



SONGS OF JOY

*Devotions by the members of The Presbyterian
Church of Lawrenceville, Advent 2018*

This year's Advent devotionals focus on the songs of Advent, Christmas and Epiphany – Songs of Joy!

The Adult Education Committee is grateful for the contributions of the members, interns and staff members who supplied the twenty-four daily entries. We hope each of them will enrich your spiritual preparation for Christmas and the year to come.

We are indebted to Emery Cummins, PhD, grandfather of Maya and Quinn Ferguson, for the idea of using carols as the basis for our Advent reflections.

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SUNDAY, DECEMBER 2

COMFORT, COMFORT YOU MY PEOPLE | LORAIN HUCHLER

*Comfort, comfort you my people,
tell of peace, thus says our God;
comfort those who sit in darkness,
bowed beneath oppression's load.*

*Speak you to Jerusalem
of the peace that waits for them;
tell them that their sins I cover
and their warfare now is over.*

Today's hymn is based on Isaiah 40:1-5. Isaiah was speaking to God's people who were experiencing great distress: the Temple in Jerusalem – the center of their community and the hallowed place where they met God - had been destroyed and they were captives, living in exile in Babylon. How could God let this terrible thing happen to the chosen people? And what does this passage have to do with Advent? Consider this old-time stanza, that does not appear in our Presbyterian Hymnal:

*Yea, their sins our God will pardon,
blotting out each dark misdeed;
all that well deserved God's anger
God no more will see nor heed.*

*They have suffered many a day,
now their griefs have passed away;
God will change their pining sadness
into ever-springing gladness.*

Think about our own reality. Have you ever wished that you could skip Christmas? Skip the parties and the shopping, and most of all, silence the voices that insist that you should be merry? When my heart is hurting, I sometimes meditate on these words from Isaiah. Why? Because Isaiah reminds me that no matter how deep the darkness in my soul, no matter how desolate or desperate life seems, that God will “blot out each dark misdeed” and will change my “pining sadness into ever-springing gladness.” God promises this redemption to all people who will prepare a way for the Lord, repent, and change their hearts. During this Advent season, sit quietly as each day dawns or in the evening's darkness until you feel God's comforting presence.

PRAYER

Lord, help us to feel your comforting presence this Advent season.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 3

LET ALL MORTAL FLESH KEEP SILENCE | JEANNE AICHER

Let all mortal flesh keep silence, and with fear and trembling stand . . .

Thus begins this rather mournful Advent hymn of ancient origin, the text dating back to the 4th century. It is considered to be one of the oldest surviving liturgies of the Christian church. It stands in stark contrast to the words we hear in many Christmas hymns of Christ's humble birth in a lowly stable to a meek Mary and Joseph. In this hymn we hear of God's power and might come down to earth – God who is deserving of “our full homage”, who is “king of kings.”

This God incarnate in Jesus Christ, this little babe in a manger, has at his disposal “rank on rank” of the heavenly host, and seraphs and cherubim guard him even while they “veil their faces to the presence.” Though we may rebel at the thought of Jesus as a sweet baby who is set on the path to the terrible cross in his earthly life, this hymn reminds us that he came “that the powers of hell may vanish as the darkness clears away.”

This is our saving grace, that Christ saves us all and transforms all who attempt to follow him. So while we celebrate his birth, may we also remember the cross that he endured for our sakes, and the Easter resurrection:

Alleluia, Lord Most High!

PRAYER

Light of Light, King of Kings, at this time of expectation may we remember our redemption through this little babe who calls us to be born anew, and to live lives of love, recognizing the good in all people. Strengthened by the power and might of God, give us courage and wisdom to carry out programs like our fledgling CookWell program to help transform both others and ourselves. In Jesus's name we pray.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 4

CHRISTUS PARADOX | BRENT FERGUSON

You, Lord, are both lamb and shepherd. You, Lord, are both prince and slave.

You, peacemaker and swordbringer of the way you took and gave.

You the everlasting instant; you, whom we both scorn and crave.

The hymn pays tribute to a “paradoxical” Christ. What does that mean? We get a glimpse in John’s gospel, where Jesus is identified as the divine Word who “became flesh and dwelt/pitched his tent among us.” Jesus everlasting, present at the creation (Christ Pantocrator) was yet invested into brief bodily life for but an instant through the incarnation two millennia ago. This is the big act of Christmas – the mysterious incarnation of God in our midst as a human creature, yet still the ultimate Creator.

