

OH COME
LET US
Adore
HIM



2018 Advent Devotional

Sing in Exultation

Santa Claus is Coming to Town. Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer. It's Beginning to Look A Lot Like Christmas. I'll Be Home for Christmas. Jingle Bells. The most notable sounds of the Christmas season are the familiar tunes of Christmas carols. Holiday music playing in stores and on the radio are some of the first signs that Christmas is coming. From a young age, we sing along to these songs throughout December. They evoke emotions about this special season, reminding us of Christmases past and filling us with anticipation.

Christmas hymns are also etched in the memories of believers. They too evoke emotions and bring anticipation, but of something deeper. These hymns remind us of our Savior, who was, is and is to come. As we hear and sing these songs, we are strengthening and further confirming our faith. When we sing these Christmas hymns, and are aware of the scripture references within, we are following the appeal from Deuteronomy, "Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds... Teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up." (Deuteronomy 11:18-19). Singing helps us to learn and remember scripture.

We pray this devotional will guide you through this season of anticipation and that you will be able to take time individually or as a family to meditate on the coming of our Lord, Jesus. The devotional focuses on the Christmas story through the lyrics of well-known and often-sung hymns. These carols are windows into the truths of scripture. You are encouraged to read and meditate upon the correlating scripture verses as you prepare your heart for the coming King.

Blessings to you this Advent season!

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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.*

In December 1745, Charles Wesley published a two-verse prayer in *Hymns for the Nativity of our Lord* that helps us enter into the season of Advent. As we sing Wesley's words, we enter into an ancient prayer. For hundreds of years, our ancestors in the faith prayed for the Messiah to come. God had blessed them to be a blessing to all the nations (Genesis 12:1-3), but it was difficult to feel blessed in the pain of defeat, exile, and occupation. They longed for the Messiah to come and reestablish the kingdom (Joel 3:16; Haggai 2:7).

We understand those feelings of distance from God. While we have experienced times when God feels near, there are others seasons of struggle and doubt. Some of us have spent time wondering if God is still with us. So, we join this prayer today, "Come, thou long-expected Jesus."

We also know this on a much larger scale. We see the brokenness of our world and its systems. We long for justice for all people regardless of race, color, national origin, ethnicity, age, gender, disability, status, economic condition, sexual orientation, gender identity, or religious affiliation. We await the day when Jesus will return to usher in the new creation and heal our broken world. We join this prayer for our future also, "Come, thou long-expected Jesus."

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” has the quality of a petition—a prayer that implores Christ to be among us. Imperative verbs are used six times in the two stanzas found in the hymnal: “**Come**, thou long-expected Jesus;” “From our fears and sins **release** us;” “**Let us find** our rest in thee;” “Now thy gracious kingdom **bring**;” “**Rule** in all our hearts alone;” and “**Raise** us to thy glorious throne.” The effect of these petitions is a tone of supplication. Wesley succeeds in recalling the deep longing of ancient Israel for the Messiah—the Promised One.

He also draws upon another technique, the repetition of a single word for effect. In this case it is the word “born” which appears four times. Each time “born” is sung, an aspect of Jesus’ mission to a troubled world is revealed: “Born to set thy people free”; “Born thy people to deliver”; “Born a child and yet a king”; “Born to reign in us forever.”

Born to set thy people free: Hebrews 2:14-15

Born thy people to deliver: Galatians 4:4-5

Born a child and yet a king: Isaiah 9:6; John 18:37

Born to reign in us forever: 1 John 4:9; Revelation 11:15

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel

*O come, O come, Emmanuel,
And ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here
Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.
Until the Son of God appear.
Rejoice! Rejoice!*

This hymn, originally in Latin, takes us back over 1,200 years to monastic life in the 8th or 9th century. All of the Latin acknowledgements to the coming Messiah are from the Old Testament except “Emmanuel,” which is found both in Isaiah 7:14 and Matthew 1:23. Matthew quotes Isaiah almost word-for-word—“Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Emmanuel”—with the exception that Matthew adds the phrase: “which being interpreted is, God with us.”

