



CAROLS & LESSONS

AN ADVENT DEVOTIONAL

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Carols and Lessons

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CAROLS

&

LESSONS

AN ADVENT DEVOTIONAL

INTRODUCTION

For Christians, advent is a time of waiting and preparation. In this season, we look back with thanksgiving to the birth of Jesus Christ, and forward with anticipation to his Second Coming. The songs of this season reflect the hope and joy of the Incarnation, but they also reflect the losses and struggles we experience now, while we wait for Christ's return.

Christmas carols have a long history, and rich tradition. In this booklet, with its 31 devotionals, we invite you to spend a month exploring the stories behind these familiar songs, and the messages of hope they convey. So read the scripture, sing the carol, and meditate on the truth of the Incarnation: God became one with us so that we might become one with him.

Merry Christmas!

READ

Matthew 1:20-23

²⁰ But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” ²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:

²³ “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall call his name Immanuel”

(which means, God with us).

SING

O Come, O Come, Immanuel

O come, O come, Immanuel,
and ransom captive Israel
that mourns in lonely exile here
until the Son of God appear.

Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel
shall come to you, O Israel.

“O Come, O Come, Immanuel”

“... they shall call his name Immanuel”
(which means, God with us). (Matt. 1:23)

One of the most familiar and best-loved of all Advent hymns is the haunting “O Come, O Come, Immanuel,” sung to a tune based on the Gregorian chant of the ancient church. The text goes back to an 8th-century antiphon, a “call and response” hymn that was used by choirs of monks and nuns in their vespers services during Advent. Each verse begins with an invitation to Jesus to come and save his people. Each one also addresses Jesus using a different name or image for him drawn from the Old Testament, some of which include *Immanuel* (Isa. 7:14), *Adonai* (“Lord,” used in Exod. 19:16 in connection with the giving of the law at Mt. Sinai), *Branch of Jesse* (Isa. 11:1), *Key of David* (Isa. 22:22), and *Bright Morning Star* (Num. 24:17).

Each of these images speaks in one way or another of the various promises of God to come to the aid of his people, bringing salvation and blessing—promises, as the apostle reminds us, that all find their “Yes” in Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 1:20). God’s Old Testament people looked for a coming king, as so many of the prophetic titles were bound up with the promised Messiah from the royal line of David. Christians sing these titles with longing for our King to return for our final deliverance, but with one big difference. Because he’s already come once, we also know his name—Jesus. And we know he is Immanuel, “God with us,” always; we have his word on that.

Prayer: Thank you, Jesus, for being our Immanuel.

READ

Psalm 130

Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD!

² O Lord, hear my voice!

Let your ears be attentive
to the voice of my pleas for mercy!

³ If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities,
O Lord, who could stand?

⁴ But with you there is forgiveness,
that you may be feared.

⁵ I wait for the LORD, my soul waits,
and in his word I hope;

⁶ my soul waits for the Lord
more than watchmen for the morning,
more than watchmen for the morning.

⁷ O Israel, hope in the LORD!
For with the LORD there is steadfast love,
and with him is plentiful redemption.

⁸ And he will redeem Israel
from all his iniquities.

SING

I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day

I heard the bells on Christmas day
Their old familiar carols play,
And wild and sweet the words repeat
Of peace of earth, good will to men.

And in despair I bowed my head:
“There is no peace on earth,” I said,
“For hate is strong, and mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good will to men.”

“I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day”

I wait for the Lord . . . and in his word I hope. (v. 5)

“I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day” is a poem written by one of the most popular poets in 19th-century America, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. The first line tells us the circumstances of the poem’s composition, but the key to its message lies in the year it was written—1864. On the Christmas day when Longfellow heard the church bells in Boston “their old familiar carols play,” the American Civil War was in its fourth year, and Longfellow felt the ironic contrast between the Christmas message of “peace on earth, goodwill to men” and the horrors of that fratricidal conflict. But as he listened to the bells, suddenly the Christmas gospel felt stronger to Longfellow than the hatred and killing of the battlefields.

*Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
“God is not dead, nor doth he sleep;
The wrong shall fail, the right prevail,
With peace on earth, good will to men.”*

One of the hardest lessons Advent has to teach us is that we need to wait—to wait for the Lord to make good on his promises. We wait with longing; as the psalmist says, we look for the Lord’s coming the way night watchmen look for the morning. We wait by not giving in to despair at the brokenness of the world or of our own lives. We wait even when it seems like we’re making little progress toward the prophesied shalom of God’s kingdom. With the psalmist, we wait in hope, because we believe God’s word is true, and trustworthy.

Prayer: O Israel, hope in the Lord!

READ

Isaiah 11:1-4

There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.

² And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him,
the Spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and might,
the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.

³ And his delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.

He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide disputes by what his ears hear,
⁴ but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth...

SING

Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming

Lo, how a Rose e'er blooming
From tender stem hath sprung!
Of Jesse's lineage coming
As men of old have sung.
It came, a flower bright,
Amid the cold of winter
When half-gone was the night.

Isaiah 'twas foretold it,
The Rose I have in mind:
With Mary we behold it,
The virgin mother kind.
To show God's love aright
She bore to men a Savior
When half-gone was the night.

“Lo, How a Rose E’er Blooming”

There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse. (v. 1)

This lovely German carol dates from the 14th century.

*Lo, how a Rose e’er blooming
From tender stem hath sprung!
Of Jesse’s lineage coming
As men of old have sung.*

The biblical verse on which it was based is Isaiah 11:1. The Rose of whom we sing is a flower on the “shoot from the stump of Jesse,” which is a symbol of the promised Messiah whose coming Isaiah foretold. This was a favorite biblical image in the Middle Ages, depicted not just musically but visually. Some medieval cathedrals have stained glass windows that feature the “Jesse Tree.” It shows a sleeping figure—Jesse, King David’s father—from whose side a stalk grows upward, sprouting kings along the way and climaxing in the figure of Jesus enthroned at the top.

A tree stump is dead, or at least it seems to be. When Judah’s last king was taken away into exile in Babylon, it looked like the house of David, the line of Jesse, was dead as well. But ours is a God who can bring life out of death, like a green shoot from a dry stump. He did it once when he sent Jesus into the world as the true Son of David, the King whose reign shall have no end. He did it again when he raised Jesus from the grave and exalted him in glory. He will do it finally when Jesus comes again to raise us from death in order to share in his reign.

Prayer: God of life, thank you for giving life and hope to me.

READ

Matthew 1:1-17

¹ The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham....

¹⁷ So all the generations from Abraham to David were fourteen generations, and from David to the deportation to Babylon fourteen generations, and from the deportation to Babylon to the Christ fourteen generations.

SING

Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus

Come, thou long expected Jesus,
born to set thy people free;
from our fears and sins release us;
let us find our rest in thee.

Israel's strength and consolation,
hope of all the earth thou art;
dear desire of every nation,
joy of every longing heart.

Born thy people to deliver;
born a child and yet a king;
born to reign in us forever;
now thy gracious kingdom bring.

By thine own eternal Spirit,
rule in all our hearts alone:
by thine all-sufficient merit,
raise us to thy glorious throne.

“Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus”

So all the generations . . . were fourteen generations. (v. 17)

Charles Wesley, measured by both quantity and quality, was the greatest hymn writer in church history. He wrote something like 6,000 hymns (estimates vary). Of all those thousands, ten or twelve are still commonly sung today, including “Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus.”

Jesus really was “long expected.” Think about how long the people of Israel had to wait for their Messiah. Matthew says that there were fourteen generations from Abraham to David, fourteen more from David to the deportation to Babylon, and a final fourteen between the exile and Jesus. (And he condensed the list some, especially in the first part.)

Even one generation is a long time to wait. We lost a shade tree in front of our house a few years ago. We replaced it, but it will be a generation before the new tree is big enough to shade the house. I doubt if I will ever see it.

But then imagine having to wait fourteen generations, and not just fourteen, but three times fourteen! Like ancient Israel, the church has been waiting too, and for about the same length of time. We’re waiting for our long expected Messiah to return and complete his great work of salvation. Perhaps you are also waiting today for some personal “coming”—better health, maybe, or greater happiness; for a spouse to return to a marriage, or a child to return to the faith. You’ve been praying for it, and long-expecting God to answer. Whatever it is you are waiting for, you can be sure Jesus will bring it with him when he comes.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, come quickly!

READ

Mark 1:1-8

¹ The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

² As it is written in Isaiah the prophet,

“Behold, I send my messenger before your face,
who will prepare your way,

³ the voice of one crying in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight,’”

⁴ John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶ Now John was clothed with camel’s hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷And he preached, saying, “After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. ⁸ I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

John 1:6-8

⁶ There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. ⁸ He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.