Over the ancient history of the church, we Christians have wrestled with how to describe the essence and status of Jesus Christ. This hymn states,

Worthy is our earthly Jesus; Worthy still our cosmic Christ!

This affirmation echoes the formulation of the Council of Chalcedon (A.D. 451): “Jesus is fully human and fully divine, without separation, division, confusion or change.” At all times, all of Jesus was (and still is) both of these things ... strange as that seems. A paradox, surely, but affirming either of these views of Jesus without the other would both contradict the record in Holy Scripture and also cause a certain amount of theological chaos. We await in Advent the coming of Jesus as the divine Holy One of Israel, so unlike us – yet at the same time a fragile and delicate human baby needing mothering and community, home and food, learning and friendship ... just like us.

The hymn builds slowly to a crescendo of tune, complexity, volume, and emotion, closing climactically:

You, the everlasting instant... you who are our death and life!

I invite you to experience it for yourself as you celebrate Advent afresh this year.

PRAYER

Lord, help us to encounter you deeply this Advent season, confronting and celebrating the paradoxes within our faith journey.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 5

O COME, O COME, EMMANUEL | JONATHAN BURKE *

The world, before the time when Christ took on flesh and came down to be with us, was a world in need. According to the seven stanzas of the original hymn, the world was looking for a savior, a teacher, a reminder, a rescuer, a door opener, a comforting light, and a unifying ruler. Each line reveals the depth of yearning that a broken world felt.

O come, desire of nations, bind all peoples in one heart and mind.

Bid envy, strife and discord cease; fill the whole world with heaven's peace.

Two thousand years have now passed since Jesus's birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension. When we look around us and see the violence, brokenness, poverty and discord that dominates our headlines, we can all agree that we are also a world in need. We too need a savior, a teacher, a reminder, a rescuer, a door opener, a comforting light, and a unifying ruler.

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

As we sing this beautiful hymn this Advent season, let it not only serve as a reminder for what it was like before Christ came to us in Bethlehem centuries ago. Let us also join our voices in the expectant cry of a people who wait for Christ to return again!

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, come quickly.

* PCOL Intern from Princeton Theological Seminary

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 6

O LORD, HOW SHALL I MEET YOU? | BRANDT McCABE

The title of this hymn poses an Advent question if there ever was one. As you read the words of the hymn, what answers do you find within these verses?

*O Lord, how shall I meet you, how welcome you aright?
Your people long to greet you, my hope, my heart's delight!
O kindle, Lord most holy, a lamp within my breast,
to do in spirit lowly all that may please you best.*

*Love caused your incarnation, Love brought you down to me;
your thirst for my salvation procured my liberty.
O love beyond all telling, that led you to embrace
in love, all loves excelling, our lost and fallen race.*

*A glorious crown you give me, a treasure safe on high,
that will not fail nor leave me as earthly riches fly.
My heart shall bloom forever for you with praises new,
and from your name shall never withhold the honor due.*

The hymn names ways and qualities of preparation to meet the Lord: welcoming, hope, humility, love, trust, praise and honor. All are wonderful qualities for Advent and preparing to meet the Lord anew.

Matthew is a gospel emphasizing God's presence with us. In the first chapter, Jesus is named "Emanuel (which means God with us)"- Mt. 1:23. In the middle of the gospel, Jesus says: "where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them"- Mt. 18:20. Jesus' last words in Matthew are: "Lo I am with you always to the end of the age"- Mt. 28:20. Jesus has come, he abides with us now, he will come again. We greet him over and over all the days of our lives. We greet him like the shepherds did, with praise and thanksgiving; like the wise men with pilgrimage and gifts; like the disciples with questions and companionship. There comes a time when Jesus calls his disciples "friends."

PRAYER

"O kindle, Lord most holy, A lamp within my breast; to do in spirit lowly, all that may please you best"- to thank you, to honor you, to love you, to praise you, to befriend you, to worship you.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 7

PEOPLE, LOOK EAST | CYNTHIA AND ROB KORKUCH

“People, Look East” is an instruction, an encouragement, a pleading, and an orchestrating of those looking in various directions to all look in one direction – to the East.

