

2022

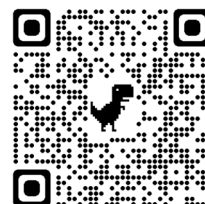
Advent

Devotional



It can be argued that Advent, more than any other season of the church year, is immediately relevant to our concrete lives as individuals, to the concrete life of the church under stress, and to the concrete headlines in the newspaper. The reason for that is that Advent tells us about our own lives as Christians, here and now. Advent is where we live, work, play, laugh, struggle, and die. Advent is the Time Between —between the first coming of Christ and the second coming, between darkness and dawn, between the kingdoms of this world and the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ. It is not the time of fulfillment; it is the time of waiting. It is not the time of seeing face-to-face; it is the time of seeing ‘through a glass, darkly’ (1 Cor. 13:12). It is not the time of triumphant victory; it is the time of bearing the cross.

To help us through this Time Between, we offer the following reflections shared by the gathered community at Grove Park. You can interact with our reflections in several different ways. You can read through this printed copy of the booklet. You can also scan the QR code at the bottom of each page; it will take you to the online version of this booklet, which adds to the reflection a recording of the carol being sung by another member of the Grove Park community. If you prefer, you can pick up a set of CD’s containing all the Advent recordings. Whatever format you prefer, we encourage you to tarry with each devotion and listen for the voice of God in both the singing of the carol and in the reflection offered.



Directory of Carols, Writers, and Singers

1. Sunday, November 27 — “O Come, O Come Emmanuel”
Writer — Matthew Byrd
Musicians — Nancy Webster, Kim Cain, Dale Cain, David McMillan
2. Monday, November 28 — “Prepare the Royal Highway”
Writer — Jim Etheridge
Musicians — Nancy Webster, Jean Vines, Hunter Joplin, David McMillan
3. Tuesday, November 29 — “Once in Royal David’s City”
Writer — Bob Webster
Musicians — Nancy Webster, Jean Vines, Hunter Joplin, David McMillan
4. Wednesday, November 30 — “Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus”
Writer — Karen Joplin
Musicians — Nancy Webster, Jean Vines, Hunter Joplin, David McMillan
5. Thursday, December 1 — “Lo, How a Rose E’er Blooming”
Writer — Rosemarie Goslen
Musicians — Nancy Webster, Jean Vines, Hunter Joplin, David McMillan
6. Friday, December 2 — “Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence”
Writer — Matthew Byrd
Musician — Janice Byrd
7. Saturday, December 3 — “Angels, from the Realms of Glory”
Writer — Janet Durham
Musicians — Nancy Webster, Jean Vines, Janice Byrd, David McMillan
8. Sunday, December 4 — “Joy to the World! The Lord Is Come”
Writer — Joan Smith
Musicians — Nancy and Bob Webster
9. Monday, December 5 — “Joy Has Dawned”
Writer — Caleb Warren
Musicians — Kim and Dale Cain
10. Tuesday, December 6 — “We Three Kings”
Writer — Earl and Susan Hudson
Musicians — The Coventry Carolers (Nancy Webster, soprano)
11. Wednesday, December 7 — “As with Gladness Men of Old”
Writer — Arnetta Petty
Musicians — Nancy McMillan and Janice Byrd
12. Thursday, December 8 — “Go, Tell It on the Mountain”
Writer — Bob Webster
Musicians — Nancy Webster, Jean Vines, Kim Cain, David McMillan

Directory of Carols, Writers, and Singers (continued)

13. Friday, December 9 — "Oh, Come, Little Children"
Writer — Candy Reavis
Musicians — Lindsay Denard and Tiffany Dunn
14. Saturday, December 10 — "Angels We Have Heard on High"
Writer — Kim Cain
Musicians — Choir
15. Sunday, December 11 — "There's a Song in the Air"
Writer — Lynnette Warren
Musician — Dale Cain
16. Monday, December 12 — "All Is Well"
Writer — Janice Byrd
Musicians — Kim and Dale Cain
17. Tuesday, December 13 — "It Came upon the Midnight Clear"
Writer — Vicki Stanley
Musician — Nancy McMillan
18. Wednesday, December 14 — "One Small Child"
Writer — Kim Cain
Musician — Jean Vines
19. Thursday, December 15 — "O Little Town of Bethlehem"
Writer — Eliza Sanders
Musician — Nancy McMillan
20. Friday, December 16 — "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day"
Writer — Janice Byrd
Musician — Cynthia Willets, Nancy Webster, Dale Cain, David McMillan
21. Saturday, December 17 — "Wexford Carol"
Writer — Lynnette Warren
Musician — Dale Cain
22. Sunday, December 18 — "I Wonder as I Wander"
Writer — Nancy Webster
Musician — Nancy Webster
23. Monday, December 19 — "Child in the Manger"
Writer — Marian Brewer
Musician — Cynthia Willets
24. Tuesday, December 20 — "Jesus Oh What a Wonderful Child"
Writer — Joan Smith
Musician — Shelly Sapp

Directory of Carols, Writers, and Singers (continued)

25. Wednesday, December 21 — "Some Children See Him"

Writer — Howard Martin

Musician — Jean Vines

26. Thursday, December 22 — "Mary's Boy Child"

Writer — Beth Canada

Musician — Janice Byrd

27. Friday, December 23 — "Breath of Heaven"

Writer — Cynthia Willets

Musician — Cynthia Willets

28. Saturday, December 24 — "O Holy Night!"

Writer — Benjy Overby

Musician — Nancy Webster

29. Christmas Sunday, December 25 — "He Shall Reign Forevermore"

Writer — Rev. Marc Sanders

Musicians — Choir

“O Come, O Come Emmanuel”

For Christians, Advent is a period of expectation and anticipation leading up to the celebration of Christ’s birth. This year, the world is much like it was that first Christmas: restless, longing for deliverance, yet hopeful. The ancient Advent hymn “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” speaks to this feeling. Each verse begins with a different Messianic title applied to the long-awaited Jesus:

“Emmanuel” (Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:23)

“Wisdom from on high” (Proverbs 8; 1 Corinthians 1:24, 30)

“Lord of might” (Isaiah 9:6; Revelation 19:11–16)

“Rod of Jesse’s stem” (Isaiah 11:1, 10; Romans 15:12)

“Key of David” (Isaiah 22:22; Revelation 3:7)

“Dayspring from on high” (Malachi 4:2; Luke 1:78)

“Desire of nations” (Isaiah 11:10; Matthew 12:18–21)

One of my most unforgettable Advent memories was hearing (feeling, really) this hymn played on the pipe organ at Wait Chapel during a service of lessons and carols. When the crowd joined in, I felt as if all those who had ever desired God’s coming into our world were singing along with us. As the final verse echoed off the stone walls of the chapel, I thought, just for a moment, that this is what the multitude of the heavenly host must sound like.