SING

On Jordan’s Banks

On Jordan’s bank the Baptist’s cry
announces that the Lord is nigh.
Awake and harken, for he brings
glad tidings of the King of kings!

“On Jordan’s Banks”

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. (Matt. 3:2)

In one way or another, each of the four Gospels starts with John, that austere wilderness preacher of repentance. Matthew and Mark bring him onstage just before the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry. Luke tells about the announcement of John’s birth before the more famous annunciation by Gabriel to Mary, and the fourth Gospel mentions John in its prologue. We know him as John the Baptist, which makes him sound like a fundamentalist preacher (actually, he was a fundamentalist preacher!). But the ancient church called him John the *Prodromos*: the Forerunner.

John dressed funny, ate weird food, worked in the boonies, and said a lot of harsh things. But all of this served a purpose. John was a one-man messianic advance team, looking and living like Elijah, meeting the people in the wilderness like Moses, speaking words from Isaiah. In fact, when the Jerusalem authorities sent representatives to investigate him, John told them he wasn’t even a prophet, let alone the Messiah. He was just a voice, crying, “Prepare the way!” Get ready; God is coming!

How do you prepare the way for God to come to you? By doing what John urged: repenting. An 18th-century Frenchman named Charles Coffin wrote the Advent hymn “On Jordan’s Banks.” Its message is simple. If we want to get ready for the Lord’s coming, do what John the Baptist says:

*Then cleansed be every life from sin:
make straight the way for God within,
and let us all our hearts prepare
for Christ to come and enter there.*

Prayer: Lord, help me turn from sin back to you.

READ

John 3:25–30

²⁵ Now a discussion arose between some of John's disciples and a Jew over purification. ²⁶ And they came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, he who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you bore witness—look, he is baptizing, and all are going to him."

²⁷ John answered, "A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven. ²⁸ You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.'

²⁹ The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete.

³⁰ He must increase, but I must decrease."

SING

From Heaven Above to Earth I Come

From heaven above to earth I come
to bring good news to every home;
glad tidings of great joy I bring
of which I now will say and sing.

"To you this night is born a Child
of Mary, chosen virgin mother mild;
this little Child of lowly birth
shall be the joy of all the earth."

Ah, dearest Jesus, holy Child,
make now a bed, soft, undefiled
within my heart, a quiet place,
a holy chamber for your grace.

All glory be to God in heaven,
who unto us his Son has given.
While angels sing with tender mirth,
a glad new year to all the earth.

“From Heaven Above to Earth I Come”

He must increase, but I must decrease. (v. 30)

This carol, whose words and music were written by Martin Luther for his family’s Christmas Eve devotions, is called in German *Vom Himmel Hoch*. It is one more musical version of the angels’ appearing to the shepherds and telling them the good news of the gospel.

*From heaven above to earth I come
to bring good news to every home!
Glad tidings of great joy I bring
to all the world, and gladly sing:*

Like the Christmas angels, John the Baptist was sent by God to bear witness to the coming of the Savior, God’s Son, into the world. But later John’s disciples became upset at what they thought was Jesus’ upstaging of John. After all, John had been there first. He had even baptized Jesus. Now everyone was flocking to this new man. That didn’t seem right somehow.

No, no, says John, you don’t understand. Jesus is the bridegroom; I’m just the best man. I’m not competing with him for attention. I’m not jockeying with him for position on the list of Israel’s Top Ten Preachers. “He who comes from above is above all” (v. 31).

Nothing is more important than believing in and obeying the Son, “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him” (v. 36). Our job is to do that first ourselves, then point others to him and get out of the way.

Prayer: Lord, may you indeed increase until all believe.

READ

Philippians 2:5-11

⁵ Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. ⁹ Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

SING

In the Bleak Midwinter

In the bleak midwinter, frosty wind made moan,
 earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone;
 snow had fallen, snow on snow, snow on snow,
 in the bleak midwinter, long ago.

Our God, heaven cannot hold him, nor earth sustain;
 heaven and earth shall flee away when he comes to reign.
 In the bleak midwinter a stable place sufficed
 the Lord God Almighty, Jesus Christ.

What can I give him, poor as I am?
 If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;
 if I were a Wise Man, I would do my part;
 yet what I can I give him: give my heart.

“In the Bleak Midwinter”

He made himself nothing by taking the very nature
of a servant. (v. 7 NIV)

Have you ever seen a painting of the manger scene by one of the Renaissance masters? The setting is clearly European, with Italian ruins or snow-covered German villages in the background. The poet Christina Rossetti does something similar, setting the Christmas story in her native England “in the bleak midwinter,” when

*...frosty wind made moan,
earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone;
snow had fallen, snow on snow, snow on snow...*

Of course, we don't actually know when Jesus was born, not even the exact year let alone the season. And it is highly unlikely that the ground around Bethlehem was frozen solid and buried in snowdrifts on the first Christmas. But this much is true: God did enter our world in the dead of winter, symbolically speaking, when our prospects were bleak and hope seemed frozen.

What a comedown it was for him! In two lines Rossetti paints the contrast between the glory of the Son of God and the lowliness of the baby Jesus:

*In the bleak midwinter a stable place sufficed
the Lord God Almighty, Jesus Christ.*

Such condescension, such voluntary self-humbling by God, makes an impossible demand: what could we ever give in response? Rossetti's answer is to give him my heart, which really means myself—all of me.

Prayer: Lord, I give you my heart.

READ

Isaiah 49:5-7

⁵ And now the Lord says,
 he who formed me from the womb to be his servant,
 to bring Jacob back to him;
 and that Israel might be gathered to him—
 for I am honored in the eyes of the Lord,
 and my God has become my strength—
⁶ he says:
 “It is too light a thing that you should be my servant
 to raise up the tribes of Jacob
 and to bring back the preserved of Israel;
 I will make you as a light for the nations,
 that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

SING

Savior of the Nations, Come

Savior of the nations, come,
 Virgin's Son, make here your home!
 Marvel now, O heav'n and earth,
 That the Lord chose such a birth.
 Not by human flesh and blood,
 By the Spirit of our God,
 Was the Word of God made flesh—
 Woman's offspring pure and fresh.

“Savior of the Nations, Come”

I will make you as a light for the nations. (v. 6)

“Savior of the Nations, Come” is the English translation of a German hymn, *Nun Komm, der Heiden Heiland*. But the German hymn was itself based on a Latin hymn by St. Ambrose—translated by none other than Martin Luther.

Ambrose was an upper-class Roman who lived during the waning years of the Roman Empire. He was the chief magistrate of Milan, at that time the administrative center of the western part of the empire. The 4th-century church was much troubled by the Arian heresy, which taught that the Son was a lesser being than the Father, and thus that Jesus was not fully God. Even the bishop of Milan held Arian views. But when he died, the people of Milan drafted Ambrose to replace him, despite the fact that Ambrose had not even been baptized yet, let alone ordained. Never mind; within a week Ambrose went through a crash course—baptism, ordination, and consecration—and was installed as the new bishop of Milan. He became a great champion of Christian orthodoxy.

“Savior of the Nations, Come” is a statement of the historic Christian faith as it was also expressed in the church’s ancient creeds—the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed. It proclaims a most important truth: only if Jesus is truly and fully God can he be the Savior of all the nations.

Well, he is God, truly and fully! And thus he really is the Savior of all nations!

Prayer: *Savior of the nations, come!*

READ

Ephesians 3:14–19

¹⁴ For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, ¹⁵ from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, ¹⁶ that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸ may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

SING

O Little Town of Bethlehem

O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie!
 Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by.
 Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting Light;
 the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.

How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given!
 So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven.
 No ear may hear his coming, but in this world of sin,
 where meek souls will receive him still, the dear Christ enters in.

O holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray.
 Cast out our sin and enter in; be born in us today.
 We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell;
 O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel.

“O Little Town of Bethlehem”

... that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. (v. 17)

There is a beautiful story behind this popular carol. Phillips Brooks was one of the most famous preachers in 19th-century America. He was pastor of Trinity Church in Boston for many years and later became the Episcopal bishop of Massachusetts. While Brooks was touring the Holy Land in 1865, he visited Bethlehem on Christmas Eve and stood in the shepherds' field that overlooked the town, where local tradition said the shepherds were “keeping watch over their flocks” on the night Jesus was born. Three years later Brooks recalled that scene in a simple carol he wrote for his Sunday school's Christmas service. Neither Phillips Brooks nor his church organist, Lewis Redner, who wrote the tune, thought that “O Little Town of Bethlehem” would ever be sung again after that service. But today it is known and loved throughout the world.