People, look east, the time is near of the crowning of the year.

Make your house fair as you are able; trim the hearth and set the table.

It is with expectation that those who turn toward the East will be glad they did. There is a sense that there is something coming from a distance to be closer.

East is where the sun rises. It is the start of something new. It erases the dark of night. It illuminates that which is being sought. It provides warmth and brings a new day. “Angels are coming with shouts of mirth!” Who can ignore a shouting angel?! Who can overlook the Savior’s birth? People, Look East!

Angels announce, with shouts of mirth, Christ who brings new life to earth.

Set every peak and valley humming with the word, the Lord is coming.

People look east and sing today. Love, the Lord is on the way.

PRAYER

Lord, may we look with hope and expectation for your coming this Christmas. May we be answered prayer for someone who needs to know your love.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 8

PREPARE THE WAY, O ZION | JIM STOCKING

The first lines of the hymn “Prepare the Way” read:

Prepare the way, O Zion, your Christ is drawing near!

They echo the words of Isaiah 40:

*A voice cries out: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.”*

Advent was not a part of my church experience when I was growing up. My first encounter with the celebration of Advent came the year Nancy and I lived in Sweden, where December is a time when the gloom of night reigns. Advent was literally a time to light candles against the dark.

This hymn goes back to a text from the 19th Century composed by a Swedish Lutheran minister born in Finland. It is set to music derived from a 17th Century German melody. The English words we sing are a 20th Century paraphrase of themes from the version in Swedish. Thus, in our celebration we build on over three centuries of worship by a greater Christian community.

Advent is a time for counting down the days to Christmas, when we celebrate anew the birth of our Savior. But it is not a season of passive anticipation; it is a time of active preparation. We work to counter the darkness that surrounds us. We take a hands-on role in getting our hearts ready to remember once again the good news of Christ’s birth. In its promise for our future, we celebrate.

His rule is peace and freedom, and justice, truth, and love.

Lift high your praise resounding, for grace and joy abounding.

During Advent we lift the valleys and lower the mountains to create the straight road. We level the terrain surrounding our lives in order that the glory of the Lord can shine on us and on those around us.

*“Fling wide your gates, O Zion; your Savior’s rule embrace,
and tidings of salvation proclaim in every place.”
...O blest is Christ that came in God’s most holy name.*

PRAYER

Help us, Lord, to prepare actively for your birth, by shining light within the darkness that surrounds us.

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 9

SAVIOR OF THE NATIONS, COME | BRETT GUEDEMAN *

Everything in our lives is incredibly fast-paced. Our electronics are constantly updating, our buildings are being modernized, there's always a new bestseller to read, and media notifications flood our phones. There is an excitement in the newness. But, when we stand beside something old, something that has stood the test of time, our breath is taken away. Maybe this a family heirloom, or a medieval cathedral, or perhaps a national relic such as the Liberty Bell. The longevity places importance and beauty upon an object.

That's how I feel when I sing this hymn. The words come from St. Ambrose who was the bishop of Milan and lived in the fourth century. In the 16th century, Martin Luther put the lyrics to music and translated them from Latin to his vernacular— German. It has continued to be sung in many different languages. When we sing this hymn, we connect to our brothers and sisters across countries, race, and time, who have prayed for centuries in supplication,

Savior of the nations, come. Virgin's son, make here your home.

Marvel now, O heaven and earth, that the Lord chose such a birth.

We become part of the community that both celebrates the incarnation of Jesus Christ and, with hope, looks toward his second coming.

PRAYER

Lord, help us to think of Christ's coming as a gift to the entire world.

* PCOL Intern from Princeton Theological Seminary

MONDAY, DECEMBER 10

I WONDER AS I WANDER | JEFF VAMOS

*I wonder as I wander, out under the sky, how Jesus the Savior did come for to die
for poor ord'n'ry people like you and like I. I wonder as I wander, out under the sky.*

John Jacob Niles, after visiting a church service in the Appalachian town of Murphy, NC in 1933, wrote about his inspiration for writing the hymn:

“A girl stepped out onto the little platform attached to an automobile. She began to sing. Her clothes were unbelievably dirty and ragged, and she, too, was unwashed. Her ash-blond hair hung down in long skeins.... But, best of all, she was beautiful, and in her untutored way, she could sing. She smiled as she sang, smiled rather sadly, and sang only a single line of a song.”

