

The Songs of Christmas



2020 Advent Devotional

The Songs of Christmas

An Introduction to Advent

Okay, admit it! Most of us love Christmas Music. We love the way they sound. We love the memories they evoke, and, in many cases, we love the truths they celebrate. Shortly after Thanksgiving, even earlier some places, everywhere you turn we hear Christmas songs. So why are these melodies not heard in our congregations during Advent?

Some in the church believe that we really shouldn't sing Christmas carols prior to Christmas Eve. Still, others in the church resent not being able to sing carols prior to Christmas. So, let's ponder what Advent really is.

Advent is the four weeks before Christmas day when Christians prepare for celebrating the birth of Jesus by remembering the longing of the Jews for a Messiah. In Advent, we're reminded of how much we ourselves need a Savior, and we look forward to our Savior's second coming.

Pastor Mark Roberts shared, *"Like most other Christians who enjoy the secular aspects of Christmas (presents, parties, decorations, etc.) I've struggled to focus on 'the reason for the season'. That's where Advent comes in! By recognizing Advent, by focusing on its themes, by using its distinctive colors, I can inject a hearty dose of genuine spirituality into my Christmas spirit. Advent has given me a way to enrich my celebration of Christmas."*

So don't give up! This devotional uses those traditional Christmas melodies, the ones we yearn to sing and experience. But since this is Advent, not Christmas, each Christmas melody will usually have a new *Advent* text. Here is an example:

CREED (tune: "Away in a Manger")

*Great God, our Creator, from whom all receive,
Their being and blessing, in you we believe.
Almighty, all knowing, all gracious, all true,
Provider and father our trust is in you.*

*And you, Jesus Christ, we affirm as our Lord.
True Son of the Father, by angels adored;
Redeemer incarnate you paid for our sins,
And joined in your rising, our new life begins.*

*Free Spirit of wisdom, of power, of love,
On us, as on Christ, you descend from above;
You call us, you cleanse us, you open our eyes,
You keep us in peace, you restore paradise.*

These new texts are written by pastors Pamela Gonzalez and Carolyn Winfrey-Gillett; some songs are traditional text with new verses added by other lyricists. We will include a musical tidbit on the history of each melody or song as well.

We will close each devotional with a prayer to guide you in your journey this Advent season. We pray that these Advent songs, set to Christmas melodies, will nourish your soul as you prepare for the coming of our Savior.

**“We love Christmas with all its wonders:
the infant Christ-child born in the stable,
Mary and Joseph, the angels, the shepherds,
the star in the heavens, the incredible story.**

**We love Christmas with all its festivities:
the trees, lights, candles, delicious delicacies,
presents, pageants, programs,
family get-togethers, friends and traditions.**

**We love Christmas...
but what our hearts truly yearn for is Advent:
the forgotten season, the four weeks before Christmas,
the pregnancy before the birth, the anticipation before the reality.**

What we really need is not another month of Christmas, but a true Advent season.

A time to prepare for God’s greatest gift, to ponder gifts and giving, to consider the miracle of birth and of life.

A time to wait, to treasure expectation, to practice patience.

A time to turn from wrong habits and ideas, from ourselves and our concerns, toward the holy face of God.

A time to repent, to admit our failures and our brokenness, to confess to those we’ve wounded, to invite healing and renewal.

A time to hope for healing, for peace where there is war or violence, for justice for those who have been beaten down, for good to prevail.

A time to imagine a new heaven and a new earth, to glimpse God’s holy vision.

May your faith be enriched as it begins to look a lot like Christmas in your heart”.

Pamela J. Gonzalez

Songs of Christmas Devotional - 3

December 1

O, Come To The Mountain (Tune: "Away in a Manger")

- 1. O, come to the mountain of God's holy light
All nations and peoples that dwell in God's sight.
Abandon forever your darkness and wrath.
Be chastened, be taught by our God a new path.*
- 2. God's Word shall go forth with this message of peace.
Your wars and your conflicts will finally cease.
Your weapons you'll trade for the tools of new life
To live with your neighbors, secure, without strife.*
- 3. O, come, let us walk in the light of our God.
O, come, let us travel the paths that Christ trod.
May we in our poor hearts embrace a new way
To walk with all creatures until that bright day.*

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Tune Tidbit: "Away In A Manger"

Martin Luther is known to have written a number of hymns, the best known being "Ein Feste Burg Ist Unser Gott"- "A Mighty Fortress is Our God", which used the melody of a popular drinking song (Luther was quoted as saying "Why should the Devil get all the good tunes?). At least one of the hymns Luther wrote was a Christmas Hymn, a folk song: "Ich Komm aus Fremden Landen Her".

In Luther's time there was a German Christmas tradition known as "Cradle-Rocking", where a large cradle with a figure of the Christ Child would be set up on the altar on Christmas Eve and would be rocked by the priest (or children) in time to a suitable hymn. It is possible that the play from which it is believed to have come presented it as being a Christmas hymn written by Luther to his children, which may have led to the confusion about its origins. The melody to which it is sung in the U.S. is by the American hymnist James R. Murray. In England, it is sung to a different tune, which, ironically, is also by an American hymnist, William J. Kirkpatrick, who was a Union soldier in the Civil War.

*Pray that as we hear these familiar stories this Advent season,
we will hear them with childlike wonder!*

December 2

Here's a Promise We Can Count On
(Tune "*Infant Holy, Infant Lowly*")

1. *Here's a promise we can count on!
It's the word Isaiah saw:
One day coming, God's own mountain
Will be highest of them all.
All the nations will be yearning
For God's teaching, and returning,
They'll find guidance in God's law.*
2. *One great day, the prophet told us
God will triumph! It is true.
Lord, we trust this word of promise
as we hear your word anew.
When we're lost among the mountains
Of the world's ways that confound us,
Show the path that leads to you.*

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Tune Tidbit: "*Infant Holy, Infant Lowly*"

This popular carol out of Poland was brought into the English language by Edith Reed. Her translation of the text appeared in December, 1925, in two publications: *Music and Youth* and *Panpipes*.