The carol breathes a spirit of peace and draws us into the stillness of that Christmas Eve scene. We're standing in the shepherds' field with Phillips Brooks, watching Bethlehem under the stars. With him we pray for the “wondrous gift” to be given to us too—that “Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith.” It doesn't necessarily happen dramatically. “*How silently, how silently*” our receiving Christ by faith can be, as Brooks exclaims. But it's real nevertheless.

*No ear may hear his coming,
but in this world of sin,
where meek souls will receive him still
the dear Christ enters in.*

Prayer: O holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray.
Cast out our sin and enter in; be born in us today.

READ

Revelation 5

...⁶ And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain, with seven horns and with seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth....¹¹ Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands,¹² saying with a loud voice, “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!”...

SING

Once in Royal David's City

Once in royal David's city stood a lowly cattle shed,
where a mother laid her baby in a manger for his bed:
Mary was that mother mild, Jesus Christ, her little child.

He came down to earth from heaven who is God and Lord of all;
and his shelter was a stable, and his cradle was a stall:
with the poor, and meek, and lowly lived on earth our Savior holy.

And our eyes at last shall see him, through his own redeeming love,
for that child, so dear and gentle, is our Lord in heaven above:
and he leads his children on to the place where he has gone.

Not in that poor lowly stable with the oxen standing by
we shall see him, but in heaven, set at God's right hand on high;
there his children gather round, bright like stars, with glory crowned.

“Once in Royal David’s City”

And . . . among the elders I saw a Lamb. (v. 6)

On Christmas Eve 1918, a service was held in the chapel of King’s College in the University of Cambridge. The bloodbath of World War I had ended barely a month before, and many a Cambridge man lay buried in Flanders fields. It was a somber Advent season. The college chaplain wanted to celebrate Christmas with a special new service, so he selected a series of Scripture readings to retell the story of God’s saving purposes. The readings began in Genesis with the story of the fall, and climaxed with John 1: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (v. 14).

The King’s College service of Lessons and Carols has become the world’s most widely broadcast Christmas celebration. The lessons remain the same; the carols that illustrate them mostly change each year. But the service always opens with a boy soprano from the choir singing the first verse of the processional hymn, “Once in Royal David’s City.”

*Once in royal David’s city
stood a lowly cattle shed,
where a mother laid her baby
in a manger for his bed...*

Then, verse by verse, the hymn builds, first with the choir joining, then adding organ, and finally the whole congregation singing the final stanza—

*Not in that poor lowly stable,
with the oxen standing by,
we shall see him, but in heaven,
set at God’s right hand on high...*

Jesus is no longer in the stable. One day everyone will see that.

Prayer: Grant, Lord, that we may see you in your glory.

READ

John 3:13-16

¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴ And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶ “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

SING

Of the Father's Love Begotten

Of the Father's love begotten
ere the worlds began to be,
he is Alpha and Omega—
he the source, the ending he,
of the things that are, that have been,
and that future years shall see
evermore and evermore.

Let the heights of heaven adore him;
angel hosts, his praises sing:
powers, dominions, bow before him
and extol our God and King;
let no tongue on earth be silent,
every voice in concert ring
evermore and evermore.

Christ, to you, with God the Father
and the Spirit, there shall be
hymn and chant and high thanksgiving
and the shout of jubilee:
honor, glory, and dominion
and eternal victory
evermore and evermore.

“Of the Father’s Love Begotten”

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son. (v. 16)

“Of the Father’s Love Begotten” is the best-known hymn of Aurelius Clemens Prudentius, a Roman government official born in northern Spain in AD 348. By his midforties Prudentius grew tired of the hustle and false glamour of the world, and retired to a humble life devoted to the writing of Christian poetry. This hymn tells the story of the incarnation of the Son of God, who was

*Of the Father’s love begotten
ere the worlds began to be*

In the New Testament, a mystery is a deep truth that we cannot fully understand, that we could never discover on our own, but that God has made known to us in Christ. The mystery of the Holy Trinity is that God has eternally existed in a community of love comprising three divine persons. The mystery of the incarnation is that the second of those persons became a real flesh-and-blood human being without ceasing to be God.

His coming is the measure of God’s love—that’s the point of the Bible’s most famous verse. Love isn’t measured by words but by actions, not by what you say but by what you are willing to do for the sake of the beloved. John 3:16 doesn’t just say that God loves us; it says he loves us so much that he gave his one and only Son to save us. All we need to do is believe in him.

Prayer: *Christ, to you, with God the Father and the Spirit, there shall be... honor, glory, and dominion and eternal victory evermore and evermore.*

READ

Philippians 4:4-7

⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. ⁵ Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; ⁶ do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

SING

God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen

God rest you merry, gentlemen,
let nothing you dismay,
remember Christ our Savior
was born on Christmas Day
to save us all from Satan's power
when we were gone astray.

O tidings of comfort and joy, comfort and joy,
O tidings of comfort and joy.

From God our heavenly Father
a blessed angel came,
and unto certain shepherds
brought tidings of the same,
how that in Bethlehem was born
the son of God by name.

Now to the Lord sing praises,
all you within this place,
and with true love and gentleness
each other now embrace;
this holy tide of Christmas
all others doth deface.

“God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen”

The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything. (vv. 5–6)

To understand the message of this jaunty old English carol, the most important thing to do is to observe the comma in the title. It's not “God rest you, *merry gentlemen*.” It's “God rest you *merry*, gentlemen.” The gentlemen—and gentle ladies are included, this being 18th-century English terminology—are not merry, as if they've had a little too much Christmas cheer. Nor is God being asked to make them rest, as if they've all been dancing too hard. The blessing that the carol asks is, “(May) God rest (make) you merry (happy), gentle people all.”

Why should we be joyful, no matter what our circumstances? Because Christmas reminds us of the Good News, “tidings of comfort and joy.” We have been given a Savior, and he changes everything. The apostle wrote a wonderfully ambiguous phrase to the Christians in Philippi: “The Lord is at hand.” The Lord is at hand, meaning he is about to return? Or, the Lord is at hand, meaning he is close by us? The answer is, both. That's why we can “rejoice in the Lord,” why we need not be anxious about anything. Cares may come and go, but happiness will be forever, because Jesus has come once and is coming again some day soon. Meanwhile, because he is close to us now through his Spirit, we can know joy, and even happiness, despite our sorrows.

Someone once asked an old African American preacher if Jesus ever laughed. “I don't know,” he replied, “but he sure fixed me so I could.”

Prayer: Thank you, Lord, for tidings of comfort and joy.

READ

Luke 1:5-25

¹¹ And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. ¹² And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. ¹³ But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. ¹⁴ And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵ for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. ¹⁶ And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, ¹⁷ and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared."

¹⁸ And Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years." ¹⁹ And the angel answered him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. ²⁰ And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time."

SING

Angels, from the Realms of Glory

Angels, from the realms of glory, wing your flight o'er all the earth;
ye who sang creation's story now proclaim Messiah's birth:

Come and worship, come and worship,
worship Christ, the newborn king.

Shepherds, in the field abiding, watching o'er your flocks by night,
God with us is now residing; yonder shines the infant light.

Sages, leave your contemplations, brighter visions beam afar;
seek the great Desire of nations; ye have seen his natal star.

“Angels, from the Realms of Glory”

I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and
I was sent . . . to bring you this good news. (Luke 1:19)

Angels don't mess around. The angel Gabriel was sent to Zechariah to announce the impending birth of his son, John the Baptist, who was to become the Messiah's forerunner. So Gabriel went, and did as he was told. That is one thing (there are obvious others) that makes angels different from us. Angels are defined not just by their glory and strength, but by their prompt obedience to God's commands. "Bless the LORD, O you his angels, you mighty ones who do his word, obeying the voice of his word!" (Ps. 103:20). No wonder then if Gabriel became a bit testy when old Zechariah seemed to doubt the possibility of God's commands being carried out.

Two hundred years ago an English hymn writer and newspaper editor named James Montgomery gave God's angels another command when he wrote this:

*Angels, from the realms of glory, wing your flight o'er all the earth;
ye who sang creation's story now proclaim Messiah's birth.*

Obviously, Montgomery wasn't really trying to order any angels around. This is a poetic way of retelling the Christmas story. In subsequent verses this carol calls on shepherds, sages (wise men), and saints to join in the joyous refrain:

*Come and worship, come and worship,
worship Christ, the newborn king.*

Christ isn't just the newborn king of the Jews; he is the newborn King, period. Every creature, both human and angelic, should come and worship him.

And one day, we hope, they will.

Prayer: I worship you today, Lord.