This hymn places me in that little Appalachian town, walking with that young girl (is it Mary?), full of wonder looking up at the stars as we walk toward a destination whose mystery we know not. Is it Bethlehem? Murphy? Is it Lawrenceville? Christmas is about looking away from the streets, up to the heavens, wondering at what love has come down, what vast mystery attends this strange and unbounded universe.

PRAYER

Lord, help us to look away from the streets and toward the heavens this season.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 11

WATCHMAN, TELL US OF THE NIGHT | ELLEN HEATH

Some years ago, my husband and I visited the German town of Rothenburg ob der Tauber, a well-preserved medieval walled town that has become a tourist site. An authentically dressed guide led us around explaining life at the time and the importance of a watchman. When night would fall, all the gates to the town were shut and fortified against thieves, marauding soldiers and other malevolent figures. During the night, the watchman's job was to call out the hour and reassure citizens that all was well and they could settle down for their rest.

Watchman, tell us of the night, what its signs of promise are.

Traveler, o'er yon mountain's height, see that glory-beaming star.

Watchman, does its beauteous ray aught of joy or hope foretell?

Traveler, yes; it brings the day, promised day of Israel.

The minor strains of the hymn remind me of the unease that people of that time experienced. A traveler to the town would have been on the alert for danger. The watchman of this hymn, who interprets the meaning of the miraculous star, tells the traveler that it portends “peace and truth” which is not just for that time and place but for all time and all places.

Watchman, tell us of the night, higher yet that star attends.

Traveler, blessedness and light, peace and truth its course portends.

Today, the physical dangers of a medieval time are not a living reality for people except in the most troubled corners of the world. Our worries are more vague but equally unsettling: the changes in the environment, the creeping dangers of our technology, the weakening of traditions that gave us peace of mind, and now in America, active distrust of one another. Thus, we are ready for the “peace and truth” that the star portends. Though all may not be well, we are buoyed by God's gift of love in that holy birth that transcends the darkness. Just as the watchman tells the traveler,

Traveler, darkness takes its flight, doubt and terror are withdrawn.

PRAYER

May we receive the wonderful message of God's commitment to us, in which we can find our rest.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 12

ANGELS WE HAVE HEARD ON HIGH | BEVERLY MACDONALD

*Angels we have heard on high, sweetly singing o'er the plains,
And the mountains in reply, echoing their joyous strains
Gloria in excelsis Deo; Gloria in excelsis Deo.*

What joy to hear and sing this hymn and instantly be in the spirit of Christmas. This hymn quickly transports me back in time, to singing in the children's choir at Ewing Presbyterian Church. The choir consisted of children in grades 3 – 7, and we wore red choir robes with white over-the-head blousy tops. I believe we always sang this hymn together with the adult choir and congregation.

I remember specifically learning about the hymn's refrain. First, we learned about musical phrasing and singing one phrase on one breath. We were to sing "Gloria" without taking a breath, lasting for 4 measures. Second, we learned to pronounce the Latin phrase, "Gloria, in excelsis Deo," using common words that we children could understand. Thus, the entire refrain, Gloria, in excelsis Deo, became "Glow-----ria, In egg shells cease, Day – O". To this day I hear that pronunciation.

This hymn is set so well musically that everyone can sing it, with wonderful major chords and strong, even beats. The melody line floats along during the refrain, while the harmony marches forward with enthusiasm.

To me, a word that stands out is the first word of the title, Angels. Angels are so iconic during the Christmas season. According to Luke, chapter 2, it is the Angel who brings the good news of Jesus's birth to the shepherds in the fields. It is the Angels who praise God, saying "Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace among those whom he favors."

This is what the congregation is singing during the refrain of the hymn – "Gloria in excelsis Deo – Glory to God in the Highest!" That the Angel appears in the heavens and brings good news reminds us to keep our minds and hearts open to hear the good news and receive the joy and love of Jesus Christ.

PRAYER

O God, during this Advent season, may we remember to look up and see the light of the angels shining down on us, guiding us to receive the good news that the birth of your son, Jesus, has occurred!