Jesus is still with us; He is still Emmanuel. He remains the ultimate source of wisdom and might. And one day, all nations will bow to Him and desire His faithful rule.

Matthew Byrd



“Prepare the Royal Highway”

The hymn title brings to mind a vision of a magnificent road in glorious mountains, along a beautiful seaside or a scenic rural farmland area planted with fabulous greenery and flowers of all kinds fit for a king. As I listen to this hymn, it is not just any earthly king that is coming but the King of kings, the King of glory who fulfills God’s story Himself who will be on this royal highway. The hymn tells me that we, His people, will see Him coming in all glory and we will greet Him with shouts of joy and singing. His coming will give us great joy, happiness and peace. We will fling open the doors of our homes and hearts and welcome Him. We will gladly bow down and worship and adore Him because His rule is peace and freedom, along with justice, truth and love. He cares for and loves us dearly.

During this Advent and Christmas season we must remember not only the birth of Christ but also His complete and total love for us through His suffering, dying on the cross and resurrection, giving us the blessed gift of salvation and eternal life.

Jim Etheridge



“Once in Royal David’s City”

This carol comes from a poem by Cecil Frances Alexander, first published in 1848 in her hymnbook *Hymns for Little Children*. It tells the story of the nativity of Jesus to illuminate his being born of the Virgin Mary. The first verse is:

*Once in royal David’s city
Stood 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.*

In reading this story, I was reminded of the lecture by a tour guide in Israel describing King David’s spying from his rooftop on the bathing Bathsheba down below. At that moment we were touring the City of David and observing the ongoing archaeological work just below the Temple Mount. I was not thinking about just 5-6 miles away was Bethlehem, which was also part of the City of David at that time. Bethlehem was David’s birthplace and there he grew into a young man. The Old Testament reports that it would be the place from which the Messiah would come.

Contrary to popular belief, the birthplace of the Christ child was in a cave, not a wooden stable as we’ve sung about for so long. In many ways this does not really matter much. I’m more impressed with the fact that our Lord had such humble beginnings.

The connections in the Bible are endless. I thought of God’s choosing flawed people to be leaders and heroes in the Bible. King David did not have a stellar reputation. Noah, Moses, some of the Disciples, and others were not the icons we would have chosen for the tasks they were given. And at this season comes baby Jesus under circumstances that would not make the evening news in our culture today.

This carol gives me pause since I was not familiar with it, but it has given me a chance to review many of the things that happened in or came out of the City of David. Both David and Jesus were born and died in that area of Jerusalem.

The City of David is the place where Jesus is to reign. The final chapters of the Bible describe a New Jerusalem where God’s people will reign forever, marking the earthly City of David with an eternal honor. Let us spend some time during this season to truly understand and appreciate the significance of these events.

Bob Webster



“Come Thou Long Expected Jesus”

The anticipation of the Messiah! The people of Israel, the world as a whole, had been longing and aching for Him for centuries. The deliverance from bondage, the rest from striving, the fulfillment of desire, and the salvation so needed would all be inherent in His birth. COME!!

The child is born and the King is come. Hallelujah! Our Deliverer is here! The bondage, the rest, the fulfillment and salvation have all become reality in Him.

We celebrate the birth as we continue the song... Come, thou long expected Jesus. Split the sky as you come again. We long and ache to sing the song with you in Heaven, to see your face, to walk with you, and to spend eternity in your presence. COME!!

Karen Joplin



“Low How a Rose E'er Blooming”

“Es ist ein Ros Entsprungen”

Advent is the time that prepares us for the coming of Jesus Christ our Lord. We enjoy singing the Advent songs and the reading of scriptures about the Lord's coming.

The Advent song that is mentioned in the headline is a 15th Century German song. The author of the song is not known. It was printed for the first time in 1599 in the city of Cologne, Germany. The song has two verses. The first verse tells us that a little flower will grow in the night from a tender root. The second verse tells that God chose Mary to bring forth a child in the night, this child was Jesus.

The Prophet Isaiah mentions in chapter 11 verse 1 and 2, that a shoot will come up from the stump, from his roots a branch will bear fruit. We learn that people then and now have been told that there is a Savior that gives us hope and help. The whole world experienced hard times lately that caused us to be separated from our friends and Loved Ones. We hoped that the Virus would lose its power soon. We had to stay positive and thank our Lord for each new day. Slowly things are getting better.

As we celebrate the Advent season let us remember the many hard times in the past and look to Jesus for our hope and help in the days to come. Enjoy singing the beautiful Advent songs!

Rosemarie Goslen



“Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence”

*But the Lord is in his holy temple;
let all the earth keep silence before him.*

Habakkuk 2:20

This haunting hymn is not typically associated with the Advent season in Protestant thought. Yet the ancient verses firmly pull the listener back to a time when Christianity held great mysteries. When these words were composed in Greek sometime in the 300s, great doctrines like the Trinity and Christ’s two natures were current events, and the Reformation wouldn’t arrive for more than a thousand years.

Because of its antiquity, the hymn transports me to another place, time, and culture. I find myself on the hillside with the shepherds, tending the flocks under a clear night sky teeming with stars. There is no light pollution, no street noise. No planes flying over, no phones chiming. The silence interrupted only by the occasional bleating of sheep.