This song brings together the whole concept of Advent. "Advent" comes from the Latin word *adventus*, which means "visit" or "coming" or "arrival." The season of Advent is a time to get ready for the two "visits" of Christ: his first coming through the Incarnation, and his second coming as Lord. In Advent *we look back* to the experience of the Israelites as they hoped for the coming of the Messiah. So we ready our hearts to celebrate the good news of Christmas. Yet Advent is also *a time to look forward* to the second coming of Christ. Though defeating sin and death through his cross and resurrection, Christ hasn't finished his work of renewing creation and restoring the kingdom of God. So, we continue to experience the brokenness of this world, in violence, disease, natural disasters, and other forms of human suffering. In Advent we yearn for God's completion of the salvation begun in Christ.

*Pray that we can trust and truly believe God's promises
even when we don't understand.*

December 3

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel
(Tune: "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel")

1. *O, come, o, come, Emmanuel,
And ransom captive Israel,
That moans to lonely exile here,
Until the Son of God appear.*

Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to you, O Israel!

2. *O, come, dear Lord, with mercy and grace,
Make strong the weak and heal the human race,
The hungry feed, the needy clothe
That by example we will learn to love.*

Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to you, O Israel!

Verse 1: 12th century Latin
Verse 2: Cynthia A. Douglas

Tune Tidbit: "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel"

This is one of the oldest of all carols, and is believed to have been derived from a set of Latin verses called the 'O antiphons' which were performed in monasteries around the 8th century AD. They were traditionally sung at vespers in the weeks before Christmas, so-called because each verse begins with the invocation "O". Each of these verses related the prophesy of the coming of the Messiah, and each referred to one of the titles of the Messiah.

One referred to the Messiah as 'Emmanuel' as described in 'Isaiah 7:14', and it is believed that around the 12th century AD this text was adapted into a rhythmic poem, '*Veni veni Emmanuel*'. The music which today accompanies the lyrics is thought to have been separately written for a 15th century Franciscan funeral hymn with influences from Gregorian chant. How and exactly when the words of '*Veni veni Emmanuel*' became united with the funeral hymn is unknown, but certainly it had happened by 1851, when John Mason Neale translated the words from Latin into English.

When Neale wrote the English language version of the carol, he titled it 'Draw nigh, draw nigh, Emmanuel', but later modifications of the text gave us the title and verses we know today, *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*.

Pray that we can rejoice at Emmanuel's coming.

December 4

When Lives of Humble Service Preach (Tune: "O Little Town of Bethlehem")

- 1. When lives of humble service preach, the Good News to the poor,
When troubled mind or bodies find, a welcome at our door,
When healing hearts and hands lift
The lowly from the dust,
Then ring the bells and sing Noels: for Christ is born in us.*
- 2. No longer dreamless, Bethlehem, you bear the wounds of war;
Can words of peace make conflict cease, when freedom is no more?
No! Therefore work for justice,
Let swords thrust none apart,
When all are free, the world may see, Christ born in every heart!*
- 3. Teach us to live the trusting life, to act with humbleness;
To rid our souls of pride and hate, in all things thee to bless;
Make us in thine own image,
To serve our human race,
Fair stewards of the priceless things, true justice, hope and grace.*

Words - 1: John Becker, 2: Rae E. Whitney, 3: Edward Blumenfeld.

Tune Tidbit: "O Little Town of Bethlehem"

This Christmas hymn began as a poem written by Phillips Brooks, rector of Holy Trinity church in Philadelphia in 1868. It was inspired by a visit to the Holy Land during which Brooks had made a pilgrimage to the field where the shepherds heard the announcement from the angels. Brooks asked Lewis Redner, a composer friend of his, to set it to music. When, by Christmas Eve, Redner had failed to come up with a suitable melody, he fell into an exhausted sleep and conceived the tune in a dream.

This is another case in which last-minute inspiration (as with "Stille Nacht") yields an enduring result. Redner's Christmas Eve nap yielded the appropriately dreamy, melody to which "O Little Town of Bethlehem" is sung to in the U.S. In England the carol is equally popular but it is sung to a different tune – the majestic "Forest Green", said to be adapted from a melody by Handel. Lewis Redner wrote a number of other poems and hymns, including the Christmas poem "Everywhere, Everywhere Christmas Tonight."

Pray for peace in Bethlehem and throughout the world.

December 5

Silent Night! Holy Night! (Tune: "Silent Night")

- 1. 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.*
- 2. Silent night, holy night! When will peace conquer might?
Pray that justice will set victims free,
Those who are shackled to bleak poverty.
Christ be born in each heart, Christ be born in each heart.*

Words by Joseph Mohr and Rae E. Whitney

Tune Tidbit: "Silent Night"

Christmas Eve services in Austria have traditionally featured folk music, or music written in the folk style, usually accompanied on folk instruments rather than the more formal organ. This tradition arose in honor of the humble shepherds, who were the first to be told of the newborn child.

And so, it was that, on Christmas Eve of 1818, Franz Xaver Gruber, the organist at the parish church of Obendorf, hastily penned a simple, lilting tune to a text by the curate, Josef Mohr, entitled "Stille Nacht" (Silent Night). It had an easy refrain for the congregation and choir and was to be sung with guitar accompaniment.

Although the original melody is somewhat different than the one we sing today, Mohr and Gruber sang the verses in two-part harmony. Contrary to popular myth that mice chewed a whole in the bellows of the organ and it didn't work, the organ was, in fact, in perfect condition and was in use for many years afterward.