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 13

BREAK FORTH, O BEAUTEOUS HEAVENLY LIGHT | JIM MOYER

The German Lutheran tradition has a rich heritage of Advent and Christmas hymns. “Break Forth, O Beauteous Heavenly Light” comes from Lutheran pastor, Johann Rist, in 1641. He originally wrote a 12-stanza poem on the incarnation that was later paraphrased and adapted as a hymn. It recalls the brilliant light at the heralding of the angels and links it metaphorically to the light of our salvation, Jesus Christ.

The tune, *Ermuntre Dich*, was composed by Johann Shop for this text in 1641; it was famously harmonized by Johann Sebastian Bach in 1734, and used in the second cantata of his famous *Weinachtsoratorium* (Christmas Oratorio.) Growing up listening to Bach’s music, this hymn takes me back to many places – the opening line has for my entire life made me wonder what the shepherds (these common folk just going about their business and trying to live from day to day) must have thought and how scared they must have been:

*Break forth, O beauteous heav’nly light, and usher in the morning;
O shepherds, shrink not with affright, but hear the angel’s warning.*

And then there is calm at the end of the first stanza – knowing that a child is coming who will overcome evil and death – and create “peace eternal.” The line is reassuring after the fact – but try to make sense of the text not knowing what is to come.

*This Child, now weak in infancy, our confidence and joy shall be;
the pow’r of Satan breaking, our peace eternal making.*

PRAYER

Lord you are the hope in our messy world. During this Advent season, help me to slow down, listen to your voice, and focus on what is most important. I place my hope in you as I prepare my heart to celebrate the birth of the Christ child.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 14

IN THE BLEAK MIDWINTER | THALIA KUENTZEL

In the dreariness of gray December nights, it's hard to look up as we put one foot in front of the other, trudging past barren trees silhouetted against cloudy skies. Storm-filled clouds obscure the brilliance of stars shining behind them. We don't look up. But this eloquent carol reminds us to look up, beyond ourselves, and to offer what is already within us - love.

Written as a poem, Christina Rossetti set the Nativity in a snowy landscape, opposite of what truly occurred. Shivering in our Northeast winters, it's easy to imagine ourselves there as the haunting yet soothing melody pulls us in.

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

Verse one sets the scene. The next two remind us of God's power breaking into our lives with an unexpected gift pulling us out of ourselves and back into whose we are - children of God. The fourth verse, the most familiar, connects us with key players who knelt at His manger or cradle. Like the wise men or working shepherds, we, too, can offer our best to this holy child. And our best is always, simply love.

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

If we are open, the illuminating spotlight of God's love shines into every forgotten, hidden or ignored corner of our lives. Coupled with that light comes God's invitation to look up to see light already shining; ready to transform dreariness into hope.

PRAYER

Dear God, thank you for your light that can transform us. Help us to look up and delight in the beauty of each passing day - snow, cloudy or clear - and to remember that your love transcends all dreariness, bleakness and pain. As we look for your light, help us to share your love with others - that they also may be drawn into your healing, welcoming love.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 15

IT CAME UPON A MIDNIGHT CLEAR | SARAH JANE KENNEDY

*And ye, beneath life's crushing load
Whose forms are bending low
Who toil along the climbing way
With painful steps and slow
Look now! For glad and golden hours
Come swiftly on the wing
O rest beside the weary road
And hear the angels sing*

When I sing this Christmas carol, it brings to mind the Norman Rockwell painting titled “Lift Up Thine Eyes.” Rockwell’s painting depicts a cathedral entrance in all its glory with the sexton changing the message board to read “Lift up thine eyes,” and the minister/priest looking at the sexton. The passing parade of pedestrians on the sidewalk is looking down at the ground with stooped shoulders, missing the point.

When I first saw this print hanging in a pastor’s office, I was struck by the simplicity and truth portrayed. Are we so burdened down beneath life’s crushing blows that we forget to look up and hear the angels’ message? Does the Christmas season come around each year with such routine and familiarity that we ignore the miracle of Christ coming to earth in human form? Where is our joy and wonder? I try to take this message to my own heart and remember the true meaning of the season.

PRAYER

Lord, help me to pause, lift up my eyes, and hear the angels sing.

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 16

O COME, ALL YE FAITHFUL | MARGARET AUSTIN

There are many Christmas carols that I enjoy. “O Come, All Ye Faithful” in particular brings memories of my grammar school where the whole school assembled each morning for prayers, a Bible reading and singing. Our stern Headmistress would only allow us to sing this carol in Latin: “Adeste Fideles.” To this day I still sing the Latin words, with a smile on my face.