READ

Luke 1:76-79

...⁷⁶ And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
 for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
⁷⁷ to give knowledge of salvation to his people
 in the forgiveness of their sins...
⁷⁹ to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
 to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

SING

The First Noel

The first Noel the angel did say
 was to certain poor shepherds in fields as they lay;
 in fields where they lay keeping their sheep,
 on a cold winter's night that was so deep.

Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel,
 born is the King of Israel.

They looked up and saw a star
 shining in the east, beyond them far;
 and to the earth it gave great light,
 and so it continued both day and night.

And by the light of that same star
 three Wise Men came from country far;
 to seek for a king was their intent,
 and to follow the star wherever it went.

This star drew nigh to the northwest,
 o'er Bethlehem it took its rest;
 and there it did both stop and stay,
 right over the place where Jesus lay.

Then entered in those Wise Men three,
 full reverently upon the knee,
 and offered there, in his presence,
 their gold and myrrh and frankincense.

“The First Noel”

... to give light to those who sit in darkness. (v. 79)

Noel is the French word for “Christmas”; a *noel* is a Christmas carol. The first one, as we well know, was sung “to certain poor shepherds, in fields as they lay.” Its text was the “Gloria in Excelsis”; “Glory to God in the highest,” sang the angels to the shepherds, “and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!” (Luke 2:14). The first *noel* was a short song, but it pretty well summed up the Christmas message. “The First Noel,” on the other hand, is quite long. This anonymous English carol combines the story of the shepherds (from Luke 2) with that of the magi (Matt. 2). If you have the stamina, singing all of them will get you through the whole Christmas story.

The carol connects the shepherds to the wise men via the star of Bethlehem. Stanza 2 imagines the shepherds looking up to see a star in the east. Then in stanza 3, “by the light of that same star,” the wise men come traveling toward Bethlehem, and we follow them as they followed the star all the way to the place where the child lay, where we watch them come reverently in and open their gifts to him.

In the last stanza we’re all invited into the light to worship our Lord:

*Then let us all with one accord
sing praises to our heavenly Lord;
that hath made heaven and earth of naught,
and with his blood mankind hath bought.*

Prayer: O God, our Creator and Redeemer, accept my praises today.

READ

Luke 2:1-14

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. ² This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³ And all went to be registered, each to his own town. ⁴ And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, ⁵ to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. ⁶ And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. ⁷ And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

⁸ And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. ¹⁰ And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹² And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

SING

Angels We Have Heard on High

Angels we have heard on high,
sweetly singing o'er the plains
and the mountains in reply,
echoing their joyous strains.

Gloria in excelsis Deo.
Gloria in excelsis Deo.

“Angels We Have Heard on High”

Glory to God in the highest . . . ! (v. 14)

Not surprisingly, angels figure prominently in a lot of Christmas carols. “Angels We Have Heard on High” is another one. This traditional French carol and tune has us once more reliving in song the familiar story of Luke 2, this time from the perspective of the shepherds.

*Angels we have heard on high, sweetly singing o’er the plains
and the mountains in reply, echoing their joyous strains.*

This Christmas favorite is also one of the very few times that Protestants enthusiastically sing in Latin, as we belt out the carol’s refrain,

Gloria in excelsis Deo! (Or Glo-o-o-o-o-O-o-o-o-o-O-o-o-o-o-O-ri-a in excelsis Deo!)

That refrain, of course, is the angels’ praise song—“Glory to God in the highest!” In singing this we seem to be playing the part of the mountains, “echoing their joyous strains.” Maybe this is what the psalmist meant when he said, “Let the rivers clap their hands; let the hills sing for joy together before the LORD, for he comes . . .” (Ps. 98:8-9).

The carol’s final stanza invites us to join the shepherds in Bethlehem’s stable.

*Come to Bethlehem and see him whose birth the angels sing;
come, adore on bended knee Christ the Lord, the newborn King.*

We have even better reason to come and adore than they did. True, the shepherds actually saw and heard the angels. But we know the whole story—not only that he came, but why; not only that he would save, but how.

Prayer: May the whole creation join together in praise for your coming, Lord Jesus.

READ

Luke 2:14-20

¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”

¹⁵ When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.” ¹⁶ And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. ¹⁷ And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. ¹⁸ And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. ²⁰ And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

SING

On Christmas Night All Christians Sing

On Christmas night all Christians sing
to hear the news the angels bring:
news of great joy, news of great mirth,
news of our merciful King's birth.

Then why should we on earth be sad,
since our Redeemer made us glad,
when from our sin he set us free,
all for to gain our liberty?

All out of darkness we have light,
which made the angels sing this night.
“Glory to God in highest heaven,
peace on earth, and goodwill. Amen.”

“On Christmas Night All Christians Sing”

The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God
for all they had heard and seen. (v. 20)

OK, we’ve been listening to the angels’ singing for several days now; at last it’s our turn.

*On Christmas night all Christians sing
to hear the news the angels bring:
news of great joy, news of great mirth,
news of our merciful King’s birth.*

This text is sung to an old English tune known as the “Sussex Carol.” The English composer Ralph Vaughn Williams heard a woman singing this song in a village in the county of Sussex. He wrote down the tune and later used it in his music; hence the name. The words were first published in a 17th-century book by a little-known Irish bishop named Luke Waddell, but it isn’t clear whether he wrote them or merely recorded them.

What is clear is that the news of great joy and mirth ought to make us glad as well.

*Then why should we on earth be so sad,
since our Redeemer made us glad,
when from our sin he set us free,
all for to gain our liberty?*

This doesn’t mean that we will never struggle, or that if we’re good Christians we will be upbeat at all times. A friend who struggles with depression asked me recently to preach about that sometime, because he suspects—rightly, I think—that many Christians also do. We still live under the effects of the fall, both in ourselves and in our world. But it does mean that sadness is temporary; glad is forever.

Prayer: Thank you for your promised joy.

READ

Romans 8:28-30

²⁸ And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. ³⁰ And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

SING

Away in a Manger

Away in a manger, no crib for a bed,
the little Lord Jesus laid down his sweet head;
the stars in the bright sky looked down where he lay;
the little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay.

The cattle are lowing, the baby awakes,
but little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes.
I love you, Lord Jesus: look down from the sky
and stay by my side until morning is nigh.

Be near me, Lord Jesus; I ask you to stay
close by me forever and love me, I pray.
Bless all the dear children in your tender care,
prepare us for heaven, to live with you there.

“Away in a Manger”

... predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son. (v. 29)

No one really knows who wrote this carol, which began appearing in American hymnals in the late 1800s. It's sometimes attributed to Martin Luther, perhaps because Luther loved Christmas and he loved children, and he wrote a lot of good songs.

One of the problems with Christmas is that it can easily become too sentimental. Indeed, our secular culture has made a sort of mush out of the season. But this can even happen when we focus on the real Christmas story. So we sing about peace and love, and the warmth of the stable, and the animals there with Joseph and Mary, and—“Why, look at that. The baby doesn't even cry when he wakes up.” I'm pretty sure baby Jesus did cry when he woke up, cold and hungry and lying in a cattle trough, just as I'm sure that Mary felt the pains of childbirth and groaned literally, as Paul says our fallen creation does metaphorically.

But even in a sentimental carol like “Away in a Manger” we are reminded of the very unsentimental work Jesus has come to do.

*Bless all the dear children in your tender care,
prepare us for heaven, to live with you there.*

Jesus came to make us like himself. His redemptive project is also transformative. We will be transformed until we are conformed to his image, and the creation will be transformed until all traces of evil have been wiped away. Then we will be fit for heaven, and heaven will be fit for us.

Prayer: Bless all of us children, Lord Jesus.

READ

Mark 4:35-41

³⁵ On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, “Let us go across to the other side.” ³⁶ And leaving the crowd, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. And other boats were with him. ³⁷ And a great windstorm arose, and the waves were breaking into the boat, so that the boat was already filling. ³⁸ But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion. And they woke him and said to him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” ³⁹ And he awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm. ⁴⁰ He said to them, “Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?” ⁴¹ And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

SING

What Child is This?

What Child is this, who, laid to rest,
On Mary's lap is sleeping?
Whom angels greet with anthems sweet,
While shepherds watch are keeping?

This, this is Christ, the King,
Whom shepherds guard and angels sing:
Haste, haste to bring him laud,
The Babe, the Son of Mary!

Why lies he in such mean estate,
Where ox and ass are feeding?
Good Christian, fear: for sinners here
The silent Word is pleading.

So bring him incense, gold, and myrrh,
Come, peasant, king to own him.
The King of kings salvation brings;
Let loving hearts enthrone him.