The hymn originated in part from the “Great ‘O’ Antiphons,” part of the medieval Roman Catholic Advent liturgy. On each day of the week leading up to Christmas, one responsive verse would be chanted, each including a different Old Testament name for the coming Messiah. When we sing each verse of this hymn, we acknowledge Christ as the fulfillment of these Old Testament prophecies. We sing this hymn in an already-but not yet-kingdom of God. Christ's first coming gives us a reason to rejoice again and again, yet we know that all is not well with the world. So along with our rejoicing, we plead using the words of this hymn that Christ would come again to perfectly fulfill the promise that all darkness will be turned to light. That is the promise we hold to as we sing this beautiful hymn.

The famous refrain, *Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to you, O Israel*, references two Old Testament passages that describe the longing of Israel for a Savior: Isaiah 59:20 and Isaiah 66:10.

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel

*O, come O Rod of Jesse's stem
From every foe deliver them
That trust your mighty power to save;
Bring them in victory through the grave*

The solemn chant of “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” reminds us of our depravity. The tune and words represent sin of the fallen world, while also describing the majesty of Christ, as each verse sings of a title of Jesus. This verse begins, “O come o rod of Jesse’s stem,” based on Isaiah 11:1-2 in which a shoot is described as springing forth from a dead stump. In sin, the whole world is dead, like a stump from which a tree has been cut. Isaiah paints an interesting picture, though. From this seemingly dead thing, new life will begin. Jesus will free His people from death, the power of sin and the devil. Other scripture references for this verse include: Isaiah 11:10; 1 Corinthians 15:54-57.

Thursday, December 6

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel

*Oh, come, O Key of David, come
And open wide our heavenly home;
Make safe the way that leads on high
And close the path to misery*

The next verse of this solemn hymn, in which Jesus is named the **Key of David** describes the process of being rescued. Jesus is referred to as the **Key of David** because he fulfills the prophecy given to David in Jeremiah 33:14-15 and 26. Jeremiah prophesied that of one of David's descendants would bring salvation and confirm His covenant with all. Jesus rescues us from hell, shuts the door behind us, unlocks and opens wide the door to heaven and brings us to our eternal home. In Isaiah 22:22, the prophecy of Jesus is described as a key placed upon his shoulders. Jesus is the key to **Heaven** and rules over **His Kingdom**. Other scripture references include: Revelation 3:7; John 14:6-7; Hebrews 10:19-23 and Revelation 1:18.

Friday, December 7

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel

*O come, O Bright and Morning Star,
and bring us comfort from afar!
Dispel the shadows of the night
and turn our darkness into light.*

In Biblical times, and in early astronomy, the Morning Star was the brightest star in the sky, seen just before daylight. In Revelation 22:16, Jesus refers to Himself as the Bright and Morning Star to fulfill a prophecy by Balaam in Numbers 24:17. He said, "I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near: a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel;" Just as the wise men used a star as a reference point to find Jesus, travelers for thousands of years also used stars to guide their travels. In the same way, Jesus is our reference point. He is not just *a* star but *the* star; the brightest star in the morning, that reminds us His mercies are new every morning. There is forgiveness in the Bright and Morning star. Other scripture references for this verse include: Matthew 2:2; 1 John 1:5; and Isaiah 9:2.

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*

*Sing choirs of angels
Sing in exultation
Sing all ye citizens of heaven above
Glory to God
Glory in the highest*

*O come let us adore Him
O come let us adore Him
O come let us adore Him
Christ the Lord*