If we have disappointed you by dispelling the popular legend, you may take comfort in the fact that this carol, comprised in great haste, has endured for almost 200 years as one of the most beloved Christmas carols.

*Pray for the courageous faith to let go of the past, entrust the
future to God, and live for today.*

December 6

Prophets Told Us, "Pay Attention!"
(Tune: "Angels, from the Realms of Glory")

1. *Prophets told us, "Pay attention! God is working in the land.
Lo, the days are surely coming; seek the justice God has planned!
Seek the signs of your redemption; hear God's word and understand!"*
2. *Christ, you taught us: "Pay attention! Nature's signs are sure and clear:
When the trees grow leaves and blossom, summertime is almost here."
So it is in God's good kingdom; be alert; God's reign is near!*
3. *Christ, you taught us: "Pay attention!" So we humbly serve and pray:
May we gladly live your kingdom in a world that's gone astray.
May the hope of our salvation guide the things we do and say.*

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Tune Tidbit: "Angels from the Realms of Glory"

There is considerable disagreement among experts concerning this carol. Montgomery's poem appeared on December 24, 1816 as a five-stanza poem under the title of "Nativity" in his newspaper, The Sheffield Iris. In 1825 it was in the Religious Tract Society's book The Christmas Box, as one of "Three New Carols."

The poem was joined in 1867 to the tune "Regent Square" by Henry Thomas Smart (1813-1879) who was blinded in 1865. The tune got its name from London's Regent Square Presbyterian Church. It was later published in the English Presbyterian hymnal Psalms and Hymns for Divine Worship, 1867. It is considered both a Christmas and Epiphany carol.

James Montgomery, hymn writer and originally a member of the Moravian Brethren (the Protestant Church which stems from Bohemia, closely linked with the Lutheran Church), was born in 1771. Unsuccessful at school, he was taken in by Mr. Gales, a publisher. Gales, fled to France in 1794, fearful of his published eulogies of the French Revolution. Montgomery took over and was jailed for libel. He took advantage of his jail time by writing a little book, *Prison Amusements*, which he published on his release. Montgomery devoted his time to religious verse. He produced over 400 hymns, and skillfully adapted many more.

*Pray that we pay attention to those who serve unnoticed in our daily lives;
as we humbly serve those around us.*

December 7

Slow Down Ye Frantic Shoppers (Tune: "God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen")

1. *Slow down ye frantic shoppers for there's something we must say.
If you would spare a moment all the stores would go away.
Big business has been telling us what Christmas Means today.*

*Refrain: Now it's time we decide for ourselves, for ourselves,
Yes it's time we decide for ourselves.*

2. *To some folks Christmas means a time for gathering with friends.
And enemies might take it as a time to make amends.
But TV says it's time for pricey gifts and selfish ends.
Refrain*

3. *Some people feel that Christmas is when Jesus makes a call.
For others it's a time to stress good will and peace to all.
But advertisers tell us it means Santa's at the mall.
Refrain*

Words from Center for a New American Dream

Tune Tidbit: "God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen" (again)

Many people read the first line of this tune as if it meant, "God give you some good rest, gentlemen who are happy." You can envision merry gentlemen that had exhausted themselves with Christmas shopping and partying and the like, finally relaxing on Christmas day. As Christians who enjoy the secular aspects of Christmas (presents, parties, decorations, music, etc.), we struggle to focus on "the reason for the season." The days prior to Christmas are filled with all sorts of pleasures that don't make it easy for us to focus on what Christmas is really about. So, like Charlie Brown we find ourselves wondering, "Does anyone really know what Christmas is all about."

That's where Advent comes in. By recognizing Advent, by focusing on its themes, by using its distinctive color, we can inject a healthy dose of genuine Christian spirituality into the holiday season. Advent gives us a way to enrich our celebration of Christmas and, even more importantly, our relationship with God.

Pray that this Advent season you find time to rest. More importantly, may God give you peace and joy! Pray for the courage and resolve to stand firm in your faith as you become immersed in the holiday celebrations.

December 8

What Prophet This? (Tune: "What Child Is This?")

1. *What prophet this of wilderness with clothing rough and manners odd?
John calls to all who hear his voice. "Come, wash in the river of God.
Come, come, friends, poor and mean. The river Jordan will wash you clean.
Turn, turn to your God above, the God of heaven and earth."*

2. *"The realm of heav'n is now begun. Repent and turn from your wicked
ways.
You snakes that think to escape the fire, will burn in the Spirit's blaze.
Flames, flames from God's own hand-within this presence none can stand.
Turn, turn to your God above, the God of heaven and earth."*

3. *"Across the desert, pave a path, prepare the way, your Redeemer nears.
The one who comes in power and might, will wipe away your sad tears."
"Hear, hear the words of love," cries God come down from heav'n above.
"Time, time to turn to God, the God of heaven and earth."*

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Tune Tidbit: "What Child Is This"

If this carol sounds very familiar, it may be because you have heard it sung as a famous English folk song. "Greensleeves," the tune to which "What Child Is This?" is sung, has a long history. It was apparently first licensed (or registered) in 1580 to Richard Jones (with a set of lyrics that were not in the least religious, nor even very respectable), but the tune is probably older still. Some theories have it that Henry VIII wrote the song.

In any event, Henry's daughter (Queen Elizabeth) is said to have danced to it. William Shakespeare mentions the song by name in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*; in which it is played while traitors are hanged. Almost three centuries later, about 1865, William Chatterton Dix published "The Manger Throne." Three stanzas were later culled from that poem and fitted to the "Greensleeves" melody, thus creating "What Child Is This?"

Pray that God exposes the idols in your life and rips them away.