“What Child Is This?”

And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?” (v. 41)

One of the most beautiful old English tunes is “Greensleeves,” which dates at least to the Middle Ages and was mentioned by Shakespeare. In the 19th century another of those prolific Anglican hymn writers named William C. Dix wrote the lovely words of “What Child Is This?” to fit this tune.

It’s a good question: what child is this? As we see with faith’s eye the baby with Mary his mother watching over him in the stable, and realize that at the same time this helpless infant is the eternal Word of God through whom all things were made, we should be filled with wonder. It reminds us of the question his disciples would later ask, after they saw him silence a stormy lake with a single word of command. “What manner of man is this...?” (Mark 4:41 KJV). And just as the disciples were awestruck and frightened when they caught a glimpse of Jesus’ true nature, so Dix urges us to a kind of reverential fear at the sight of God lying in a feed box.

*Why lies He in such mean estate,
Where ox and ass are feeding?
Good Christian, fear: for sinners here
The silent Word is pleading.*

But we need to do more than wonder at the mystery of God made man. We need to respond to him appropriately.

*So bring Him incense, gold, and myrrh,
Come, peasant, king to own him.
The King of kings salvation brings;
Let loving hearts enthrone him.*

Prayer: Lord, my heart enthrones you on this day and every day.

READ

Isaiah 6:1-3

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. ² Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. ³ And one called to another and said:

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory!”

SING

Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence

Let all mortal flesh keep silence,
and with fear and trembling stand;
set your minds on things eternal,
for with blessing in his hand
Christ our God to earth descended,
come our homage to command.

Rank on rank, the host of heaven
stream before him on the way,
as the Light of Light, descending
from the realms of endless day,
comes, the powers of hell to vanquish,
clears the gloom of hell away.

At his feet the six-winged seraph,
cherubim with sleepless eye
veil their faces to his presence,
as with ceaseless voice they cry:
“Alleluia, alleluia!
Alleluia, Lord Most High!”

“Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence”

Let all God's angels worship him. (Heb. 1:6)

With this Christmas hymn we are brought into the worship of the ancient church. “Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence” was originally written in Greek and is found in the Liturgy of St. James, which may go all the way back to the early church in Jerusalem. It certainly breathes the awe and sense of mystery that is associated with Eastern Orthodoxy.

*Let all mortal flesh keep silence,
and with fear and trembling stand;
set your minds on things eternal,
for with blessing in his hand
Christ our God to earth descended,
come our homage to command.*

The Nicene Creed speaks of the Son as “God from God, Light from Light.” So does this hymn, with the added thought that all the angels of heaven rise to honor and accompany him—clearing his path, so to speak—as Christ descends to earth to take on human flesh in order to defeat the powers of darkness.

*Rank on rank, the host of heaven
stream before him on the way...*

In Isaiah's vision the angels surround God with praise: “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts” (v. 3). “Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence” echoes that scene, but the cherubim and seraphim sing their praise to the incarnate Son.

*At his feet the six-winged seraph,
cherubim with sleepless eye
veil their faces to his presence,
as with ceaseless voice they cry:
“Alleluia, alleluia!”
Alleluia, Lord Most High!”*

Prayer: We worship you, Jesus, Son of God.

READ

Revelation 22:16-20

¹⁶ “I, Jesus, have sent my angel to testify to you about these things for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star.”

¹⁷ The Spirit and the Bride say, “Come.” And let the one who hears say, “Come.” And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price...

²⁰ He who testifies to these things says, “Surely I am coming soon.” Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

SING

How Bright Appears the Morning Star

How bright appears the Morning Star,
with mercy beaming from afar;
the host of heaven rejoices.

O Righteous Branch, O Jesse's Rod,
the Son of Man and Son of God!

We too will lift our voices:

Jesus, Jesus, holy, holy, yet most lowly,
come, draw near us; great Emmanuel, come and hear us.

Rejoice, O heavens, and earth, reply;
with praise, O sinners, fill the sky
for this, his incarnation.

Incarnate God, put forth your power;
ride on, ride on, great Conqueror,
till all know your salvation.

Amen, amen! Alleluia, alleluia!

Praise be given evermore by earth and heaven.

“How Bright Appears the Morning Star”

I am . . . the bright morning star. (v. 16)

Phillip Nicolai was a Lutheran pastor who lived from 1556 to 1608 and served congregations in several cities in northern Germany. He wrote the words and music of two of the greatest and most popular German hymns, “Sleepers Awake” and “How Bright Appears the Morning Star.”

The Christmas hymn *Wie Schoen leuchtet der Morgenstern* was written during a terrible epidemic in the city where Pastor Nicolai was serving. Surrounded by suffering and death, one day during his devotions he turned his thoughts to the Lord whose coming into the world brought light into our darkness, and who promises his presence in our need. The first verse prays for just that.

*How bright appears the Morning Star,
with mercy beaming from afar;
Jesus, Jesus, holy, holy, yet most lowly,
come, draw near us; great Emmanuel, come and hear us.*

But Nicolai doesn’t just think of his own immediate circumstances. In the hymn’s last stanza his vision expands outward to the whole universe, and forward to the full flowering of salvation. Though now we may experience suffering, and one day we too will die, our Incarnate God has conquered these enemies, and he will make our lives—and the life of the entire creation—end in praise.

*Incarnate God, put forth your power;
ride on, ride on, great Conqueror,
till all know your salvation.*

Prayer: Amen, amen! Alleluia, alleluia! Praise be given evermore by earth and heaven.

READ

1 Corinthians 15:51-57

⁵¹ Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, ⁵² in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. ⁵³ For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. ⁵⁴ When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written:

“Death is swallowed up in victory.”

⁵⁵ “O death, where is your victory?

O death, where is your sting?”

⁵⁶ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. ⁵⁷ But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

SING

Good Christian Friends, Rejoice

Good Christian friends, rejoice
with heart and soul and voice;
give ye heed to what we say:
Jesus Christ was born today.
Ox and ass before him bow,
and he is in the manger now.
Christ is born today!
Christ is born today!

Good Christian friends, rejoice
with heart and soul and voice;
now ye need not fear the grave:
Jesus Christ was born to save!
Calls you one and calls you all
to gain his everlasting hall.
Christ was born to save!
Christ was born to save!

“Good Christian Friends, Rejoice”

○ death, where is your victory?
○ death, where is your sting? (v. 55)

Here is a joyful invitation to celebrate the good news of the Christmas gospel. “Good Christian Friends, Rejoice” is another of the many hymns we owe to the linguistic and poetic gifts of John Mason Neale, a scholarly Anglican minister of the 19th century who translated numerous ancient hymns from Latin and German. In this instance, he translated “Good Christian Friends, Rejoice” from both Latin *and* German, because each line had a phrase written in each language. Originally titled *In Dulci Jubilo*, this medieval carol was used to teach the peasants (who could follow the German parts) what the priests (who chanted the Latin parts) were telling them on Christmas.

One 14th-century writer said that the angels sang *In Dulci Jubilo* while they danced on Christmas. I like the idea; it’s a rollicking tune. The climax of the carol comes in the last stanza, when we sing about why Christmas can help us dance even in the face of death.

*Good Christian friends, rejoice
with heart and soul and voice;
now ye need not fear the grave:
Jesus Christ was born to save!
Calls you one and calls you all,
To gain his everlasting hall.
Christ was born to save!
Christ was born to save!*

Now that Jesus has come, death is a general whose army has been defeated. It’s a scorpion that has lost its stinger. It’s still ugly and mean, but it can’t keep us from him.

Prayer: Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

READ

Psalm 98

Oh sing to the Lord a new song,
for he has done marvelous things!
His right hand and his holy arm
have worked salvation for him.

⁴ Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth;
break forth into joyous song and sing praises!

⁷ Let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
the world and those who dwell in it!

⁸ Let the rivers clap their hands;
let the hills sing for joy together

⁹ before the Lord, for he comes
to judge the earth.

He will judge the world with righteousness,
and the peoples with equity.

SING

Joy to the World

Joy to the world! the Lord is come: let earth receive her King.
Let every heart prepare him room,
and heaven and nature sing...

Joy to the earth! the Savior reigns: let all their songs employ,
while fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains
repeat the sounding joy.

No more let sin and sorrow grow, nor thorns infest the ground;
he comes to make his blessings flow
far as the curse is found.

He rules the world with truth and grace, and makes the nations prove
the glories of his righteousness
and wonders of his love.