This favorite Christmas hymn appears to be the result of a collaboration of several people. What we sing is a 19th-century version of a hymn written in the 18th century. There is a sense of urgency to this hymn. Imagine a child, tugging at your hand, saying insistently, “Let’s go, let’s go, let’s go!” In the same way, imagine someone pulling at your sleeve or grasping you by the hand, half dragging you as they run through the crowd, saying over and over again, “Come!” We are told that patience is a virtue, but in this case, impatience is a beautiful thing. For who could stand by and wait when all we want to do is worship our Lord and Savior? This hymn invites us to sing with the angels, sing with our families, sing with our fellow believers, and with every fiber of our being, worship Christ the Lord. The invitation to “come, all ye faithful, . . . to Bethlehem” places the singer both among the shepherds who rushed to see the Christ child, and in the long procession of the “faithful” that have journeyed to Bethlehem in their hearts for over 2,000 years. The Chorus of O Come All Ye Faithful is based off of the text from Psalm 95:6, which says, “Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the LORD our Maker.” When we sing the lyrics of this hymn, we join the choirs of angels described in Luke 2:13-14, singing praises to God.

O Come All Ye Faithful

*Yea Lord we greet Thee
Born this happy morning
Jesus to Thee be the glory given
Word of the Father now in flesh appearing*

*O come let us adore Him
O come let us adore Him
O come let us adore Him
Christ the Lord*

The last verse of “O Come All Ye Faithful” reminds us of John’s declaration in the first chapter of the Gospel of John. John 1:1-14 describes Jesus’ existence before the creation of the world: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” The end of this passage of scripture, in verse 14, readers of John’s Gospel know that the Word appeared in flesh and that we see the glory. The simple, repetitive lyrics of this hymn, remind us to adore Jesus at Christmastime, which is difficult to do. Amidst the preparations of the season, decorating, shopping, wrapping presents, attending Christmas themed parties, and the general hustle and bustle of the season, it is difficult to truly take time to adore Christ. But as we hear and sing this refrain, may we be reminded to truly adore Jesus, Christ the Lord.

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.*

*For Christ is born of Mary
and, gathered all above,
while mortals sleep, the
angels keep
their watch of wondering
love.
O morning stars, together
proclaim the holy birth,
and praises sing to God the
King,
and peace to men on earth.*

*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*

Many hymns that were written originally for children have captured the imagination of everyone. Such is the case with “O Little Town of Bethlehem.” Phillips Brooks wrote this beloved Christmas hymn for the Sunday school children at his Philadelphia parish, Holy Trinity Church, following a pilgrimage to Bethlehem in 1865. Brooks traveled on horseback between Jerusalem and Bethlehem on Christmas Eve.

“Before dark we rode out of town to the field where they say the shepherds saw the star. It is a fenced piece of ground with a cave in it, in which, strangely enough, they put the shepherds... Somewhere in those fields we rode through, the shepherds must have been. As we passed, the shepherds were still ‘keeping watch over their flocks,’ or leading them home to fold.”

Brooks participated in the Christmas Eve service, writes hymnologist Albert Bailey, “conducted in...Constantine’s ancient basilica (326 A.D.) built over the traditional site of the Nativity, a cave. The service lasted from 10 P.M. to 3 A.M.!” This sequence of events provided the backdrop for Brooks’ children’s hymn. Dr. J.R. Watson sums it up well: “Not only does the hymn beautifully describe the little town asleep in the December night; it also gracefully moves from a description of Christmas into an examination of the meaning of Christmas: first in its encouragement of charity and faith, and then into the coming of Christ into the human heart.”

Scripture reference for this hymn come from the prophecy of Micah that from Bethlehem a ruler of Israel will come (Micah 5:2-4) and Matthew 2:1-6, which details the fulfillment of the prophecy.

God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen

*God rest ye 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.
O tidings of comfort and joy,
Comfort and joy
O tidings of comfort and joy*

In their original context, the phrase "God rest you merry" meant "God keep you merry." The comma between "merry" and "gentlemen" is missing from the earliest versions, which slightly alters the meaning. This hymn reminds us, "God keep you joyful and fill your hearts with gladness!" Verse one reminds us of the bondage of Satan's power, too. Satan's name means adversary. The Satan we see in the Bible seeks to undermine and destroy our hope and our love, both for God and one another. But Jesus was born to save us from that power.