December 9

John Came Preaching, Bearing Witness
(Tune: *"Angels from the Realms of Glory"*)

*1. John came preaching, bearing witness,
Pointing to God's only Son.
He proclaimed the truth with boldness:
"Now believe! God's light has come!"
Yet he would not be the focus;
He proclaimed a greater One.*

*2. Thank you, God, for all your servants
Who proclaim your light each day.
Brave and bold, like John, they bless us,
Pointing us to Jesus' way.
They proclaim your kingdom's nearness
In the things they do and say.*

*3. May we live in that tradition;
Fill us with integrity.
Take away our vain ambition;
Keep us in humility.
Make us faithful in our mission
As we serve Christ joyfully.*

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Tune Tidbit: *"Angels from the Realms of Glory"*

The melody to which it is sung in the U.S. is by the American hymnist James R. Murray. In England, it is sung to a different tune which ironically, is also by an American hymnist William Kirkpatrick, who was a union soldier in the Civil War. Some have attributed the song to Martin Luther himself. The confusion may have begun because Murray published it with the subtitle "Luther's Cradle Hymn (Composed by Martin Luther for his children and still sung by German mothers to their little ones)."

*We pray for all those who, like John, proclaim God's love with truth and boldness.
May we be faithful in our mission to serve Christ joyfully.*

December 10

O Come, All Ye Faithful
(Tune: "O Come, All Ye Faithful")

1. *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.*

2. *Then go, you who love him, Into every nation
Teaching his word of love to all humankind
Feeding the hungry, Fighting for the lowly.
O, come, let us obey him, O, come, let us obey him,
O, come, let us obey him, Christ the Lord.*

Verse 1: attr. John F. Wade, c. 1711-1786 Verse 2: Cynthia A. Douglas

Tune Tidbit: "O Come, All Ye Faithful"

This favorite hymn, originally sung to the Latin text "*Adeste Fideles*" (still in frequent use today) is of rather mysterious origin; both England and France have laid claim to it (it is also sometimes known as the "Portuguese hymn", having been popular in that country, but its origins are probably English).

In the middle of the 18th century, a Catholic hymn writer and supporter of Bonnie Prince Charlie's rebellion against King George II of England fled across the sea to France to escape persecution. He was John Francis Wade and in 1743, he wrote the lyrics of four verses of '*O Come all ye Faithful*', in Latin, '*Adeste Fideles*'.

What was the purpose of the hymn? A belief has developed that 'O Come all ye Faithful' was in reality a coded show of support for the Catholic Jacobean cause in England, and that the song was actually imploring 'the faithful' to come to the aid of Prince Charles. Whatever the truth of that, John Francis Wade is now seen as the most likely original author of these four verses.

The authorship of the melody is also unclear; Wade may have composed the music too, although a similar tune appears in a contemporary comic opera by French composer Charles Favart. Samuel Webbe, a colleague of Wade's, published the music and Wade's Latin verses together for the first time in 1782.

Pray for the hungry and the homeless this Advent.

December 11

Long Ago The Prophet Came (Tune: "We Three Kings")

1. *Long ago the prophet came, to the Jordan to proclaim
"turn from sinning, new beginning,
make righteousness your aim".*

*Refrain: "Oh, in the desert make away, for the Lord to pass today."
John's voice crying, faith undying. "God's salvation comes today."*

2. *To the Jordan John was sent, to baptize, to cry out "Repent!"
Water cleansing, Spirit mending,
changed hearts were evident. Refrain*

3. *After John came God's own Son, Holy Reign through him begun.
New ways teaching, lost lives reaching,
Vict'ry from death he won. Refrain*

4. *We await his last return, Satan's stronghold to o'erturn.
Justice reigning, peace attaining.
For Christ's new rule we yearn. Refrain*

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Tune Tidbit: "We Three Kings"

Both words and music to this well-known carol were written by Pennsylvania clergyman John Henry Hopkins, rector of Christ's Church in Williamsport, as part of an 1865 collection simply titled "Hymns, Carols, and Songs". This carol, with its vaguely Oriental-sounding melody, always adds a fairly exotic note to programs of traditional carols.

Hopkins, whose photographs show him to have borne a remarkable resemblance to Santa Clause, tragically died in 1891 from injuries sustained during a horse-cart accident. Although his 1865 collection of hymns and carols was admired in its day, "Kings of Orient" (the original title), is the only selection to enjoy lasting popularity.

Pray that God would strengthen you in being set apart for God's purposes.

December 12

Did Your Parents Pray at Table?

(Tune: "*Joyous Light*")

- 1. Did your parents pray at table? Did your aunt serve Jesus well?
Did your grandpa preach the gospel? Is your grandma serving still?
This is not your folks' religion! God is calling you, yourself!
You must make your own decision — take your own faith off the shelf.*
- 2. Do you trust in God's abundance — not in hatred, pride and fear?
Is the love of Christ your compass as you welcome strangers here?
Do you work to end the violence, and to share and share some more?
Are you humble, peaceful, present to the outcast and the poor?*
- 3. God, we point to those before us who have witnessed to your Way,
But you come to us and ask us, "How have you served me today?"
Make us faithful, bold and giving; may our love and joy abound.
In the work of daily living, may we turn our lives around.*

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Tune Tidbit: "*Joyous Light*"

Marty Haugen was born December 30, 1950 in Wanamingo, Minnesota and is a prolific liturgical composer with many songs included in hymnals across the liturgical spectrum of North American hymnals and beyond, with many songs translated into different languages. He was raised in the American Lutheran Church, received a BA in psychology from Luther College, yet found his first position as a church musician in a Roman Catholic parish at a time when the Roman Catholic Church was undergoing profound liturgical and musical changes after Vatican II.