Then it happens—an angel, glory, a proclamation, and a heavenly host. The weight of the situation is so intense that no one speaks. All mortal flesh is silent. Only after the angels recede does anyone say a word. How is the Savior here? How can the Christ be a baby in a manger? The mystery of all this is astounding. If the shepherds had found a scribe, they might have written the first verse of the hymn, the experience still fresh in their minds:

*Let all mortal flesh keep silence
and with fear and trembling stand;
ponder nothing earthly-minded,
for with blessing in his hand
Christ, our God, to earth descending,
comes our homage to command.*

May we regain the ability to “ponder nothing earthly-minded” in light of the astounding presence of Christ in a world desperate for His coming.

Matthew Byrd



“Angels, from the Realms of Glory”

The devotional thought for today comes from the hymn, *Angels from the Realms of Glory*. The words are from a poem written by James Montgomery and published on Christmas Eve in 1816. He was the son of Moravian parents who died on the West Indies mission field, while he was in boarding school.

Incorporated into the hymn is a call to all creatures to come and worship Christ, the newborn King, regardless of their station in life. He calls angels in flight all over the earth, shepherds in the fields nearby, wise men deep in study and meditation, and saints in the temple. As we sing this song let us think about where we come from as we come to worship and in what manner we approach it.

In reflecting on the words of this hymn I feel this could well be a challenge for each of us to answer our mission call to go into all the world, to teach, to show others the way, and to love them in. We should again remember those who do not share our joy in the promise of salvation because they have not been introduced to Jesus. Let us be an instrument to invite them in and introduce them.

During this Christmas season I implore you to personally “come and worship” this newborn King, this King of glory and honor, this Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Wishing you love, peace, and joy!

Janet Durham



“Joy to the World! The Lord Is Come”

The song “Joy to the World” is one of my favorite songs to sing at Christmas because when I think of Christmas, I think of joy. The dictionary defines joy as great happiness, delight, the acquisition or expectation of something good, and the prospect of possessing what one desires. Isaac Watts based the words to this song on Psalm 98 which celebrates the coming of Jesus who gives us salvation.

When my two sons were growing up, they spent hours studying the Sears Wish Book, a catalog of toys, as Christmas approached. After making their lists of toys they wanted, they waited with anticipation for Christmas morning. It was so much fun to see their happiness and delight as they opened their presents, expressing joy as they received what they had desired.

At Christmas this year, I hope we can find this child-like delight and happiness as we celebrate the birth of Jesus. As the song says, “Let heaven and nature sing,” we need to join in song expressing our joy because the Lord has come. When we hear, “Let every heart prepare Him room,” and “He rules the world with truth and grace,” may we open our hearts to receive Jesus as our Savior and King and allow Him to rule in our lives. May we see the glory of His righteousness and wonders of His love.

Because this song is so familiar, we often sing it without paying attention to the words and therefore miss its wonderful message. If you will play it again and really focus on the words as you hear them, I hope you will be reminded to express your joy and happiness that Jesus came to earth where He ministered, died, and was resurrected to give us salvation. Joy to the World, the Lord is come.

Joan Smith



“Joy Has Dawned”

As people waited for the prophesied savior to come there had to be some debate as to the form this savior would take. Would this savior grow up into a political king and tear down the Roman government, establishing Jewish political superiority? Would this savior lead an insurrection and cultural revolution redefining Judaism in the process? I cannot help but think there had to be conversation regarding this prophesied savior because God was silent for 400 years. What else could be done besides talk, and hope?

Then, the night that everyone waited for happened and Joy dawned upon the world, but in the form of a babe to a poor woman, in a stable. I imagine it was hard to see a king when looking at this babe, yet shepherds and wise men came and worshipped. Their doubt overcome by belief and hope in their God.

Fast forward roughly 33 years and this king has died. His movement was gaining traction and followers. His name was spreading across the continents. However, the savior is dead. Usually when the leader of a movement is murdered, history shows us that movement ends or others continue to fight, out of belief and hope. Jesus' movement certainly did not end, but neither did He. The leader of the movement had died, but also did He rise. Oh, did He rise. He did not come into the world with fanfares from above, nor with scenes of glory, but what we do know is that He rose with the might of Heaven behind Him and the glory of the angel legions beside Him.

The prophecy was fulfilled and the movement continues; Christianity continues. However, it is easy for us to sing this hymn and look back retrospectively on a story we have all of the details to and imagine what we would do and think. Hindsight is rarely ever blurry. I would encourage you as you listen to this hymn this advent season, try and imagine the story this hymn tells from a firsthand perspective. Your family and culture have waited 400 years under an oppressive Roman government. Your king is a mere babe born to a poor woman. You see the things your king does as his movement takes off. Then you see him paraded through the streets and murdered. How do you keep the faith and the movement alive?

It is easy for us to do so today, but how did our brothers and sisters do it centuries ago? If not for them, would we know our faith today as it is? We have much to be grateful for this holiday season. After all, our Champion stands undefeated, and by His blood, so do we.

Caleb Warren



“We Three Kings”

“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, 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.” ... After listening to the king, they went on their way. 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. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. 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.” Matthew 2:1-2, 9-11 ESV

“We Three Kings” is a Christmas carol that was created by John Henry Hopkins Jr. in 1857. This hymn depicts the story above from Matthew 2.

John Henry Hopkins, Jr. (1820-1891) was born in Pittsburgh, PA, the son of immigrant parents (his father from Dublin, his mother from Hamburg). His father had been an ironmaster, school teacher, lawyer, priest and second Episcopal Bishop of Vermont. John Henry reflected the artistic talents of both parents in music, poetry, and art. Although he originally worked as a journalist for a New York newspaper and studied to become a lawyer, he chose to join the clergy upon graduating from the University of Vermont in 1839. He continued his studies at the General Theological Seminary in New York City, graduated and became its first music teacher.