The refrain, "O tidings of comfort and joy" reflects the angel's sentiments in Luke 2, when the angel greeted the shepherds and said, "I bring you good tidings of great joy...for unto you is born a Savior, Christ the Lord." We find comfort and joy that, "the reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil" (1 John 3:8). The season of Advent is a time to prepare for the coming of Jesus but it is also a time to share the comfort and joy found only in Jesus. Isaiah 52:7 mentions bringing good tidings when proclaiming the Gospel. It reads, "How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who *bring good tidings*, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, "Your God reigns!" This fallen world needs the glad tidings of great joy found only in Jesus. May we confidently share tidings of comfort and joy this Advent season.

God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen

*Now to the Lord sing praises
All you within this place
And with true love and brotherhood
Each other now embrace
This holy tide of Christmas
All other doth deface.
O tidings of comfort and joy
Comfort and joy
O tidings of comfort and joy*

For two short days during Christmas Eve and Christmas Day 1914, amidst the fighting of World War I, the German and English units locally declared ceasefires—a “Christmas Truce.” Enemies from both sides gathered in no-man’s land, between the trenches on the Western Front, and exchanged Christmas pleasantries, shared food and even souvenirs. This act of brotherhood on Christmas is how we are called to live as Christians, because of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. However, the ceasefire during World War I only lasted those two days, then enemies went back to being enemies.

The last verse of “God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen” goes beyond the traditional telling of the Christmas story, and instead gives us a poignant reminder of true brotherhood and Christian love. Ephesians 2:11-22 is our enduring “Christmas Truce.” Instead of the conflicted killing of war (even paused), Christ Jesus “himself is our peace” by making “us both [Jew and Gentile] one,” reconciling formerly alienated peoples. Today, He still gives us peace and he enables us to have peace with others. Because of Him, we are no longer strangers and aliens but we have access to both the Father and the Spirit. We worship and rejoice because we were made one with Christ and one another. We look forward to Christ Jesus’ reign, when “nation will no longer fight against nation” (Isaiah 2:4-5) and when we will experience God’s dwelling place being among His people. (Rev 21:3)

Angels We Have Heard on High

<i>Angels we have heard on high Sweetly, sweetly o'er the plains And the mountains in reply Echoing their joyous strains Gloria, in excelsis Deo Gloria, in excelsis Deo</i>	<i>Shepherds, why this jubilee? Why your joyous strains prolong? What the gladsome tidings be Which inspire your heavenly song? Gloria, in excelsis Deo Gloria, in excelsis Deo</i>	<i>Come to Bethlehem and see Him whose birth the angels sing, Come, adore on bended knee, Christ the Lord, the newborn King. Gloria, in excelsis Deo Gloria, in excelsis Deo</i>
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The French people love to sing at Christmas! Chants de Noël (Christmas Carols) from France may be found in most English-language hymnals. In Luke 2:14 we find the canticle of the angel's song—one of the most famous and frequently sung of the Christmas canticles. The refrain of “Angels we have heard on high” is taken directly from this verse; Gloria in excelsis Deo is Latin for, Glory to God in the Highest.

Reflecting a common theme found throughout the history of Christian hymnody, a cosmic chorus resounds in the first stanza. The chorus begins in heaven with the angels. Then the “mountains in reply” echo back in response—symbolizing the participation of earth. Other scripture references include: Psalm 103:20-22; Isaiah 55:12; and John 14:1-3.

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 Christians, fear, for sinners here
The silent Word is pleading.
Nails, spears shall pierce him through,
the cross he bore for me, for you.
Hail, hail the Word made flesh,
the Babe, the Son of Mary

So bring him incense, gold, and myrrh,
Come, peasant, king, to own him.
The King of kings salvation brings,
Let loving hearts enthrone him.
Raise, raise a song on high,
The virgin sings her lullaby
Joy, joy for Christ is born,
The babe, the Son of Mary.

Greensleeves, the tune for which this text was probably written, is one of the most beautiful and beloved melodies of the season. Though not exclusively a Christmas tune, its association with this season goes back to at least 1642. The writer of this hymn, William Chatterton Dix, an Anglican layman, was a businessman. Beginning with a rhetorical question, “What child is this?” the poet condenses Luke 2:8-16 into a single stanza, painting a picture of a classic Nativity scene with the Christ Child sleeping on “Mary’s lap” while angels sing “anthems sweet” and shepherds “watch are keeping.”