"*Joyous Light*" is part of Marty Haugen's popular *Holden Evening Prayer*. Written in 1985-1986 while Marty was the musician-in-residence at Holden Village, a Lutheran retreat center in Washington State, this melodic setting of vespers follows the traditional form while using contemporary and inclusive language. This melody has gone on to be used for other hymns including "*Carol at the Manger*", "*Jesus Met with his Disciples*", and was the original hymn tune for Ruth Duck's famous "*As a Fire is Meant for Burning*."

Pray for family members near and far.

December 13

O, Breath of Life in Spirit Come
(Tune: "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear")

*1. O Breath of Life, in Spirit come, bear fruit in us anew;
Forgive our wrongs, reshape our lives, make firm our trust in you.
In simple ways, let all our days point gently to your will;
And turn our hearts to human need where you are dwelling still.*

*2. Shall we go out to greet the Christ, or wait in heart and home?
Shall we go out to seek the Christ however Christ might come?
Shall we search out the holy one, God's prophesied surprise?
Where will it be when God in flesh appears before our eyes?*

*3. It may not be as trumpet sound resounding 'cross the skies,
But in the form of fallen ones from whom we turn our eyes:
The stranger standing at our door, the child unclothed, ill fed.
God once again appears in flesh without a roof or bed.*

*4. Will we go out to seek the Christ to find God manifest
Within all people south and north, in children east and west?
Yet in our search to find God's gift amid the clam'ring din,
Will we acknowledge God in us, the Christ who dwells within?*

Words by Thomas Townsend and Densley H. Palmer

Tune Tidbit: "It Came Upon A Midnight Clear"

The lyrics of this carol are by the 19th century American Unitarian minister Edmund Sears. In America, it is sung to a melody by organist Richard Storrs Willis; in England, they use a tune composed by Sir Arthur Sullivan (of Gilbert and Sullivan fame). The carol's lyrics speak of mankind's unwillingness to heed the angel's message of peace and goodwill; ironically, it was penned only ten years before the outbreak of the Civil War.

Sears, unlike most Unitarians, believed strongly in the divinity of Christ. He was deeply concerned with the social issues of the day, such as the Industrial Revolution and the ongoing controversy over slavery, which would be one of the catalysts of the Civil War. Oliver Wendell Holmes declared this carol "One of the finest and most beautiful ever written."

Pray that God continues to come to you through your faith community and that you continue to bring God's love and forgiveness to those in need.

December 14

From the Stump of Jesse's Tree
(Tune: "Good King Wenceslas")

- 1. From the stump of Jesse's tree, green shoots will be springing.
Hearts despairing, will go free; bursting into singing.
Though their spirits seem dry wood, for new life their sighing.
Sacred Root of earthly good, come revive the dying.*
- 2. When Christ reigns in righteousness, poor and meek he'll favor.
By his breath their wrongs redress, strike down the enslaver.
Christ will judge what's in the heart, pious speech ignoring.
Justice then on earth shall start, equity restoring.*
- 3. Lions will no longer feed, om the meek and humble.
Leopards won't devour with greed, all the weak who stumble.
Innocently children play, safe from danger's stinging.
When that hopeful, peaceful day, Christ our way comes winging.*

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Tune Tidbit: "Good King Wenceslas"

The "Feast of Stephen" that is mentioned in the original text for this song falls on December 26, known as "Boxing Day" in England and Canada. The name, "Boxing Day" came from the tradition of bringing boxes of food and clothing to the less fortunate.

Wenceslas was originally Vaclav the Good, a Bohemian monarch of the 10th century (Bohemia being the present-day Czech Republic) who was dedicated to establishing the Christian faith in what was then a pagan country. Vaclav's efforts in this respect earned him the hate of both his brother, Boleslav and his mother, Drahomira, who remained loyal to the pagan religion.

Eventually, Vaclav was murdered by his brother at Drahomira's instigation. Vaclav was immediately celebrated as both a saint and a martyr and is recognized by the church as the patron of Czechoslovakia.

Pray that we, like Wenceslas, care for the poor and hungry.

December 15

Patient Waiting

(Tune: *“Infant Holy, Infant Lowly”*)

- 1. Patient waiting, demonstrating faithfulness in daily life
This our calling, never falling, by our love defeating strife.
Without grumbling, no complaining, Without stumbling, never waning!
Thus we wish to live our lives! Thus we wish to live our lives!*
- 2. Yet our patience is ungracious, and resentment is our song.
Though our trying is undying, thoughts and deeds turn to the wrong.
Failing ever, daily sinning, Our endeavor never winning.
Still to Christ we do belong! Still to Christ we do belong!*
- 3. Christ is coming, we’re succumbing to an overflowing grace.
Christ will strengthen, patience lengthen, shine upon us with love’s face.
Advent season, preparation, Christ the reason, for elation
Living in divine embrace! Living in divine embrace!*

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Tune Tidbit: *“Infant Holy, Infant Lowly” (again)*

The hymn singing traditions in eastern European countries are rich and diverse, but virtually unknown in hymnals published in the United States. During the twentieth century, the lack of good singing translations from eastern European countries was further impaired by world wars, the rise of the Third Reich, and the Iron Curtain. Throughout the seventeenth century and those that followed, regional hymn collections were published—each with distinct, local musical styles, making it difficult to develop a uniformly known body of congregational song throughout Poland.

It is no accident that one of the few Polish hymns we have in English is a Christmas carol or “koledy.” A koledy would be sung with the visit of the priest to a home and, eventually in Slavic traditions, walking from house to house—in other words, Christmas caroling. The carolers, called kolednicy, perform in neighborhoods between Christmas and the Feast of the Epiphany, carrying a star on a pole and a Nativity scene. Dressed in folk costumes as angels, shepherds, and kings, the carolers enact Nativity plays with a comedic touch, and sing. The term is more generic now and can refer to singing any Christmas carols in Polish.