In 1857 Hopkins was in his final year of teaching at the seminary and also served as the rector of Christ Episcopal Church in Williamsport, PA. He composed the carol, both lyrics and music, for a Christmas pageant held at the college. Thereafter it was sung within his circle of family and friends. Because of the popularity it achieved among them, Hopkins decided to publish the carol in 1863. It was the first widely popular Christmas carol written in America.

Hopkins organized the carol in such a way that three male voices would each sing a solo verse. The first and last verses of the carol were sung together by all three as “verses of praise”, while the intermediate verses were sung exclusively with each king explaining the gift he was bringing.

Scripture does not tell how many wise men came, but does list three gifts. Each gift was appropriate for the newborn Jesus; gold for a King, frankincense for a God, myrrh for anointing and embalming. This beautiful carol is just another blessing from God Almighty, coming through the child of immigrant parents during the most tumultuous period in our nation’s history.

1. We three kings of Orient are: Bearing gifts we traverse afar—Field and fountain, moor and mountain—Following yonder star.

Chorus—Oh, star of wonder, star of night, Star with royal beauty bright, Westward leading, still proceeding, Guide us to thy perfect light.

2. Born a King on Bethlehem’s plain: Gold I bring to crown Him again, King forever, ceasing never, Over us all to reign. Chorus

3. Frankincense to offer have I, Incense owns a Deity nigh; Prayer and praising, all men raising, Worship Him, God on high. Chorus

4. Myrrh is mine, its bitter perfume Breathes a life of gathering gloom—Sorr’wing, sighing, bleeding, dying, Sealed in the stone cold tomb. Chorus

5. Glorious now behold Him arise: King and God and Sacrifice; Alleluia, Alleluia! Earth to heav’n replies. Chorus

Earl Hudson



“As with Gladness Men of Old”

This song was written by William Chatterton Dix around 1860 while he was suffering from an illness. The tune had been composed in 1838 by Conrad Kocher for a cantata, and the tune has been used with other hymns, one of which we often sing, “For the Beauty of the Earth.”

This hymn tells of the account in scripture of the visit of the wise men and applies it to us.

Stanza one refers to the star the wise men followed. There was a star heralding the birth of the King of the Jews which the wise men followed. Matt. 2:2. As they followed its light, it led them on toward the place where the new king was born. Matt. 2:1. This is used to symbolize the fact that God today leads us through the light of His Word. Psalm 119:105.

Stanza two refers to the worship which the wise men offered Christ. When they found the place where Jesus lay, they bowed down and worshipped Him.

Stanza three refers to the rare and precious gifts the wise men presented to Jesus. Matt. 2:11 tells us these gifts were gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

The coming of the Christ brought the wise men to see and worship Him. It should also fill our hearts with great joy, and we should also bring our treasures to our King, but first we should give ourselves to Him.

Stanza four refers to the Savior before whom the wise men fall. Because Jesus is the Savior, we should look to Him to keep us in the narrow way. He is the one who gave His life to ransom our souls, and if we follow Him, He will take us to that land where there will be no star to guide because He is the light.

Stanza five refers to the ultimate goal that awaits all truly wise men. This final goal is the heavenly country bright. There God will give the redeemed light as they reign forever with Him. Rev. 22:5.

Whenever we sing this hymn, whether at Christmas or any other time, we should sing it with gladness as it tells a beautiful story of true worship.

Arnetta Petty



“Go, Tell It on the Mountain”

Wikipedia reflects that “Go Tell It on the Mountain” is an African American spiritual, compiled by John Wesley Work, Jr. around 1865. Recorded by many artists, it is considered a Christmas carol as its original lyrics celebrate the nativity of Jesus. We also learn that Work was the first African American collector of folk songs and spirituals and was also a choral director, educationalist, and songwriter. He was born in Nashville, TN and attended Fisk University, where he organized singing groups and studied Latin and history, graduating in 1895. He also studied at Harvard University.

Wikipedia also reports that Charles Marsh, a religious studies professor and civil rights historian, cited Fannie Lon Hamer, an African American civil right leader, as one who modified the song. Hamer combined this song with the spiritual “Go Down Moses,” taking the last line of the chorus, “let my people go” and substituting it in the chorus of “Go Tell It on The Mountain.”

Notwithstanding the history of the song, the message in the chorus is the key learning for us as we think of Jesus’ birth during this Christmas season. In the first and second verses we sing of shepherds watching over silent flocks by night and that they trembled when angels sang of our Savior’s birth. In thinking about this image, I am reminded of being in the shepherd’s field outside of Bethlehem near Christmas time in 2018 at night, and we could see the lights of that old city on the horizon. What a thrilling sight as we sang carols with the tour group.

Shepherds were considered to be in a lowly profession in those times. They were social outcasts. The gospel of Luke further indicates that when the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds agreed to go over to Bethlehem and see the thing that had happened.

Now some two thousand years later we still celebrate this event. Do you ever wonder what the world would be like if this had not taken place? We have no way of knowing, of course, but it certainly gives us hope and inspiration to continue our work in bringing about God’s kingdom.

Bob Webster



“Oh, Come, Little Children”

Just yesterday, a friend proudly showed me a photo of her new granddaughter, taken when she was less than two hours old. Grandmother was so happy that she couldn't stop smiling! She was looking forward to holding that precious baby and rocking her to sleep in her arms.

It occurred to me that Mary, the mother who gave birth to the Savior of the world, did not have that same family support when Jesus was born. She and Joseph were away from home and on their own. We don't know how their families had reacted when they had learned of Mary's pregnancy. All alone in Bethlehem that night, Mary and Joseph may have wondered if anyone else was excited about the birth of their baby boy.

Then the angels announced His birth, and the shepherds made their way to the very place where Jesus lay. How encouraging it must have been to Mary and Joseph when those shepherds came to see their newborn son. Perhaps others from the area soon came, too, after the shepherds spread the word.

Such thoughts come to mind when we hear the words of this hymn.