Stanza two makes reference to the less than ideal conditions—“mean estate.” Like stanza one, the poet begins with a rhetorical question, “Why lies he in such mean estate?” In essence, he asks why the Christ Child should be in such a humble setting “where ox and ass are feeding.” The original second half of this stanza, not found in the hymnal, provides a more complete response to this question: *Nails, spears shall pierce him through*. Dix’s answer to the reason for the “mean estate” under which Christ was born lies in his future suffering on the cross.

In the final stanza, the poet expands the circle of those attending this humble scene. Drawing from the Epiphany season and the gifts brought by the magi, we take our place at the manger, bringing metaphorical gifts of “incense, gold, and myrrh.” This is a setting that defies the conventional class structures of the time; the invitation is open to both the “peasant” and “king.” In a sentiment that is very common in hymns, “the King of kings” will be “enthroned” in “loving hearts.”

Other scripture references for this hymn include: Luke 1:26-38; Philippians 2:5-11; and Hebrews 1:1-12.

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,
And fit us for heaven, to live with you there.

The origin of this popular Christmas hymn is often associated with Martin Luther. First, the facts. Methodist hymnologist Fred Gealy noted that “evidence suggests that [Away in a Manger] is wholly an American product. The original two-stanza form probably originated among German Lutherans in Pennsylvania about 1885.” What about the text itself? Some suggest that we may be singing heresy, or at least poor theology at some places.

Stanza two notes, “the little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes.” Modern society knows that a baby who does not cry is a cause for concern. Hearing a baby’s cry at birth is a joyful sign of life. If the suggestion in the hymn is that the baby was a kind of super infant whose divinity overshadowed his humanity, then we may be moving into the realm of Gnosticism, suggesting that even in infancy Jesus had special knowledge.

The stanza concludes: “I love thee Lord Jesus, look down from the sky and stay by my cradle till morning is nigh.” This proposes a comforting concept that Jesus is watching over children, especially at night when children are more vulnerable and subject to manufactured fears of imagination. In the 18th and 19th centuries, even adults were thought to be closer to death while asleep. Though that notion is less accepted today, the idea of Jesus as a comforting presence is certainly an appropriate understanding for a child.

The final stanza, added later, follows the pattern of many hymns by using the form of prayer, petitioning Jesus’ presence in the first part of the stanza and blessing of “all the dear children in thy tender care.” The final petition requests that Jesus would “fit us for heaven to live with thee there.” This stanza would seem to indicate that all of us are Christ’s children by baptism and our hope lies in heaven.

In spite of perhaps a bit of slippery theology, this little gem of the season is still sung each year with fervor and joy. This sweet hymn, learned by so many children, stands as a reminder that Jesus invites the little children to come to him (Mark 10:13-16).

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:*

*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:*

*Saints before the alter bending
Watching long in hope and fear
Suddenly the Lord, descending,
In His temple shall appear*

Refrain:

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

“Angels from the Realms of Glory” was written by James Montgomery in 1816. Montgomery, a poetic and prolific hymn writer, penned the words on Christmas Eve after reading and being moved by the story of the birth of Christ in Luke 2. Montgomery was inspired to write the hymn and had it published in the Christmas Eve edition of his local newspaper. The hymn has a sense of urgency and excitement, magnified the refrain: “Come and worship . . .” Each verse views the birth from the perspective of different group of people, the angels, shepherds and magi.

The original final stanza is usually omitted in hymnals:

*Sinners, wrung with true repentance,
Doomed for guilt to endless pains,
Justice now revokes your sentence,
Mercy calls you; break your chains . . .*

While such language seems harsh to modern ears, and seems to end the Christmas hymn on a bit of a “downer,” it completes a thoughtful progression from the first to the last stanzas. The Angels song (stanza one) leads to the Shepherds’ adoration (stanza two), and to Sages’ gifts (stanza three), and to Saints’ praise in heaven (stanza four), and finally, to the Sinners’ repentance on earth (stanza five). Even though the original final stanza may seem to put a damper on unbridled Christmas joy, Montgomery reminds us that the Nativity was more than a sweet manger scene.