Pray thanks to God for the redeeming grace of a babe born in Bethlehem.

December 16

Are You the One Who Is to Come? (Tune: "O Little Town of Bethlehem")

1. *"Are you the one who is to come?" John bravely asked the Lord.
John knew the hope he'd counted on And sought a guiding word.
So Jesus gave this answer: Tell what you hear and see!
Tell John about the sick and poor — How God has set them free!*
2. *"Are you the one we're longing for" — The name above all names?
We hear each day a thousand words That make competing claims:
"Buy this and you'll be happy!" "Find meaning here or there!"
But Lord, these other things we seek Lead only to despair.*
3. *"Are you the only one we need?" Remind your church anew
That in the midst of sin and greed Our joy is serving you.
In you we still see wonders As peace replaces fear;
You heal the sick, lift up the poor And bring your kingdom here.*

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Tune Tidbit: "O Little Town of Bethlehem" (again)

Many hymns that were written originally for children have captured the imagination of everyone. Such is the case with "O Little Town of Bethlehem." As mentioned before, 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.

According to hymnologist Albert Bailey, Brooks traveled on horseback between Jerusalem and Bethlehem on Christmas Eve and participated in the Christmas Eve service, "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.!"

Three years later, needing a Christmas carol for the Sunday school Christmas program, he decided to write one. Inspired by memories of Bethlehem, he wrote the words in one brief sitting.

Pray for contentment in what God has blessed you with.

December 17

Hear John's Cry
(Tune: "Silent Night")

*1. Hear John's cry: "See the light" Sent from God, burning bright.
Darkness scatters, night is gone. Death's deep shadows flee the dawn.
God's Anointed is near! God's Anointed is near!"*

*2. Hear John's cry: "Wash, be whole, strip all guilt from your soul.
Stains of wrong now bleach away. Pledge your heart: God's law obey.
God's Anointed is near! God's Anointed is near!"*

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Tune Tidbit: "Silent Night" (again)

Have you ever been skeptical about the first verse of "Silent Night?" Was this an accurate representation of reality? If you've ever been around newborn babies, you know that they tend *not* to sleep well at night. And when they don't sleep, they often cry. Odds are pretty good that Jesus spent Christmas night squalling like every other human baby. Was the night silent? Did the holy family really sleep in heavenly peace, or was this some romantic idealization? Here is a literal but non-singable translation of the first verse of "Stille Nacht" ("Silent Night").

Silent night! Holy Night! Everyone is sleeping; Only the beloved most holy pair is watching by themselves. Blessed boy with curly hair, sleep in heavenly peace!

In this verse, the night is silent. But, the "holy pair" (Mary and Jesus) are not sleeping. They alone are awake. The verse ends with an imperative: "Go to sleep, blessed boy with curly hair!" The German makes it clear that Jesus is not some baby who sleeps soundlessly through his first night of life, but a real infant who fusses and needs encouragement to get to sleep. It's easy to see that the first verse of the English preserves the imperative but loses the fact that Jesus and his mother are still awake (the English also loses the part about the curly hair).

So "Silent Night" is okay! A real human drama. In the second verse (there are six verses in German) the baby Jesus is laughing (!) as the good news of salvation issues from his mouth. Of course, a newborn baby doesn't laugh either, but the image of a laughing Savior is delightful, historically accurate or not.

Pray that we don't lose our sense of humor this holiday season.

December 18

Deck the Halls (Tune: "Deck the Halls")

- 1. Deck the halls with boughs of holly, Fa la la la la la la la la.
'Tis the season to be jolly, Fa la la la la la la la la.
Don we now our gay apparel, Fa la la la la la la la la.
While we sing a yuletide carol, Fa la la la la la la la la.*
- 2. Forward now to peace and freedom, Fa la la la la la la la la.
There, a little child shall lead them, Fa la la la la la la la la.
Break the chains of war and slavery, Fa la la la la la la la la.
Pray with courage. Work with bravery, Fa la la la la la la la la.*
- 3. Dance away your victim's silence*, Fa la la la la la la la la.
Bring an end to fear and violence, Fa la la la la la la la la.
War and hatred? No and never, Fa la la la la la la la la.
Peace on earth, we sing forever, Fa la la la la la la la la.*

Words traditional and Rod Reinhart.

** This image can be unfamiliar to us in North America and may sound inappropriate. But, forbidden on penalty of death to speak the names of the "Disappeared Ones," mothers (in some exploited countries) danced in the village squares holding up pictures of the children who had "disappeared," those who had been kidnapped and/or killed by the government. This serious text may seem trivialized by the happy tune and especially the nonsense "Fa-la-la's."*

Tune Tidbit: "Deck the Halls"

"Deck the Hall with Boughs of Holly" is one of the most frequently heard carols around the holidays. Ironically, it was not originally a Christmas carol. It originated in Wales, was entitled "Nos Galen" and had lyrics which bear almost no resemblance to those of "Deck the Halls." "Nos Galen" actually means "New Year's Eve", and the carol was both sung and danced to in anticipation of the New Year. The original first line in Welsh: "Oer yw'r gwr s'yn methu caru" (don't ask me how that's pronounced) means "Soon the hoar old year will leave us." The "Fa-la-la-la's were originally not sung but played on the harp or another such instrument. "Nos Galen" dates back to the 18th century.

Pray that God would open your eyes to the exploitation and suffering of others, so that you may increase God's reign among them.