“Joy to the World”

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth. (v. 4)

Unlike carols written for local occasions that took a while to become more widely known, “Joy to the World” was popular from the start. One reason is that its author was the best-known hymn-writer of the time (and one of the greatest of all time), Isaac Watts. Another is that it’s not really a Christmas carol, though we have pigeon-holed it that way. It’s a psalm paraphrase, and Watts wrote dozens of them, publishing them in a hymnal in 1719.

The psalm in this case is Psalm 98, which opens with a call to “sing to the Lord a new song” because of the marvelous and powerful things he has done in salvation. The psalmist goes on to invite the world of creation to join with the people of God in offering praise. “Let the sea roar... Let the rivers clap their hands... Let the hills sing for joy together” (vv. 7–8). All these show up in stanza 2 of “Joy to the World,” as the “fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains, repeat the sounding joy.” But in the third stanza Watts takes a detour from Psalm 98 and looks back at Genesis 3.

*No more let sins and sorrows grow,
nor thorns infest the ground;
he comes to make his blessings flow
far as the curse is found.*

Remember how even the ground was cursed because of Adam and Eve’s disobedience? Well, Jesus comes to undo all the consequences of sin, including the consequences in nature itself. Joy to the world, indeed!

Prayer: Praise to you, Lord, for the wonders of your love.

READ

Titus 2:11-14

¹¹ For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, ¹² training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, ¹³ waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, ¹⁴ who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.

SING

O Come, All Ye Faithful

O come, all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant!
 O come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem!
 Come and behold him, born the King of angels;

O come, let us adore him,
 O come, let us adore him,
 O come, let us adore him, Christ the Lord!

God of God, Light of Light eternal,
 lo, he abhors not the virgin's womb;
 Son of the Father, begotten, not created;

Sing, choirs of angels, sing in exultation,
 sing, all ye citizens of heaven above:
 "Glory to God, all glory in the highest!"

Yea, Lord, we greet thee, born this happy morning;
 Jesus, to thee be all glory given;
 Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing;

“O Come, All Ye Faithful”

...the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ. (v. 13)

This Christmas hymn was originally written in Latin (*Adeste Fideles*) by an English musician named John F. Wade, who was living in France because of his Roman Catholic faith. It was translated into English by an Anglican priest, Frederick Oakeley, who was forced to leave Oxford because of his Roman Catholic sympathies, and who eventually was ordained as a Catholic priest. And it's been sung ever since at every Christmas by just about every Protestant in the world. Go figure.

Have you ever sung a creed? You have, if you've sung the original second stanza of “O Come, All Ye Faithful.”

*God of God, Light of Light eternal,
lo, he abhors not the virgin's womb;
Son of the Father, begotten, not created;*

O come, let us adore him, Christ the Lord!

Those phrases are from the Nicene Creed, which was adopted by a universal council of the church in AD 325. The whole Christian church was in turmoil then because of a heresy called Arianism, which claimed that Jesus was a created being and less than God. One of their slogans went, “There was a time when the Son was not.” “Not so!” said the orthodox. The Son is the same as the Father in divine nature, and he is equally eternal. In the words of the Creed, he is “God of God, Light of Light, True God of True God, of one being with the Father... begotten, not created.” If we are faithful Christians, we're still singing that tune today.

Prayer: We praise you, Lord Jesus, God of God and Light of Light.

READ

1 Timothy 3:14-16

¹⁶ Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness:

He was manifested in the flesh,
vindicated by the Spirit,
seen by angels,
proclaimed among the nations,
believed on in the world,
taken up in glory.

SING

Silent Night

Silent night! Holy night! All is calm, all is bright
'round yon virgin mother and child! Holy infant, so tender and mild,
sleep in heavenly peace, sleep in heavenly peace.

Silent night! Holy night! Shepherds quake at the sight.
Glories stream from heaven afar, heavenly hosts sing: "Alleluia!
Christ the Savior is born! Christ the Savior is born!"

Silent night! Holy night! Son of God, love's pure light,
radiant beams from thy holy face with the dawn of redeeming grace,
Jesus, Lord, at thy birth! Jesus Lord, at thy birth!

Silent night! Holy night! Wondrous star, lend thy light;
with the angels let us sing Alleluia to our King:
"Christ the Savior is born! Christ the Savior is born."

“Silent Night”

Great . . . we confess, is the mystery of godliness. (1 Tim. 3:16)

Of all the Christmas carols ever written, this is the best-loved, and the story of its writing is best known. In the Austrian alpine village of Oberndorf, the assistant priest, Joseph Mohr, had written a beautiful little carol for the Christmas Eve service in 1818. In it, he envisioned the scene in the stable: the virgin mother watching her newborn child, an aura of holiness enveloping both. The church organist, Franz Gruber, wrote a tune to go with the text. But the organ in the church was broken, so at that Christmas Eve service when they sang the song together for the first time, Mohr and Gruber accompanied it with guitar. The congregation joined in by repeating the last line of each stanza:

...Sleep in heavenly peace.

...Christ the Savior is born!

...Jesus, Lord at thy birth!

...Christ the Savior is born.

“Great is the mystery,” exclaimed the apostle Paul in his first letter to Timothy. He goes on to quote a creedal statement from the early church that outlines the basics of Christ’s career, beginning with incarnation and ending in exaltation. “Great, we confess, is the mystery of our faith,” says the church in its communion liturgy. “Mystery,” as in, “Who ever could have guessed this?” “Who can begin to grasp the wonder of this thing that God has done?”

The eternal Creator of the universe came to earth as a baby in order to save us by living a perfect life on our behalf and dying a sacrificial death for our sins.

When words fail us, worship in silence.

Prayer: Contemplate the mystery on this silent, holy night.

READ

John 1:1-5, 9-14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. ⁴ In him was life, and the life was the light of men. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it...

⁹ The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. ¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. ¹¹ He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. ¹² But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

SING

Hark! The Herald Angels Sing

Hark! the herald angels sing, "Glory to the newborn King;
peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled!"
Joyful, all ye nations, rise; join the triumph of the skies;
with the angelic hosts proclaim, "Christ is born in Bethlehem!"

Hark! the herald angels sing,
"Glory to the newborn King!"

Christ, by highest heaven adored, Christ, the everlasting Lord!
Late in time behold him come, offspring of the virgin's womb.
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see; hail the incarnate Deity,
pleased as man with us to dwell, Jesus, our Immanuel.

“Hark! The Herald Angels Sing”

The word became flesh, and dwelt among us. (v. 14)

Once again, we have Charles Wesley (see December 4) to thank for one of our greatest Christmas carols. Although scholars tell us it originally began with the archaic and puzzling line, “Hark, how all the welkin [heaven] rings.” So if Wesley’s friend George Whitefield hadn’t suggested changing it to “Hark, the herald angels sing,” it might never have caught on. If you listen closely to the words and think about them while you sing, you will find yourself jumping around in the Bible a lot. We go from Luke 2 to Galatians 4 to Matthew 1 to John 1 to Malachi 4 to Philippians 2, and come back to Luke 2:14 with the refrain after every stanza.

The text is a curious mixture of exclamation, exhortation, and theological reflection. The text’s strength may not lie so much in any orderly sequence of thought but in its use of Scripture to teach its theology. That teaching surely produces in us a childlike response of faith; we too can sing “glory to the newborn King!” (*The Psalter Hymnal Handbook*, 1987).

My favorite part of this, my favorite Christmas carol, comes in stanza 3, where we sing out the truth of the Incarnation—

*Veiled in flesh the Godhead see;
hail the incarnate deity,
pleased as man with us to dwell,
Jesus, our Immanuel.*

If anyone ever asks you about the real meaning of Christmas, point them this way. God was pleased to dwell with us as a man; because of that, Jesus truly is “God with us”—now and forever.

Prayer: We worship you today, Immanuel.

READ

Mark 10:42-45

⁴² And Jesus called them to him and said to them, “You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. ⁴³ But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴ and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. ⁴⁵ For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

SING

Good King Wenceslas

Good King Wenceslas looked out on the Feast of Stephen,
 When the snow lay round about, deep and crisp and even.
 Brightly shone the moon that night, though the frost was cruel,
 When a poor man came in sight, gath’ring winter fuel.

“Hither, page, and stand by me, if you know it, telling,
 Yonder peasant, who is he? Where and what his dwelling?”
 “Sire, he lives a good league hence, underneath the mountain,
 Right against the forest fence, by Saint Agnes’ fountain.”

“Bring me food and bring me wine, bring me pine logs hither,
 You and I will see him dine, when we bear them thither.”
 Page and monarch, forth they went, forth they went together,
 Through the cold wind’s wild lament and the bitter weather.

“Sire, the night is darker now, and the wind blows stronger,
 Fails my heart, I know not how; I can go no longer.”
 “Mark my footsteps, my good page, tread now in them boldly,
 You shall find the winter’s rage freeze your blood less coldly.”