As many texts from Isaiah and the prophets remind us, the Incarnation was an event celebrating the liberation of oppressed peoples by a just and merciful God taking on human form. Let us celebrate, that through God’s justice and mercy, our sentence is revoked and our chains are broken. Other scripture references for this song include: Psalm 145:10-13; 1 Corinthians 15.

Go, Tell it On the Mountain

*While shepherds kept their
watching
Over 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 manger
Our humble Christ was
born
And God send us salvation,
That blessed Christmas
morn:*

Refrain:

*Go, tell it on the mountain,
Over the hills and everywhere;
Go, tell it on the mountain
That Jesus Christ is born*

Imagine the celebration surrounding the birth of a child. Phone calls sharing the news, family and friends visiting the hospital, posts on social media and birth announcements sent out, sharing the joy of new life. This is the same kind of joy felt in the lyrics of "Go, Tell it on the Mountain." The long-awaited child, promised to Israel, was finally born that holy night in Bethlehem. Just like we make phone calls, send birth announcements and even share our happy news on Facebook, this traditional Spiritual implores us to share the good news of Jesus: "For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" John 3:16.

Not only are we called to share the Good News, we are commissioned. In Matthew 28:19-20 Jesus says, "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." The angel's pronouncement in the Christmas story says that the birth of Jesus will bring great joy to all people. Jesus calls us to make disciples of all nations. This great news is for everyone, our family members, friends, neighbors, coworkers and even the person in line behind us in the long line at the mall or grocery store.

Do we allow the hope of our Savior's birth to fill our hearts and overflow from our lips? Do we feel compelled to share the birth of Jesus from the mountains, hilltops, everywhere? As we sing and hear the words of this well-known spiritual, may we consider the announcement of the birth of Jesus and ask God for grace and boldness to share this great news to others.

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 host proclaim,
“Christ is born in Bethlehem!”
Refrain: Hark! the herald angels sing,
“Glory to the new-born King!”*

The opening lines of this favorite Christmas hymn echo Luke 2:14, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace. . .” Immediately, the hymn writer established a cosmic connection between the heavenly chorus and our hope for peace on earth. While many Christmas carols recount in one way or another the Christmas narrative, Wesley provides a dense theological interpretation of the Incarnation.

Wesley begins not with the prophets, the Annunciation to Mary, the journey to Bethlehem or the search for a room, but in the middle of the action. Rather than citing the final phrase of Luke 2:14, “good will toward men,” he offers his theological interpretation - “God and sinners reconciled.” “God and sinners reconciled” was a natural interpretation since the hymn was written within a year of Charles Wesley’s conversion.

The familiar first line we now sing sets up the opening stanza as an expansion of the song of the angels in Luke 2:14. Rather than exerting influence in the form of spirits, demons, or other beings said to inhabit the middle zone of the three-tiered universe, God, through the Incarnation, comes directly to earth in human form, the “Word made flesh...dwelling among us...full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). “Hark! the Herald Angels Sing” highlights the virgin birth, the universal application of the coming of “the incarnate Deity” to all nations, and that Christ, who was “pleased with us in flesh to dwell,” gives humanity a second birth. The second or “new birth” was essential to Wesleyan theology.