*Adeste Fideles laeti triumphantes, venite, venite in Bethlehem.
Natum videte, Regem Angelorum;
Venite adoremus, venite adoremus, venite adoremus Dominum!
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!*

*Ergo qui natus, die hodierna, Jesu, tibi sit gloria.
Patris aeterni Verbum caro factum;
Venite adoremus, venite adoremus, venite adoremus Dominum!
Yea, Lord, we greet Thee, born this happy morning,
Jesu, to Thee be 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!*

*Cantet nunc io chorus Angelorum cantet nunc aula caelestium:
Gloria in excelsis Deo!
Venite adoremus, venite adoremus, venite adoremus Dominum!
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!*

PRAYER

Lord, help every person to smile while singing your praise - in any language.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 17

O LITTLE TOWN OF BETHLEHEM | MARCIA MEEHAN *

Going to the 11 pm service every Christmas Eve was a treasured tradition in my family. At midnight, when we lit our candles and welcomed in the day of Jesus's birth, I would have already sung this song, either from the choir loft, or beside my grandfather, who was determined to blow out my candle. I knew that he and my grandmother had traveled a long way to spend this special evening with us, just like Mary and Joseph had traveled a long way to Bethlehem.

*O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie!
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by.*

Although this song was written hastily in 1868, it has stood the test of time, and was heard frequently throughout the holiday season in our house as my mother played it on the piano.

*... Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light;
the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.*

This hymn brings back memories of celebrating the birth of Jesus, love and family – all things that have also stood the test of time in my life. If I had a Christmas wish, it would be that all children would know the love of Christ and be surrounded by caring adults during this holiday season, just like I was blessed in my life.

PRAYER

Lord, help all children to know your love this Christmas season.

* PCOL Capital Campaign Consultant

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 18

Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming | LOUISE JOHNSON

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. –Isaiah 11:1

Those of you who know me well will know that I am not a musical person, but when I hear the four-part blended harmonies of this hymn, it is a sublime, transcendent experience.

*Lo, how a rose e'er blooming from tender stem hath sprung,
From Jesse's lineage coming, by faithful prophets sung ...*

Listen to the Mormon Tabernacle Choir and see what you think: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kU-E46o0sp0>

The tempo of this hymn is slow, just like the new growth that eventually comes out of a stump; just like the blooming of a rose; just like the birth of a long-awaited Savior. The music was composed by German court musician Michael Praetorius in 1609. The words were composed in the 15th century in German. What we sing is a translation, admittedly a pretty awkward one.

The message is simple, yet profound. Jesus, of Jesse's lineage (Jesse was King David's father), is the Savior foretold by Isaiah. In the birth of Jesus, God's promise to Israel, to us and to our world is made real.

*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 for us a Savior, when half spent was the night.*

This is a hymn about God's plans and purposes unfurling like a rose in time, space and eternity.

PRAYER

Loving Lord, enable us to wait expectantly for your saving presence to be revealed every day.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 19

ONCE IN ROYAL DAVID'S CITY | ALISON YOUNG

This is not a popular Christmas carol in the US, but it is one of the most beloved in the British Commonwealth. We heard it perhaps for the first time in 1978 when we were living in Calcutta, India. Our little daughter Amalie was two and a half. We had the unique and lovely experience of living for that year inside the compound community of Bishop's College Theological Seminary. Our neighbors and Amalie's little friends were Christian student families from all over India.

There was a lot of excitement leading up to the seminary families' Christmas Eve celebration. It was to be an elaborate tableau involving many members of the student and faculty community, with songs and narration retelling the nativity story. Amalie and the other little children were cast as angels. We gathered in the brightly lit worship space as darkness fell. Instead of soft candles in the windows, there were strings of colored lights and gaudy tinsel decorations everywhere. The choir led us all in the opening hymn to set the stage –

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

The narration of the familiar words from Luke unfolded, and the story culminated with all the little angels, dressed in white robes, solemnly assembled. As they took their places among the adult 'statues,' the choir began an exuberant, rhythmic rendition of the angels' song—

Glory to God in the highest!