In his master’s steps he trod, where the snow lay dinted;
 Heat was in the very sod which the saint had printed.
 Therefore, Christian men, be sure, while God’s gifts possessing,
 You who now will bless the poor shall yourselves find blessing.

“Good King Wenceslas”

Whoever would be great among you
must be your servant. (v. 43)

December 26 is Boxing Day in Canada and the United Kingdom, but on the calendar of the medieval church it was St. Stephen's Day, when the feast of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, was celebrated. This is also the day when “Good King Wenceslas,” according to the traditional carol, looked out his castle window and saw a poor peasant trudging through the deep snow trying to gather enough fuel to keep warm. Wenceslas was a 10th-century ruler in Bohemia (now known as Czechia) who was noted both for his humility and for his many acts of personal charity.

His legend was recounted in an 1853 carol by the English hymn writer and translator John Mason Neale, whom we also have to thank for “Good Christian Friends, Rejoice” (see December 21). As Neale tells the story, Wenceslas calls a page boy to his side, finds out where the peasant lives, then personally sets out with the boy into the freezing weather to bring firewood, food, and drink to the peasant's cottage. The lesson comes in the song's final lines:

*Therefore, Christian men, be sure, wealth or rank possessing,
You who now will bless the poor shall yourselves find blessing.*

Shortly before his death Jesus called his disciples aside for a lesson in true greatness. The world's big shots like to throw their weight around and let everyone know how important they are. That's not how it is in the kingdom, says Jesus. There greatness is expressed in humble service.

Good King Wenceslas understood that. I wonder if I do.

Prayer: Help us to be servants.

READ

Luke 2:27-35

²⁷ And he came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law, ²⁸ he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said,

²⁹ “Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace,
according to your word;

³⁰ for my eyes have seen your salvation

³¹ that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,

³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and for glory to your people Israel.”

³³ And his father and his mother marveled at what was said about him. ³⁴ And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, “Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed ³⁵ (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.”

SING

The Holly and the Ivy

The Holly and the Ivy now both are full well grown,
Of all the trees that are in the wood, the Holly bears the crown.

O the rising of the sun, the running of the deer,
The playing of the merry organ, sweet singing in the choir.

The Holly bears a blossom, as white as lily-flower;
And Mary bore sweet Jesus Christ, to be our sweet Savior.

The Holly bears a berry, as red as any blood;
And Mary bore sweet Jesus Christ, to do poor sinners good.

The Holly bears a prickle, as sharp as any thorn;
And Mary bore sweet Jesus Christ, on Christmas Day in the morn.

The Holly bears a bark, as bitter as any gall;
And Mary bore sweet Jesus Christ, for to redeem us all.

“The Holly and the Ivy”

...and a sword will pierce through your
own soul also. (v. 35)

When Joseph and Mary brought Jesus into the temple to fulfill the requirements of the Law, old Simeon was waiting for them. Spirit-directed and Spirit-inspired, Simeon prophesied over the infant. But it was a mixed and somber message. Simeon expressed joy for the dawning of the light of Israel's (and the world's) hope, but he also foresaw trouble ahead. The child would bring salvation, to be sure; he would also provoke division. And Mary herself would experience piercing pain and sorrow in connection with her Son's mission.

Those who celebrate Christmas with the whole Bible in mind can't help but think about where the story is headed. There's plenty of rejoicing today, but suffering is just on the horizon. Nothing captures that aspect of Christmas better than the traditional English carol “The Holly and the Ivy.”

The Holly bears a berry, as red as any blood;...

The Holly bears a prickle, as sharp as any thorn;...

The Holly bears a bark, as bitter as any gall;...

The carol's refrain paints a medieval Christmas scene—chasing deer at sunrise, and organ music and sweet singing in church. But the verses point to the holly's red berries, sharp prickles, and bitter bark; in other words, blood, thorns, and gall—the cross, and the cost of our salvation.

Prayer: We bless you for coming to pay the price of our redemption.

READ

Matthew 2:1-2, 9-12

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, ² saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

⁹ And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was.

¹⁰ When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. ¹¹ And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. ¹² And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

SING

We Three Kings

We three kings of Orient are; bearing gifts we traverse afar,
field and fountain, moor and mountain, following yonder star.

O star of wonder, star of light,
star with royal beauty bright,
westward leading, still proceeding,
guide us to thy perfect light.

Born a King on Bethlehem's plain, gold I bring to crown him again,
King forever, ceasing never, over us all to reign.

Frankincense to offer have I; incense owns a Deity nigh;
prayer and praising, voices raising, worshiping God on high.

Myrrh is mine; its bitter perfume breathes a life of gathering gloom;
sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying, sealed in the stone-cold tomb.

Glorious now behold him arise; King and God and sacrifice:
Alleluia, Alleluia, sounds through the earth and skies.

“We Three Kings”

... and they fell down and worshiped him. (v. 11)

The first line of this familiar carol makes three claims about the magi, and of the three only one is certainly true: they were from the Orient. This doesn't mean they came from China or Japan; the Latin word *oriens* is literally “the place of the sun's rising,” so “Orient” refers to anyplace to the east—in this case, to the east of Jerusalem. But Matthew doesn't say how many of them there were, and they definitely weren't kings. He calls them *magoi* (or magi). Magi were a class of scholars who were a cross between astronomers and astrologers, and were especially numerous in Babylon and Persia.

The magi understood the heavens, so the Lord spoke to them in their own idiom and led them by a star. He reaches people in all sorts of places and by all sorts of means that we wouldn't expect him to use. He'll spark an interest in Jesus in someone, and then he'll lead them to his Word, the way he led the magi to the Bible scholars in Jerusalem, so they can meet him and come to know him personally.

The magi were gentiles. Jesus was born, as they themselves said, the king of the Jews. But his kingship was not intended just for one race or tribe. The blessings of his reign—peace and joy and hope—are meant for everyone. No one people is God's particular favorite. Jesus is the light of the whole world, and the magi represent a sort of preview of the nations who have come, and who continue to come, to worship Christ the Lord.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, bring the nations to worship you.

READ

Matthew 2:16-18

¹⁶ Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men.

¹⁷ Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah:

¹⁸ “A voice was heard in Ramah,
weeping and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be comforted, because they are no more.”

SING

The Coventry Carol

Lully, lulla,
thou little tiny child,
by by, lully lullay.

O sisters too, how may we do
For to preserve this day.
This poor youngling, for whom we do sing
By by, lully lullay?

Herod the king, in his raging,
charged he hath this day.
His men of might, in his own sight,
All young children to slay.

That woe is me, poor child for thee!
and ever morn and day.
For thy parting neither say nor sing
By by, lully lullay!

“The Coventry Carol”

A voice was heard in Ramah,
weeping and loud lamentation. (v. 18)

This time of year you sometimes see news images of armed troops patrolling the streets of Bethlehem—an ironic contrast to the Christmas message of peace and good will. Earlier generations of Christians didn’t need video to remind them of the dark side of Christmas. They sang “The Coventry Carol.”

*Herod the king, in his raging,
Charged he hath this day.
His men of might, in his own sight
All young children to slay.*

*Lully, lulla,
Thou little tiny child,
By by, lully lullay.*

Here, within the innocent confines of an ancient carol, are all the elements of today’s headlines from the Middle East: a ruler’s murderous rage, soldiers committing genocidal atrocities, and a refugee family fleeing for their lives—even as a young mother tries to quiet her frightened child by singing a lullaby.

The Christmas story reminds us that the world into which the Savior was born was not a very nice place, which is why he had to enter it in the first place. Christmas has always been a story of conflict and contrast: good with evil, light with darkness, joy with grief, hope with despair. The message of Christmas is not that there’s no reason to weep; there are plenty of reasons for weeping. The message of Christmas is that because God has come into the world, now there is reason for comfort and joy as well.

Prayer: Remember those who suffer, including the world’s refugees.

READ

Genesis 3:22-24

²² Then the Lord God said, “Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil. Now, lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever—”
²³ therefore the Lord God sent him out from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken. ²⁴ He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life.

SING

Jesus Christ the Apple Tree

The tree of life my soul hath seen,
 Laden with fruit, and always green,
 The trees of nature fruitless be,
 Compar'd with Christ the appletree.

His beauty doth all things excel,
 By faith I know, but ne'er can tell,
 The glory which I now can see,
 In Jesus Christ the appletree.

For happiness I long have sought,
 And pleasure I have dearly bought;
 I missed of all but now I see
 'Tis found in Christ the appletree.