Each Christmas season we are invited by this venerable hymn to join the angels in swelling the cosmic chorus:

*With the angelic host proclaim,
“Christ is born in Bethlehem!”
Hark! the herald angels sing,
“Glory to the new-born King!”*

Hark the Herald Angels Sing

*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 men with me men to dwell,
Jesus, our Immanuel.
Hark! The herald angels sing:
Glory to the newborn King!*

*Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace!
Hail the Sun of Righteousness!
Light and life to all he brings,
Risen with healing in his wings.
Mild he lays his glory by,
Born that we no more may die,
Born to raise us from the earth,
Born to give us second birth.
Hark! The herald angels sing:
Glory to the newborn King!*

Charles Wesley wrote “Hark the Herald Angels Sing” in 1739. As with many of Wesley’s hymns, “Hark the Herald Angels Sing” is jam-packed full of deep theological concepts. The lines of the hymn sum up why Jesus came to earth. One such reason Jesus was born is so that we may be reborn. In John chapter 3 (verses 1-21), we see Jesus teaching Nicodemus about being reborn. Nicodemus visits Jesus in the night to confess that he believes Jesus is from God. Jesus responds by telling Nicodemus, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.” (John 3:3). Nicodemus is confused by this, asking Jesus how a grown person can reenter their mother’s womb. Jesus answers, “Truly, truly, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (John 3:5). Jesus is telling Nicodemus that in order to have eternal life with Christ, they must be made new. When we are reborn, we are reconciled to God.

Ezekiel also references this rebirth. “I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.” (Ezekiel 36:25-26).

Our sin makes us unclean to stand before God. But praise be to Jesus that we are reborn, made new and can stand before God. Because of this, God’s great love for us to send Jesus to give us second birth, we can stand with the angels and sing, “Glory to the newborn King!”

Joy to the World

*Joy to the World, the Lord has come!
Let earth receive her King;
Let every heart prepare Him room,
And Heaven and nature sing,
And Heaven and nature sing,
And Heaven, and Heaven, and nature sing.*

*Joy to the World, the Savior reigns!
Let men their songs employ;
While fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains
Repeat the sounding joy,
Repeat the sounding joy,
Repeat, repeat, the sounding joy.*

*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,
Far as the curse is found,
Far as, 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,
And wonders of His love,
And wonders, wonders, of His love*

“Joy to the World” is perhaps an unlikely popular Christmas hymn. First of all, it is based on a psalm, and, second, it celebrates Christ’s second coming much more than the first. This favorite Christmas hymn draws its initial inspiration not from the Christmas narrative in Luke 2, but from Psalm 98.

A comparison between Isaac Watts’s psalm paraphrase in the hymn and the original verses in the King James translation of Psalm 98:4-9 demonstrates considerable freedom:

“Make a joyful noise unto the Lord, all the earth: make a loud noise, and rejoice, and sing praise. Sing unto the Lord with the harp; with the harp, and the voice of a psalm. With trumpets and sound of cornet make a joyful noise before the Lord, the King. Let the sea roar, and the fullness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein. Let the floods clap their hands: let the hills be joyful together. Before the Lord; for he cometh to judge the earth: with righteousness shall he judge the world, and the people with equity.” (KJV)

Curiously, stanza three is the exception. It is not based on Psalm 98 and is sometimes omitted:

*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.*

The “curse” is a reference to Genesis 3:17 when God says to Adam following the eating of the apple from the tree, “Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life.” (KJV). This stanza also echoes Romans 5:20-21.

As Christians, we find joy in the birth of Jesus. We also look toward the second coming of Christ, preparing our hearts and looking forward to the day when He will come to take us home.

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!*

*O that birth forever blessed,
when a virgin, full of grace,
by the Holy Ghost conceiving,
bore the Savior of our race;
and the Babe, the world's Redeemer,
first revealed his sacred face,
evermore and evermore!*

This is perhaps the oldest hymn that many congregations sing. In the early fourth century, one of the greatest controversies in the church came to a breaking point, and the Emperor Constantine called together the First Council of Nicea to establish once and for all the Church's official stance on the nature of the Trinity. The council condemned the teaching of Arius, who believed that Jesus was not of the same nature as God the Father. The Nicene Creed was thus written as a statement of faith that God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit are all of the same nature, three and yet one. "Of the Father's Love Begotten" addresses this belief in the Trinity in the very first line. It is very clear from his text that Christ is both human and divine, and rather than simply being made by God, he was "begotten" of the very same substance. As we sing this hymn, we both affirm and align our faith with the broader faith of the Church, and we deny any belief that says that Christ is not fully divine.