*Oh, come, little children, oh, come, one and all,
To Bethlehem's stable, in Bethlehem's stall,
And see with rejoicing this glorious sight
Our Father in heaven has sent us this night.*

*Oh, there lies the Christ Child, on hay and on straw;
The shepherds are kneeling before Him with awe.
And Mary and Joseph smile on Him with love,
While angels are singing sweet songs from above.*

Candy Reavis



“Angels We Have Heard on High”

Angels We Have Heard on High is a French carol that was written in the 18th century. It is based on Luke 2: 8 - 15 (NIV) which says:

8 And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. 9 An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. 11 Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. 12 This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” 13 Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, 14 “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.” 15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”

What strikes me about this carol is the excitement and how much we see worship in action. We hear the angels praising God. We sing about the mountains rejoicing. We sing about the shepherds going to Bethlehem and worshipping Jesus on bended knee.

We sing the chorus “Gloria in excelsis Deo” which translates to Glory in the highest to God.

One can’t help but show excitement about the birth of Jesus while singing this carol. Glory in the highest to God!

Kim Cain



“There’s a Song in the Air”

There’s a Song in the Air is a beautiful Christmas carol (and originally a United Methodist hymn) written by Josiah G. Holland in the late eighteen hundreds. It was set to music in 1904 by Karl P. Harrington.

The carol exudes gladness and joy associated with the birth of Christ. It causes us to reflect on the events surrounding His birth. It causes us to reflect on the joy occasioned by His birth. It causes us to reflect on the effect Jesus’ birth had on the world. It causes us to reflect on the fact that Jesus is King, which is mentioned in each of the four verses in the carol.

Jesus our King entered the world as a baby in the humblest of circumstances, lived a perfect life and was obedient to God’s plan to be the sacrificial Lamb for our sin. We have good news to share! We can echo the “song” of His love and grace by sharing the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ. May we all make sharing His good news a priority in the new year.

Lynnette Warren



“All Is Well”

BREAKING NEWS:

The war in Ukraine is far from over
Hurricane Ian makes second landfall leaving death and destruction in its path
Another school shooting leaves 22 dead, 17 injured
Inflation reaches 40 year high
Stocks finish a losing week, month, and quarter
Covid-19, poverty, gangs, corruption, crime—the list goes on and on

It is easy for us to be consumed by negative news. Every day we are bombarded with incidents that cause stress in our lives. We often feel helpless and hopeless.

Imagine how the people of Israel must have felt waiting over 1,000 years for the prophecy in Isaiah 9:1-7 to be fulfilled. Between the time of the Old Testament and New Testament, 400 years passed without a word from God. The people of God were living in darkness. Under Roman rule, Israel suffered oppression and violence. Can you imagine how they must have felt as “tonight darkness fell into the dawn of love’s light”? A promise fulfilled—all is well.

There was great rejoicing that holy night as those living in darkness witnessed the miracle of a promise passed down from generation to generation.

“Christ is come, go and tell that he is in the manger.” Waiting is over. All is well.

As we celebrate the birth of our Savior, we understand the power of this birth. Emmanuel—God with us. We will continue to struggle with the daily situations that seem to be beyond our control. There will still be unrest, unfairness, unkindness, disasters, losses, and hard times. We live in a sinful world, but Emmanuel. All is well.

“Born is now Emmanuel; Born is our Lord and Savior.”

“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given;
and the government shall be upon his shoulder,
and his name shall be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” Isaiah 9:6

Sing alleluia. All is well.

Janice Byrd



“It Came upon the Midnight Clear”

“The Angel’s Song”

Reverend Edmund Hamilton Sears wrote a Christmas poem titled “Calm of the Listening Ear” that first appeared in the Boston Christian Register on December 29, 1849. Years later he was encouraged to revise his work and wrote what we know today as the hymn “It Came Upon a Midnight Clear”. However, it has also been referred to as “The Angel’s Song”.

Reverend Sears wrote the hymn during a period of personal struggles. He was recovering from a devastating illness and had recently suffered a break down. He was living among a period of turbulent times. The United States was still reeling from the aftermath of the Mexican War and the burning issue of slavery that, in another few years, would ignite the Civil War. People all over the world struggled. This is reflected in Verse 2:

*Yet with the woes of sin and strife the world has suffered long,
Beneath the angel strain have rolled two thousand years of wrong;
And man, at war with man, hears not the love song which they bring:
O hush the noise, ye men of strife, and hear the angels sing.*

This may be the only hymn we sing that does not mention the birth of Christ or the holy family, but the song of the angels. Luke 2:14 says the angels said, “Peace on the Earth, good will to men.”

This is a Christmas carol that doesn’t focus on Jesus but on “life’s crushing load”. It reminds us that, even through the challenges of our everyday lives, we should stop and listen to the angels sing!

As the hustle and bustle of the upcoming Christmas season takes over, may we take the time to slow down and listen for the angel’s song. May this hymn bring peace and comfort to all who are feeling stressed and overwhelmed.

Vicki Stanley



"One Small Child"

One Small Child was written by David Meece and first released in 1977. This beautiful song tells of the kings, the shepherds, and the mother Mary all worshipping the small Savior child.

The lyrics are as follows:

*One small child in a land of a thousand
One small dream of a Savior tonight
One small hand reaching out to the starlight
One small Savior of life*

*One king bringing his gold and riches
One king ruling an army of might
One king kneeling with incense and candlelight
One king bringing us life*

*See Him lying a cradle beneath Him
See Him smiling in the stall
See His mother praising His Father
See His tiny eyelids fall*

*See the shepherds kneeling before Him
See the kings on bended knee
Oh, See the mother praising the Father
See the Blessed infant sleep.*

*One small child in a land of a thousand
One small dream of a Savior tonight
One small hand reaching out to the starlight
One small Savior of life*

The song shows that Jesus was born for all - from the lowly shepherds to the powerful kings. In a land of a thousand, one small child is the Savior of us all. Let us all worship Him.