Our little golden-haired Amalie COULD NOT hold her pose in the tableau, but began to sway, then move, then full-on dance to the music. The joy of celebrating Christ's coming, with new friends in a strange new place, was breaking through! We still smile at that, and all that surrounds our memories of Christmas in Calcutta.

PRAYER

Loving God, we give thanks for the rich memories of telling and retelling the story of the birth of our Savior.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 20

RISE UP, SHEPHERD, AND FOLLOW | KYLE ANDERSON

*There's a star in the east on Christmas morn,
Rise up, shepherd, and follow.
It will lead to the place where the Christ was born,
Rise up, shepherd, and follow.*

The imperative: “Rise up!” is what really grabs my attention. What do you suppose the shepherds were doing that they needed to rise up? Sitting? Lying down? Perhaps even sleeping? Whatever they were doing, it’s clear they didn’t expect what was coming. Luke’s account of this narrative in scripture seems to suggest that the shepherds were going about their normal work when suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared before them.

Suddenly, everything they knew and had heard about God and the expected Messiah—everything they hoped for—in that moment, collided with reality. Suddenly, heaven and earth met. Suddenly, God was present among them, bearing “good news of great joy for all the people.”

*If you take good heed to the angel's words,
Rise up, shepherd, and follow.
You'll forget your flocks, you'll forget your herds,
Rise up, shepherd, and follow.*

In the busyness of the holiday season, amidst full schedules, holiday parties, Christmas cookies, and family gatherings (and all that comes with them), Advent comes to us as an angel of the Lord, all of a sudden, to direct our attention somewhere else; to remind us that God, in Jesus Christ, has drawn near to us.

Advent, like the voice of the angel, reminds us: rise up, shepherd, and follow.

PRAYER

God, thank you that even in the midst of the most mundane, you are there. This Advent season, may we be ready to receive you wherever you may be found. May we keep watch. May we rise up and follow, trusting in the good news which you proclaimed so long ago—“to us is born this day... a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 21

WHAT CHILD IS THIS? | TOM WILFRID

The tune Greensleeves, originally a lament about unrequited love, has been captivating people since the 16th century in England. It inspired William Chatterton Dix to write the lyrics to “What Child Is This?” in 1865. I’ve been inspired by that tune and those lyrics since I was a teenager.

One refreshing thing about this hymn is that it starts off with a question:

What child is this who, laid to rest on Mary’s lap, is sleeping?

This question invites each of us to consider who this child is, and what his identity means for us and others. After the initial chorus proclaims “This, this is Christ the King,” another question follows in verse 2:

Why lies he in such mean estate, where ox and ass are feeding?

This presents us with the astounding paradox of Christmas: almighty God entering the world in the humblest of circumstances. In an older version of the hymn, there is no repeated chorus; instead, the second verse continues with a preview of Jesus’s sacrifice:

Nails, spear shall pierce him through, the cross be borne for me, for you.

The final verse and chorus invite each of us to respond with gratitude and praise:

So bring him incense, gold and myrrh; come one and all, to own him.

The King of kings salvation brings; let loving hearts enthrone him.

This, this is Christ the King, whom shepherds guard and angels sing;

Haste, haste to bring him laud, the babe, the son of Mary.

PRAYER

Lord, thank you for coming to humanity in the way that you did. Help us to praise you through our lives.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 22

THE FIRST NOWELL (OR NOEL OR NOËL) | ANNE LEWIN

So many spellings for one word! Noel comes from the French, although it is a strictly English carol (16th century Cornish, with the spelling Nowell).

The second verse of the song is the one that has the most meaning for me in this season - about the star that appeared in the sky:

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

Can you imagine the shock and amazement to everyone to first have an Angel choir sing, and then to have a bright heavenly body shining down without stopping for several days? To me this is the first indication that Jesus is the Light of the world.

The song goes on to tell of the Wise Men following that light, as we continue to do today:

*Then entered in those wise men three, fell reverently upon their knee,
And offered there in his presence their gold and myrrh and frankincense.*

This season, as you hear or sing The First Nowell, really listen to the lyrics beyond the first verse. Notice that the song isn't really about the Angels singing, but about the star, and the light, and about Jesus as our salvation:

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

PRAYER

O Light of the world, shine upon us and our world as you did so long ago.