The first verse also speaks to the eternal nature of Jesus:

*"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...."*

Revelation 1:8 says, "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty." The second verse indicates through its repetition at the conclusion of each stanza, that the existence of God with the Son and the Spirit have been, are and will be co-eternal.

This beautiful hymn reminds us that the Christmas story transcends the month of December. It reminds us that Jesus is our past, present and future as with every verse we sing, evermore and evermore.

Of the Father's Love Begotten

*O ye 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 Thee with God the Father
and, O Holy Ghost, to Thee,
hymn and chant and high thanksgiving
and unwearied praises be:
honor, glory, and dominion,
and eternal victory
evermore and evermore!*

The rich language used in “Of the Father’s Love Begotten” not only serves as an argument to the co-eternal, co-equal nature of Christ and God—one in essence, nature, power, action and will. The second two verses serve as a doxology—a short hymn of praise. Two Psalms of praise, Psalm 148 and Psalm 150, both written by David, serve as references for the last two verses of the hymn. In the final verse, we are again reminded again of Jesus’ co-equal nature, as He is a partner in the Trinity. When we sing the words of this ancient hymns, we are joining the voices of all those who have sung it before, praising God with saints. This hymn, so often associated with Christmas, is thus a hymn of proclamation, calling us to sing out our faith - “every voice in concert ring, evermore and evermore!”

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.*

*This Flower, whose fragrance tender
With sweetness fills the air,
Dispels with glorious splendor
The darkness everywhere.
True man, yet very God,
From sin and death He saves us
And lightens every load*

This Advent and Christmas hymn expresses and acknowledges a particular tension to be aware of during the Christmas season. Just as, in the prophecies from Isaiah, a “rose,” or stem, shoots up from the stump, so too do we celebrate Christ’s birth in the knowledge that He brings life out of death. Our celebrations of Christmas must always point us to Easter. We celebrate Christ’s life because His death brings us a new kind of life (Galatians 2:20).

So too, the season of Advent points us not only to Christmas, but to the second coming of Christ, when He will finally make all things new (Revelation 21:1-5). This is a beautiful and peaceful hymn, but there is just a touch of melancholy in the tune. Even in the arrangement the composer was able to convey the tension amidst our celebration, the sorrow that must lie within our rejoicing, if only for a moment. We know what is coming that week before Easter morning, and this should give us reason to pause. But we also know that the tiny babe whose birth we celebrate, our “Rose,” came to “dispel...the darkness everywhere.” Thus, even amid the tension of life out of death, we celebrate the ultimate life we are promised in Christ.

Silent Night, Holy 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!*

In the small, quiet town of Oberndorf, Austria, on a snowy Christmas Eve, a priest and an organist wrote what is now the most beloved Christmas carol world-wide. Stories abound as to the exact circumstances of the hymn's origin, and there are societies dedicated to the task of protecting the authentic hymn text and story. If you ever visit Bronner's Christmas Wonderland in Frankenmuth, Michigan, you can visit a replica of the Silent Night Chapel. Movies and operas revolve around the hymn, and almost every recording artist that has ever made a Christmas album has recorded it. In a sense, this spreading of the Word is a joy. But these honors should also make us wary. Paul Westermeyer writes, "Partly because of its popularity, Stille Nacht can easily point to itself rather than beyond itself to the Word" (*Let the People Sing*, 153). It is important, then, to not simply listen to what we might consider a quaint, nostalgia-evoking carol, but to sing out the depth of these words. For the "dawn of redeeming grace" is something far greater and grander than any song we could ever write.

God's redeeming grace is immeasurable. Paul writes in Ephesians (chapter 2:4-9) that God, in his mercy and because of his love for us, sent His Son to redeem us. It is redeeming grace that saves us. The practice of lighting the candles, lowering the church lights and singing Silent Night can seem like a mere tradition. However, this year as we join millions of other Christians in this tradition, may we remember the darkness we once walked in and the light of Jesus that enters our hearts and redeems us.