Kim Cain



“O Little Town of Bethlehem”

I grew up in a sleepy little town named Snow Hill after a place in England. It was founded on the Pocomoke River in 1686. Snow Hill is the county seat of Worcester County. If you drove through Worcester County, you might wonder why Snow Hill was the county seat. It's not Ocean City with flocking tourists, lines of hotels and restaurants. It's not Berlin where movies such as *The Runaway Bride* and *Tuck Everlasting* were shot. It's not Pocomoke City which has been named one of the Friendliest Towns in America. Snow Hill is smaller than all of these, yet it is special. It is a place where you can see the stars twinkling at night and hear the frogs down near the river banks. At Christmas, the downtown is decorated with white lights on every tree and bows and wreaths on every door. The churches have garlands and nativities. And the townspeople dress up as Victorian characters with a night Christmas Parade that makes you cold and happy all at once. I think that is why I've always loved this hymn. Little Bethlehem, tiny and unknown, sleepy and silent reminds me of my little town. Scripture describes Bethlehem as too little to be among the clans of Judah, and yet in the dark streets shineth the everlasting light. This is the Christmas story. God reaching down to Earth, not to the powerful but to the powerless. Here in this sleepy little unknown town the Messiah of the world will be born. Here in a dark cave where animals are kept, God will come forth. Here, shepherds, the outcast, will be the first to hear the good news. Here in this forgotten place, angels will sing His glory and wisemen will bow before him. Here the stars will proclaim Emmanuel - God is with us! And here in this little town, God will bring peace to men on Earth.

As you listen to this hymn today, may you be reminded that Jesus came for you. The world may batter us and forget us. We may feel small and insignificant like Bethlehem but God has engraved us on the palm of his hands. He tells us that like a child at his mother's breast, He will not forget nor forsake us. The story of Bethlehem is our story. Feel the peace of this hymn and be comforted that God knows and sees you. See the stars and be reminded that we too should shine with the glory of God. And know that even in the darkness of this world, there is a light that is everlasting.

Eliza Sanders



“I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day”

One of my mother’s favorite Christmas carols was “I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day.” Having been born in 1920, just after World War I, she grew up during the Great Depression. During her lifetime, she would live through World War II, the Korean War, Vietnam, and many Mideast conflicts, not to mention the era of Civil Rights, assassinations of a US President, numerous foreign leaders, and those who tried to bring peace to a struggling world. Her 2011 Christmas letter began with a copy of this carol, with the words to the third verse highlighted. It reads:

*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.”*

Three months prior to the Christmas season of 2001, our country had experienced the attack now referred to as “9-11.” Even though hatred and violence had reared its head that year, we had been blessed with a season of love, kindness, and unity within our communities, and support throughout many nations of the world.

The author of this carol, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, came to realize that there is hope. The unrest of this world—the unfairness of daily life, the hatred, the evil, the poverty, the natural disasters—weighs heavy on our hearts and minds. As Christians, we celebrate the Savior who continually pours out the blessings of hope, mercy, grace, forgiveness, and love. Verse four speaks to this:

*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.”*

Cling to hope. Pray for peace.

Janice Byrd



“The Wexford Carol”

The Wexford Carol is one of Ireland’s oldest traditional Christmas carols. When I first listened to this beautiful carol, my first thoughts were that it was the Christmas story from Luke Chapter 2 set to music. The first stanza of the carol reads “Good people all, this Christmas time, consider well and bear in mind what our good God for us has done in sending his beloved son.”

The word consider has really grabbed my attention and caused some self-reflection. Webster’s defines consider as “to think about carefully” and I have asked myself do I really ever truly “consider” the significance of the Christmas story? Do I consider what it cost God the Father to sacrifice his son (would you sacrifice your child?) Do I consider the obedience to God’s will demonstrated by the Virgin Mary and Joseph? Do I consider the obedience of the shepherds as they chose to not be afraid and traveled to find baby Jesus? Do I consider the sacrifice of Jesus as he was obedient to the Father’s will and gave his life as a ransom for my sins?

As the Christmas season approaches, I pray that we will spend time considering what our good God has done for us through the birth of Jesus and become more obedient, more thankful and more willing to serve boldly as we follow Him into new areas of service and ministry.

Merry Christmas!

Lynnette Warren



“I Wonder as I Wander”

“I Wonder as I Wander” was composed by American folklorist John Jacob Niles in 1933 after he heard a young girl named Annie Morgan sing a couple of lines at a gathering in Murphy, North Carolina.

In Psalm 19 King David sang, “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge.” There is something powerful about contemplating matters of faith and life under a broad canopy of blue sky. A songwriter shares her heart through her music; an artist reveals his perspective through his painting. Likewise, the character and heart of God are reflected in nature, his creation.

*“I wonder as I wander, out under the sky, how Jesus the Savior did come for to die.
For poor ornery people like you and like I. I wonder as I wander, out under the sky.”*

It is difficult to grasp. How could the creator of the universe send his son to die for someone who often feels poor in spirit (and dollars) and is more than a little bit ornery? Why would he do such a thing for such an ordinary, underserving, wandering sheep like me?

*“When Mary birthed Jesus, all in a cow's stall, came wise men and farmers and shepherds and all.
And high from the heavens a star's light did fall; The promise of the ages it then did recall.”*

The owner of the universe could have chosen any place for his son, Jesus to be born on earth. My daughter was born 35 years ago December 26 in a warm, dry birthing room in a hospital in Springfield, Missouri, with a pile of warm blankets, a doctor, and a few nurses nearby. I can't imagine giving birth outdoors in a stable or a cave, on a winter night. What message was written in the heavens in star light on that first Christmas night so long ago in Bethlehem? And why were farm animals and poor shepherds on the hillside first on the guest list to witness this grand miracle?

Jesus didn't come to make us comfortable and wealthy or to lead a grand military army, as some at the time expected. Instead, he said uncomfortable things like: “The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.” Go figure.

