutely.

(singing).

Dustin ([27:00](#)):

Sandra, thank you so much. We use that line from the song a lot around Denver Institute, and Faith & Work in general, "He comes to make his blessings flow far as the curse is found." So thanks for sharing that with us this morning. You've been a gift to us at Denver Institute and a gift to the body of Christ through your songwriting and your performing.

Sandra ([27:17](#)):





Thank you so much, Dustin.

Dustin ([27:20](#)):

Yeah. I hope you and your family have a great Christmas.

Sandra ([27:21](#)):

Yeah, you too. Cheers, you guys. Hope to see you in person soon.

Joanna ([27:25](#)):

That'll be the best. Thank you.

Jeff ([27:31](#)):

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Speaker 2 ([28:38](#)):

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