December 19

Spirit, Send Good News
(Tune: *"Hark, the Herald Angels Sing"*)

- 1. Spirit, send good news to earth! Pave the way for freedom's birth.
Hopeless prisoners set free. Holy vengeance let them see.
Comfort hearts with sadness torn. May they be in joy reborn.
Clothe the weak and weary soul. Let your poor ones be made whole
Holy year of hope begun, with the advent of God's son.*
- 2. God of justice, come restore; with your hand lift up the poor.
Cities ruined, come rebuild. May this land with hope be filled.
Come, our brokenness repair. Rescue us from our despair.
Cloak us with your robe of praise; bless us all out earthly days
Holy year of hope begun, with the advent of God's Son.*

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Tune Tidbit: *"Hark, the Herald Angels Sing"*

So the first irony of *"Hark, the Herald Angels Sing"* is that the words we know so well were not penned by the original writer, Charles Wesley (brother of the Methodist founder, John Wesley). Wesley disliked what his friend and fellow minister, George Whitefield, changed as he edited the original text. Whitefield omitted a couple of verses and changed a few other lines, including *"Hark, how all the welkin rings"* to *"Hark, the herald angels sing."* Whitefield's version became immediately popular and yet Wesley was not happy. He didn't approve of Whitefield's assertion that angels sang the good news of Christ's birth because it wasn't in the text of Luke (in Luke 2:13 the angels are saying, not singing, *"Glory to God in the highest"*).

The second irony has to do with the tune. Wesley had specifically stated that his hymn required solemn, slow music. Nevertheless, in 1855, after his death, an enterprising musician named William Cummings married the revised version of *"Hark"* to the music of Felix Mendelssohn. Cummings took the music and adapted it for the meter of *"Hark, the Herald Angels Sing."* The result, which we know so well today, was magic. Yet this is not what the composer Mendelssohn anticipated or wanted. In a letter to his publisher in 1843, the composer said his song *"Will never do to sacred words."*

*Pray that Christ would strengthen all churches as we wait
for the coming of Christ in glory.*

December 20

Mary Gladly Told Her Cousin
(Tune: "Once in Royal David's City")

1. *Mary gladly told her cousin, "Praise the Lord! My spirit sings!"
Young and humble, she'd been chosen! God was surely changing things!
God of love, her words ring true As we sing her prayer to you:*
2. *"Now my soul is gladly singing At the greatness of the Lord.
I rejoice, for God is bringing His salvation to the world.
All who live will say I'm blest Even in my lowliness.*
3. *"God is mighty, just and holy, And he's done great things for me.
Those who fear him know the mercy That God gives us endlessly.
Mighty ones are brought down low; Lowly ones find blessings flow.*
4. *"God has filled the poor and hungry, And he's sent the rich away.
God is active here in history, In a real and wondrous way.
God has promised, and I'm blessed, For I know God's faithfulness."*

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Tune Tidbit: "Once in Royal David's City"

"Hark the Herald Angels Sing" is the recessional hymn played at the end of the Service of Nine Carols at King's College. The processional hymn is **"Once in Royal David's City"**, and a solo rendition of the first verse by a boy chorister has opened the service every year since 1919.

The lyrics of this carol were written by Miss Cecil Frances Humphreys - a noted songwriter who composed more than 400 poems and hymns in her lifetime. In 1848 a compilation of her lyrics entitled **"Hymns for Little Children"** was published and included in the volume was **"Once in Royal David's City"** (*David's City is Bethlehem*).

One year later, Henry John Gauntlett set her words to music to produce the carol we know today. Most of Miss Humphrey's works were aimed at children with the intention of making the Bible easy to understand. Miss Humphreys, who later became Cecil Francis Alexander, wife of an Irish Bishop, would one day give the profits from all her hymn books to support disabled children in the north Ireland.

Pray to recognize God's gifts.

December 21

The King Shall Come (Tune: "Joy to the World")

1. The King shall come when morning dawns, and light triumphant breaks,
When beauty gilds, the eastern hills
And life to joy awakes. (repeat 2x's)
2. The King shall come when morning dawns, and light and beauty brings.
Hail, Christ the Lord! Your people pray:
Come quickly, King of kings. (repeat 2x's)

Text: John Brownlie

Tune Tidbit: "Joy to the World - Antioch"

"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 is the result of a collaboration of at least three people and draws its initial inspiration not from the Christmas narrative in Luke 2, but from Psalm 98.

Echoing the beginning notes of "*Lift up Your Head*" from Handel's *Messiah*, the hymn tune 'Antioch', to which we sing "*Joy to the World*" also borrows from the instrumental interludes of the recitative "*Comfort Ye*" from the same composition.

Lowell Mason, who is listed in many hymnals to be the arranger of the tune, was deeply immersed in the music of the classical composers, including Handel, Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven. He seemed to have been so influenced by Handel that he wasn't sure where the dividing line came between his work and that of George Frederick Handel. This hymn tune first appeared in a 1839 collection of which Lowell Mason was the editor. Mason named this tune after the New Testament city of Antioch in Syria, where disciples were first called Christians (Acts 11:26).

When sung to *Antioch*, the text is repeated in the second section, reflecting a particular early American treatment of the melody called a "fuging tune." A fuging tune was a compositional device initiated by American-born composer William Billings (1746-1800) where voice parts enter one after the other in rapid succession, usually repeating the same words.

Pray for joy.

December 22

Elizabeth and Mary (Tune: "God Rest You Merry, Gentleman")

*1. Elizabeth and Mary were embraced by God's pure love.
Each carried in her womb a child of promise from above:
One mother older, one so young, bound by God's plan of love.*

*Refrain: Oh, people, sing praises to God, praises to God.
Oh, people, sing praises to God.*

*1. Within Elizabeth's own womb, the promised prophet leapt.
To greet the child of holy light, the secret Mary kept:
The hope of all the hungry poor, which Mary did accept. Refrain*

*3. "My soul does magnify the Lord," was Mary's song of praise.
"God's mercy raises up the meek and guards us all our days.
God fills the hungry with good things and sends the rich away." Refrain*

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Tune Tidbit: "God Rest You Merry, Gentleman" (again)

In America this classic carol definitely makes the top-ten list of beloved carols. But in England it has been in the number one slot for two centuries! "God Rest You Merry Gentlemen" was in fact the only carol that actually made it into Charles Dickens' classic story *A Christmas Carol*. The song's origins are unclear, but it was well known in the 19th century in many different versions, so it is probably much older.