I'm wearied with my former toil,
 Here I will sit and rest awhile;
 Under the shadow I will be
 Of Jesus Christ the appletree.

This fruit doth make my soul to thrive,
 It keeps my dying faith alive;
 Which makes my soul in haste to be
 With Jesus Christ the appletree.

“Jesus Christ the Apple Tree”

Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good! (Ps. 34:8)

“You have made us for yourself,” prayed St. Augustine famously, “and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” This truth is expressed with incomparable beauty in the carol “Jesus Christ the Apple Tree.”

This folk hymn compares Jesus to the tree of life from the Garden of Eden.

*The tree of life my soul hath seen,
Laden with fruit, and always green,
The trees of nature fruitless be,
Compar'd with Christ the appletree.*

When Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit—traditionally, an apple—God pronounced a curse upon them. Their lives would be painful and hard, and they would die and return to the dust. Then God banished them from the garden, posting an angel at the entrance to prevent them from returning and eating from the tree of life. This seems cruel but was actually merciful. If humankind found a way to live forever in its fallen state, that wouldn't be heaven; it would be hell. God had a different plan. He would provide another apple tree, Jesus, who would redeem the lost race and be the source of eternal life.

The children of Adam and Eve still wander the world, looking for whatever can satisfy their hunger for life and longing for happiness. How wonderful to learn that Jesus can, and does.

*For happiness I long have sought,
And pleasure I have dearly bought;
I missed of all but now I see
'Tis found in Christ the appletree.*

Prayer: O God, my heart rests in you today.

READ

Isaiah 40:9-11

⁹ Go on up to a high mountain,
 O Zion, herald of good news;
 lift up your voice with strength,
 O Jerusalem, herald of good news;
 lift it up, fear not;
 say to the cities of Judah,
 "Behold your God!"
¹⁰ Behold, the Lord God comes with might,
 and his arm rules for him;
 behold, his reward is with him,
 and his recompense before him.
¹¹ He will tend his flock like a shepherd;
 he will gather the lambs in his arms;
 he will carry them in his bosom,
 and gently lead those that are with young.

SING

Go, Tell It on the Mountain

Go, tell it on the mountain,
 over the hills and everywhere;
 go, tell it on the mountain
 that Jesus Christ is born.

While shepherds kept their watching o'er silent flocks by night,
 behold, throughout the heavens there shone a holy light.

The shepherds feared and trembled when lo! above the earth
 rang out the angel chorus that hailed our Savior's birth.

Down in a lowly stable the humble Christ was born,
 and God sent us salvation that blessed Christmas morn.

“Go, Tell It on the Mountain”

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation. (Isa. 52:7)

“Go, Tell It on the Mountain” was first printed in a collection of spirituals published in 1907 by John Wesley Work, a professor at Tufts University, and was popularized through performances by the Tufts Jubilee Singers. The spiritual picks up on references in Isaiah to preaching the good news of God’s message from the mountaintops.

Why does Isaiah say that those who proclaim the gospel have beautiful feet? I don’t think he’s talking about physical beauty. It’s not as though these preachers have just had pedicures. Their feet may be dusty and calloused, but they’re beautiful because of what they have undertaken in spreading God’s gospel of salvation. Why are these feet especially beautiful when they are walking on the mountains? Maybe it’s because mountains are difficult to climb and cross, but the preachers have done so because they want to reach those who haven’t yet heard the good news. Maybe it’s because when you stand on a mountain your voice carries farther (especially when it’s carried on a radio transmitter!).

Words of Hope exists to go “tell it” on any number of mountains—and valleys, deserts, cities, towns, and villages. We believe that it’s not enough just to celebrate Christmas for ourselves. We also need to preach the Christmas gospel to the world. Don’t you agree?

Prayer: Lord, we pray that throughout the coming year many will hear of you and believe.

About Words of Hope

Words of Hope has been producing church resources like devotionals, Bible studies, and radio programs for over 70 years. We produce these resources because we recognize the importance of growing the faith of Christians here at home. Our materials are backed by a solid Reformed worldview that you can trust.

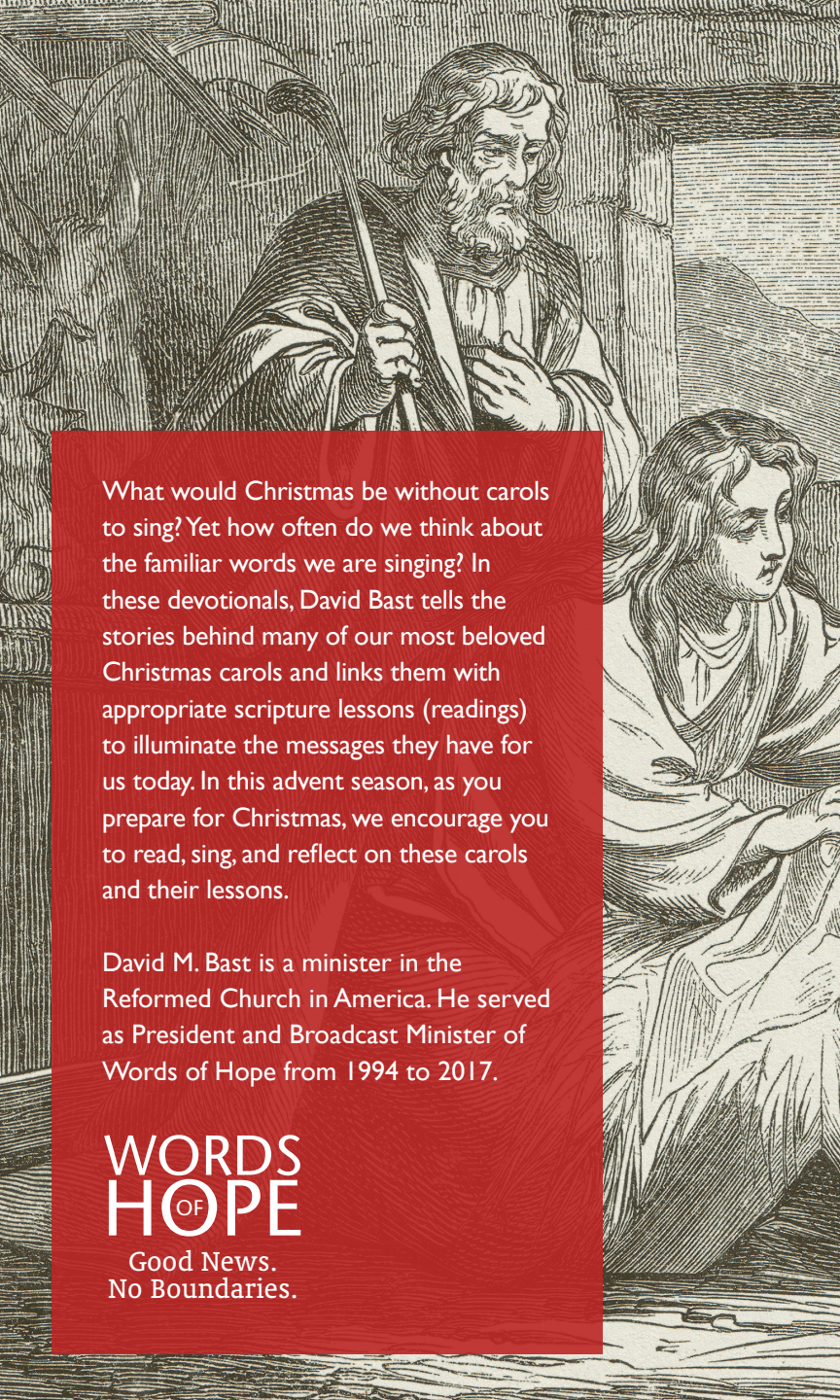
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Did you know there are still 4.7 billion people in the world who do not have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ? By partnering with Words of Hope, you can extend your international reach through audio technology like radio, podcasts, and digital recordings of the Scriptures that will be listened to in the native languages of some of the hardest-to-reach people on earth. International Christians use these resources to connect listeners to a church family so that they too can continue to grow in their faith.

To learn more about the resources and ministry efforts of Words of Hope, and to get involved in outreach yourself, visit www.woh.org.

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What would Christmas be without carols to sing? Yet how often do we think about the familiar words we are singing? In these devotionals, David Bast tells the stories behind many of our most beloved Christmas carols and links them with appropriate scripture lessons (readings) to illuminate the messages they have for us today. In this advent season, as you prepare for Christmas, we encourage you to read, sing, and reflect on these carols and their lessons.

David M. Bast is a minister in the Reformed Church in America. He served as President and Broadcast Minister of Words of Hope from 1994 to 2017.

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HOPE**

Good News.
No Boundaries.