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 23

'Twas in the Moon of Wintertime | JOHN CALKINS

Also known as the Huron Carol, I was first drawn to this hymn for its title and its cultural subtext. A French Jesuit missionary in Canada, Jean de Brébeuf, wrote this hymn for the Huron people during a time of conflict with the Iroquois Nation. A call to worship, this hymn calls for the Huron people to bring what gifts they have to offer as new followers of Christ and “Gitchi Manitou,” the Algonquian name for God.

*'Twas in the moon of wintertime, when all the birds had fled,
That mighty Gitchi Manitou sent angel choirs instead.
Before their light the stars grew dim and wondering hunters heard the hymn:
Jesus, your King, is born, Jesus is born. In excelsis Gloria.*

*Within a lodge of broken bark the tender babe was found;
A ragged robe of rabbit skin enwrapped his beauty round.
The chiefs from far before him knelt with gifts of ox and beaver pelt:
Jesus, your King, is born, Jesus is born. In excelsis Gloria.*

Musically, it is a beautiful carol in a minor-key and throughout contains a bass drone effect, and provides a celestial color, a dual-tonality. The carol then rises to a bright moment, calling for peace, thankfulness and perspective, which I believe resonates with this season of Advent.

*O children of the forest tree, O you of Manitou,
The holy child of earth and heaven is born today for you.
Come kneel before the radiant boy who brings you beauty, peace and joy.
Jesus, your King, is born, Jesus is born. In excelsis Gloria.*

During this Advent season, we should pray, meditate and reflect on what gifts we have to offer for the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ, and for peace and joy the new year to come. What gifts do you have to bring?

PRAYER

Lord, help us, as we draw this this Advent season to a close, to do so enwrapped with beauty, peace, thankfulness, perspective – and JOY!.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 24

O HOLY NIGHT | JOHN HUCHLER

It's 1950, and I have my first solo in the Lutheran church's Christmas program. My mom and Tante Gussie sit in the front row of pews, smiling at me as I, a nervous twelve-year-old, sing the first verse and third chorus. That night, I was able to make music from beautiful words whose meaning I didn't fully understand.

*O Holy Night, the stars are brightly shining;
It is the night of our dear Savior's birth.
Long lay the world in sin and error pining,
Till he appeared and the soul felt its worth.
The thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices,
For yonder brinks a new and glorious morn.
Fall on your knees; O hear the angel voices.
O night divine, O night when Christ was born,
O night divine, O night, O night divine.*

Each Christmas, I reflect on this divine, holy night, rejoicing with the thrill of hope, listening for the angels' voices and pondering the power of Jesus' birth. Today, I can sing this hymn in my tenor voice with wonder and joy as a disciple for Christ.

What makes this night holy for you? On this holiest of nights, step outside and listen for the angels' voices proclaiming, once again, the happy news that Christ has come!

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, we welcome you again this night, with wonder and joy in our hearts.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 25

JOY TO THE WORLD | STEVE LONGLEY *

“Joy to the World” is a hymn that gets all your blood flowing, encouraging even those Christmas time church-goers who consider their voices so bad that humming is a substitute to puffing up your chest and belting out those big, glorious repeating “joys” at the beginning of verses 1 and 2. I can hear my brother now, digging into his bag of deep bass tones and sharing a smile with all those observing his Christmas-time excitement! Joy, joy, joy to all.

Isaac Watts, who wrote “Joy to the World” in 1719 would be proud to know that his lyrics (based on selections from Psalm 98, Psalm 96:11-12 and Genesis 3:17-18) and set to Handel’s “Antioch” melody (later revised by Lowell Mason in 1848), ranks today as the most-published Christmas hymn in North America.

However bad you consider your voice (and it’s not as bad as you think), I hope you join me this Christmas season in sharing “Joy to the World” with all your friends and loved ones. To get you in the mood, follow the link to the U.S Army Chorus’ performance of “Joy to the World.” It’s sure to make you want to share some joy with others. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Joy_To_The_World.ogg

Psalm 95:

*O come, let us sing to the LORD;
let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!
Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;
let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!*

PRAYER

With joy, we welcome you into our hearts, Lord Jesus!

* PCOL Intern from Princeton Theological Seminary



THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
OF LAWRENCEVILLE
2688 Main Street
Lawrenceville, NJ 08648

www.pclawrenceville.org