*“If Jesus had wanted for any wee thing, A star in the sky or a bird on the wing,
Or all of God's angels in heaven for to sing, He surely could have had it, 'cause he was the king.”*

He could have had any or all of these things for his birthday, but the Savior of the world chose something different. In “I Wonder as I Wander” we hear the lonesome edge of winter set against the awe of heaven in the advent story—glorious and ordinary at the same time. There he was as the prophecies foretold, but in the most humble of circumstances, demonstrating his immense, life-changing love for a bunch of ornery people on earth who could only stare at the sky in wonder and gratitude while contemplating his amazing gift. Sometimes that's still the best we can do, trying to understand it all.



“Child in the Manger”

All babies are so special. I am so thankful for the years I got to serve the women and children who came through the doors at the Heart’s Cry Ministry. We served them with three main things – the necessities for babies/children and their family, the opportunity to learn how to make their foundation stronger by learning to know the Lord as their Savior and Guide, and a listening ear. Sadly, this ministry had to close in December of 2021. It was hard for all of us to understand as the ministry wound down to its final day. But this was NOT the end of the Story! God had already made other plans (unknown to us).

From the first day we got the news in June that we were going to have to close (Oh, so many questions!), we knew that God was the One closing this door. Over the next six months, He would show us the many opportunities that were reopening in one stead and carrying on the ministry of His work toward the underserved populations. He multiplied the Heart’s Cry Ministry into four other ministries that we were able to assist by giving them all our goods (clothes, furniture, books, office supplies, Bibles, and even the very building we were using was given to one of the new ministries). God took literally everything we had and used “all” of it to start up or support four other ministries that bear His name to minister and support other underserved populations (babies, college students and missionaries). Wow!! How appropriate that the pictures of baby Jesus lying in a manger of straw wrapped in swaddling clothes is the picture that comes to mind when I think of the Heart’s Cry.

God didn’t send Jesus in regal attire. He sent Him to a carpenter and a faithful handmaiden to show us how much He cares for the underserved populations (widows, orphans, and other displaced peoples). He was born in a stable and placed in a manger on purpose. No detail of any of these stories was left unfinished. God planned it every step of the way and worked out all the details (unknown to us). But with God, there’s always more to the story. One may end and another begins as a result. So, the next time some hard times, trying circumstance, adversity, trial (whatever you want to call it) strikes, remember that as Jesus was able to walk His planned path, so we can, no matter what! He is there guiding our every step even when we can’t see or feel Him. Just know it in your heart, trusting when this trial ends – a new chapter begins.

So this Christmas season, when a hard time strikes, or you get an urge to do something for someone, or want to start a new tradition, or see something that touches your heart, see “The Child in the Manger”, the Champion of the underserved, the undeserving, the weak, the lost, the broken hearted, the unseen, (put a group you think of here _____). Ask God what He’s wanting/leading you to do and just do it. Start a new chapter and let God lead. He knows the way!

God Bless You All! And Merry Christmas!

Marian Brewer



“Jesus Oh What a Wonderful Child”

When I hear the song “Jesus Oh What a Wonderful Child,” I can’t keep from clapping my hands in joy and excitement and praise. This spiritual describes Jesus as a baby, born in a manger, lowly, meek, and mild and says that this special baby Jesus brings new life, new hope, and new joy.

That is exactly the feeling I had when my two sons were born. I had waited in anticipation so long for their birth, and was excited when that happened. Each of those tiny babies brought me such joy and happiness that I wanted to share with everyone. They gave me new life, new hope, and new joy, just as Jesus does.

Jesus wants us to share that hope and joy with those we encounter in our lives. We should shout with joy and thanks to God for His Son Jesus, and sing, “Glory, glory, glory” to Him as the angels did in this song.

During the time of Advent, we are waiting and preparing for Jesus’ birth just as I waited and prepared for my sons’ birth. When Jesus’ birth finally comes, we are overjoyed and express our happiness and excitement as this song does.

I am singing my praise to the newborn King Jesus.

Joan Smith



“Some Children See Him”

Every believer sees the baby Jesus first within the context of their background and culture. After all the first real babies we see and touch are usually younger siblings, cousins, or friends of the family. We see a baby and think Jesus was a baby just like them. So we place the Biblical story of Christ’s birth and how he looked within our culture. We can see such depictions in paintings such as Rembrandt’s *Adoration of the Shepherds* or Raphaels’s *The Madonna and Child*. If we were born into another culture we might see baby Jesus with Asian features, or Hispanic features.

Other cultures have names for the Christ written out other than Jesus. In Hebrew his name would be Yeshua (English spelling is Joshua). The Greek translation of that would be Jesus. So Joshua and Jesus are the same just as “Yes” is the same as “Oui” and “Si” and “Ja.” Here are some different countries/cultures and their word for Jesus.

Bosnia	Isus	Mongolian	Ecyc
Cherokee	Tsisa	Romanian	lisus
Hawaiian	Iesu	Vietnamese	Chúa Giêsu
Italianan	Gesù		

I mention these things because Christians have actually gotten into arguments over how they believed Jesus looked or how you should write or say his name. Majoring on the minors instead of the important things.

I believe that it’s fantastic that people of different ethnicities see the baby Jesus as one of them. For Jesus came for them, for all of them, not just Europe, the Middle East or America, but for the entire world. He knows them all, each one, by their name, and He hears when they cry out for Him even in a 100 different languages.

Is it important to know how Jesus looked two thousand years ago or how to say his name? No, you don’t have to worry about it. It’s more important for you to have experienced His love and forgiveness for then you will know His voice and He will know you and He will be in your heart.

I am the good shepherd, and I know My own and My own know Me.

Howard Martin



“Mary’s Boy Child”

As I listen to “Mary’s Baby Boy”, my first thought is that it is lovely. It is a beautiful, amazing and heart-touching musical reminder for us to keep Christ in Christmas.

We need to be prompted because as time has gone by, society has changed Christmas. Charles Dickens’ “A Christmas Carol” written in 1843 perhaps is responsible for the Christmas celebrations we have today. Stories written about Santa Claus, elves, reindeer and grinchies have taken front and center. The secular preparations taking place this time of the year (buying presents, decorations, party going, etc.) keep us busy. These Christmas activities performed by Christians and non-Christians alike are often devoid of Christian elements.