Originally the first line read, "God rest you merry – comma – gentlemen." "To rest someone merry" meant "to keep someone happy." In other words, this wasn't a wish for happy people to rest, but for people to be and to keep on being happy because Christ is born. When you consider the rest of the lyrics, this makes sense. The best response to the birth of Jesus isn't rest but rejoicing.

Pray that we can rejoice like Mary and Elizabeth.

December 23

Go Tell it on the Mountain (Tune: "Go Tell it on the Mountain")

Refrain: Go tell it on the mountain, Over the hills and everywhere,
Go tell it on the mountain That Jesus Christ is born.

1. When I was a sinner, I sought both night and day.
I asked the Lord to help me And he showed me the way. Refrain

2. Now I've a message for you. In answer to God's call
Be fair and just to each one; The Lord God made us all. Refrain

3. Where hungry folk are weeping, Where those in prison cry,
Go tell them help is coming, Else why did Jesus die? Refrain

Verse 1: Spiritual Verse 2: Cynthia A. Douglas Verse 3: Rae E. Whitney

Tune Tidbit: "Go Tell it on the Mountain"

"Go, Tell it on the Mountain" provides the opportunity to tell the story of how singing African American spirituals saved a university.

The Fisk Jubilee Singers (drawing their name from Leviticus 25—the year of jubilee) were founded as a ten-member touring ensemble to raise funds for debt-ridden Fisk University. Taking the entire contents of the University treasury with them for travel expenses, they departed on October 6, 1871, from Nashville on their difficult, but ultimately successful eighteen-month tour, a triumph that is still celebrated annually as Jubilee Day on the campus. Though not the original repertoire of the group, by the time they reached New York in December of that year, their concerts consisted primarily of choral arrangements of spirituals. They have been credited with keeping the Negro spiritual alive.

"Go Tell It on the Mountain" would surely have been lost long ago, except for the work of John W. Work, Jr. and his brother, Frederick J. Work. They searched Appalachia for American spirituals, and in 1907 published a collection entitled Folk Songs of the American Negro. African American theologian James H. Cone's interpretation of this spiritual states that "the conquering King, and the crucified Lord . . . has come to bring peace and justice to the dispossessed of the land. That is why the slave wanted to 'go tell it on de mountain.'"

Pray that we are God's hands to the outcast this season.

December 24

Silent Night (Again)

1. 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.
2. Silent night, holy night, Shepherd quake at the sight.
Glories stream from heaven afar,
Heavenly hosts sing alleluia;
Christ the Savior is born! Christ the Savior is born!
3. 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.

Tune Tidbit: "*Silent Night*"

We will close with one "*Silent Night*" story that is relatively unfamiliar, yet one of the most moving of all. It comes from Stephen Ambrose's narrative of military life in World War II, *Citizen Soldiers*. The scene takes place in the freezing forest of Europe in the midst of heavy fighting between the German and American armies. The story comes from Lt. Charles Stockwell of the U.S. Army. Late on Christmas Eve, he was at a company HQ cellar. At about 23:45 hours, the firing died down.

"At the stroke of midnight, without an order or a request, dark figures emerged from the cellars. In the frosty gloom voices were raised in the old familiar Christmas carols. The heavy snowflakes fell softly, covering the weapons and signs of the war. The infantry, in their frontline positions, could hear voices 200 yards away in the dark joining them, in German, in the words to 'Silent Night.' It was a time when all men could join in the holy and sacred memories of the story of the Christ Child, and renew a fervent prayer for peace, goodwill toward all people".

Amen to that!

Thank God for Christmas.

December 25

“Joy to the World”

Issac Watts grew up in the Reformed/Puritan branch of Christianity in England. People in this theological persuasion used to believe that Christians should sing only the biblical Psalms in worship. But many of the Psalms were hard to sing in their existing form, the meter was too complicated. So many of the Reformed musicians recast the Psalms, changing the words; the meaning was essentially the same, but the result was easier to sing in English.

Nevertheless, the metrical Psalms sung in church were boring, at least to a young man named Issac Watts. When he complained to his father, he was challenged to do better. And so Issac began composing some better hymns for worship. Watts ended up composing over 600 hymns, including some we still sing today, “O God Our Help in Ages Past” and “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross.” In 1719 he published *The Psalms of David, Imitated in the Language of the New Testament*. In this collection of hymns, Watts used the biblical Psalms for his foundation, and then rewrote the words so they could be sung easily in English and so they reflected the reality of Christ. Psalm 98 provides the text for the carol “*Joy to the World*.”

This was not meant to be a Christmas carol at all. Apart from the fact that “the Lord is come” and the overall sense of joy, there isn’t anything “Christmassy” about “*Joy to the World*.” Yet, for obvious reasons, it has become one of the most loved and most frequently sung of all Christmas carols.

Though not written as a Christmas carol, “*Joy to the World*” gets to the heart of the matter. What are we celebrating this day? The entry of God into the world. And all of this deserves lots and lots of joy!

BENEDICTION (tune: “O, Little Town of Bethlehem”)

*Now may the good Lord bless and keep,
His love in you increase;
Lift up His face with shining grace,
And grant eternal peace.*

*To father, Son, and Spirit,
Eternal one-in-three,
Be thanks and praise
Through all our days and through eternity!*

May your celebration be rich, truthful, and joyful! Merry Christmas!