The first lines of “Mary’s Baby Boy” reminds us what the real source of information on Christmas is...the Holy Bible. We are signaled to remember and prepare for the commemoration of the birth of Christ. This song while telling the story of Christ’s birth, beckons us to recall that this child carried the hopes for the whole world because He came to save us.

The Father sent Jesus because of His love for us. John 3:16 “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life.

Let’s reflect during this Christmas season on what Jesus did for each of us.

And man will live forevermore because of Christmas Day!!

Christmas blessings to you all.

Beth Canada



“Breath of Heaven”

“Breath of Heaven”, what a beautiful carol!

When I hear or sing this carol, I reflect on the words and wonder how Mary felt. She is pregnant, afraid and alone. Perhaps she is feeling insecure and unworthy of carrying the baby Jesus.

Mary was chosen to carry the Christ Child. It was definitely a blessing and honor but also an enormous responsibility. She was tired and cold but she didn't complain. What did she do? She prayed for strength and guidance. She had faith in the goodness of God.

Do we pray when we feel afraid or alone like Mary?

When God gives us a responsibility, do we complain? We need to see it as a blessing and honor. I'm not suggesting that it's simple to handle difficult situations. We need to have faith and pray for strength.

The carol “Breath of Heaven” gives me assurance that if I have faith in God's goodness, I can handle any situation.

Cynthia Willets



“O Holy Night”

*For his anger lasts only a moment,
but his favor lasts a lifetime;
weeping may stay for the night,
but rejoicing comes in the morning. Psalm 30:5*

Many artists have recorded O Holy Night including Nat King Cole, Bing Crosby and even my personal favorite Elmer Fudd. Legend even states that it was the first song played on the radio. However, the story of its origin is fascinating in and of itself. In 1847 a local Priest in France asked an atheist poet Placide Cappeau to write something for Christmas mass. He wrote a poem and was so happy with it he asked Adolphe Charles Adams, a practicing Jew to write the music. One of the wonders of our Christmas time originated from two individuals who professed no faith in Christ. Once the church discovered those facts, the song was actually banned in the French church.

Fast forward a few years, an American abolitionist named John Sullivan Dwight discovered the song and rewrote the lyrics to what we know today. Dwight poetically nails an explanation of the Gospel in the first stanza.

*Long lay the world in sin and error pining
'Til he appeared and the soul felt its worth*

The world laid in sin and error due to man's faults. The world was in another word lost. However, upon Christ's appearing, the soul of man finally has its purpose in its redeemer. God through Christ made the world whole.

*A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn'*

Dwight goes further in the next line. He indicates there is a thrill of hope and that the weary world rejoices. Consider the state of the world prior to Christ. In Galatians Chapter 3 Paul tells us we were bound to sin. In Romans Chapter 3 Paul tells us we are all sinners and that the punishment for sin is death. No wonder the world is weary, we were bound to something that leads us to eternal damnation and separation from God. But God during the appointed hour sends our thrill of hope and a new morning breaks. As David says in Psalm 30, God's anger lasts for a moment, our sorrow only for a moment and our joy, our hope comes in the morning. That Hope is Christ as Dwight so poetically explains.

Finally what should then our response be to our Redeemer. Once again, the carol here is instructive I think.

FALL ON YOUR KNEES

Dwight indicates that we should Fall on our knees in an act of worship. So for this Christmas perhaps instead of focusing on our weariness, business and divisions, we should simply fall on our knees and worship our redeemer.

Benjy Overby



“He Shall Reign Forevermore”

Last year I stumbled across this new Christmas hymn and fell instantly in love with it because to me it perfectly expresses the vitality and transcendence of Christmas. It accomplishes such a gigantic charge by first capturing what truly happened in Bethlehem so long ago, a baby was born. I think sometimes we overlook the miracle that this baby and really all babies represent. A baby in the strictest sense is a combination of two lives into one. We express this sentiment when we hold a newborn and comment on how the child may have their father's eyes and their mother's nose. Bethlehem's babe represented this on a far larger scale for He represented the joining of the divine and humanity as Jesus was fully human and fully divine, the perfect expression of two lives becoming one. Our hymn today captures that as it borrows from Christina Rossetti's poem "In the Bleak Midwinter," which has been turned into a hymn, and two excerpts from Handel's "Messiah," "The Hallelujah Chorus" and "For Unto Us Child Is Born," as it seamlessly weaves these well known pieces into a new life for modern hearers in clearly recognizable ways from the start.

Now, as a child grows up the physical similarities that were clear at birth are often joined by emotional and dispositional aspects of the extended family. For example, a lifelong friend recently commented to Eliza that I shared a lot of my grandmother's disposition. Such aspects can only be discerned over time and with careful study. The writer of today's hymn achieves this in the third verse as he rearranges lines from the 19th Century hymn "See Amid the Winter's Snow" by Edward Caswall. It took some research as I knew that "Here within a manger lies/The One who made the starry skies" was too poetic to be attributable to modernity, but I ultimately found it. How wonderful that a forgotten hymn of long ago is reborn for modernity to enjoy and be edified by!

What does any of this have to do with the hymn expressing the vitality and transcendence of Christmas? Beloved, each day you and I are invited to find new life by allowing the divine to enter into our lives in a fresh way than it did the day before. By doing so, we not only grow more and more in the image of Bethlehem's babe, but we also express to modernity that God still changes lives. Hence, the vitality of Christmas is seen. Furthermore, as we grow more in the image of Christ, we exhibit to a new generation Jesus's values and attributes to declare anew that they have not been forgotten. We remind the world that God still loves sinners, finds inherent worth in everyone, is on the side of the disenfranchised, remains continuously at work to bring justice to the earth, and yes, reigns. These are values that humanity desperately needs a reminder concerning and are accomplished if everyday we allow Christmas to be transcendent rather than simply 24 hours in our annual trek around the Sun. May we continuously seek to carry the vitality and transcendence of Christmas into each new day.

Happy Christmas,
Marc





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