

Advent is the time of expectation... of preparation...
to anticipate Christ's coming in glory,
and to remember His coming as a baby.

In Christ God's love is made manifest:

*"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son,
that whoever believes in Him should not perish
but have everlasting life." (John 3:16 NKJV)*

2021

Advent Journey

From 28th November
1st Sunday in Advent
To 25th December
Christmas Day
2021

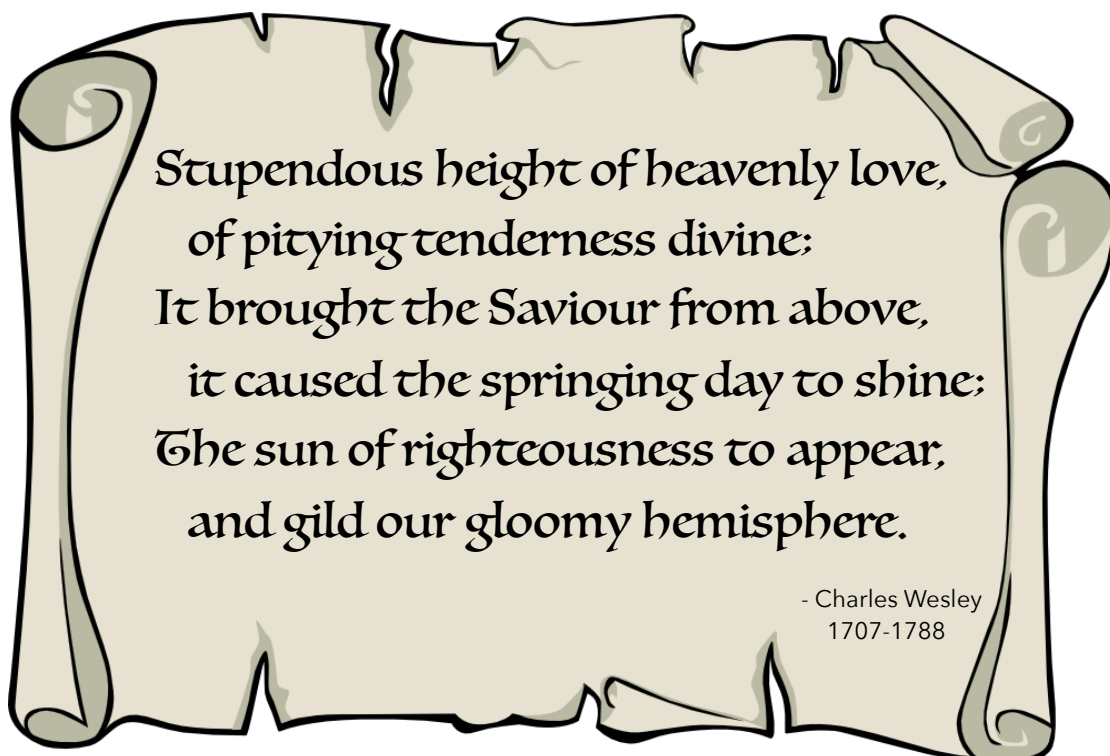


The word 'Advent' is derived from the Latin word *adventus*, meaning "coming," which is a translation of the Greek word *parousia*. Scholars believe that during the 4th and 5th centuries in Spain and Gaul, Advent was a season of preparation for the baptism of new Christians at the January feast of Epiphany, the celebration of God's incarnation represented by the visit of the Magi to the baby Jesus (Matthew 2:1), his baptism in the Jordan River by John the Baptist (John 1:29), and his first miracle at Cana (John 2:1). During this season of preparation, Christians would spend 40 days in penance, prayer, and fasting to prepare for this celebration; originally, there was little connection between Advent and Christmas.

By the 6th century, however, Roman Christians had tied Advent to the coming of Christ. The "coming" they had in mind was not Christ's first coming in the manger in Bethlehem, but his second coming in the clouds as the judge of the world. It was not until the Middle Ages that the Advent season was explicitly linked to Christ's first coming at Christmas.

Today, the season of Advent lasts for four Sundays leading up to Christmas. At that time, the new Christian year begins with the twelve-day celebration of Christmastide, which lasts from Christmas Eve until *Epiphany* on January 6th. Advent begins on the Sunday that falls between November 27th and December 3rd each year.

- from christianity.com



Each day of Advent 2021 we will consider some aspect of God's promise to send the Messiah -- and how that promise was fulfilled -- through scripture, meditation, prayer, testimony.

At the end of each week we will focus on one of Charles Wesley's hymns that celebrate the Good News of Advent and Christmas.

Here is how we will 'map' our Advent Journey:

The Messiah

1st SUNDAY in ADVENT

DAY 1 - The Anointed One

God Makes Promises

DAYS 2-7

- 2 - When Did These Promises Start?
- 3 - Government Involvement
- 4 - A New King Arrives
- 5 - God Uses Whom He Chooses
- 6 - He Shall Reign Forever
- 7 - Light Dispels Darkness

Hymn 141 "To Us A Child of Royal Birth"

God Keeps Promises

DAYS 8-13

- 8 - Time was Full
- 9 - Forever Old, Forever New
- 10 - Invasion!
- 11 - God Stoops Low
- 12 - God Makes Himself Little
- 13 - *If* Christmas Comes

The Long-Expected Messiah

DAYS 14-19

14 - Immanuel... God With Us

Hymn 242 "Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus"

15 - God Will Become A Baby

16 - The Son Of God Became The Child Of Mary

17 - No Ordinary Night

18 - God Entered The World

19 - One Of Us

The More-than-Expected Jesus

DAYS 20-27

20 - He Did It For You

21 - What Do We Do With The Levis Of The world?

Hymn 142 "Let Earth and Heaven Combine"

22 - Almost Peace

23 - Always Peace

24 - And The Gift Goes On

25 - Joyful, Joyful

26 - Love Came Down At Christmas

27 - Heavenly Peace

The Christ

CHRISTMAS DAY

28 - Born In Us

Hymn 117 "Hark! The Herald-Angels Sing"

Day 1 Sunday 28th November 1st Sunday in Advent

The woman said to him, "I know that the Messiah will come, and when he comes, he will tell us everything."

Jesus answered, "I am he, I who am talking with you."

- John 4:25-26 (GNT)

The Old Testament contains over 300 prophecies about a future Messiah, a savior anointed by God to deliver His people from oppression. The New Testament trumpets the fulfillment of those prophecies through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus Himself revealed that He was the promised Messiah -- see John 4:25-26 (quoted above).

Further, the gospels show how Jesus fulfilled the messianic prophecies and ultimately delivered humanity from the oppression of death through the promise of eternal salvation -- see John 3:16:

For God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not die but have eternal life.

- from *christianity.com*

Messiah = Anointed One

Messiah is derived from the Hebrew word *mashiach* which means "anointed one" and which corresponds to the New Testament title of "Christ" (*Christos* = anointed one). As Andrew exclaimed to his brother Peter "We have found the **MESSIAH** (which translated means **CHRIST**)" (John 1:41). And as the Samaritan woman at the well said to Jesus "I know that **MESSIAH** is coming (He Who is called **CHRIST**)" (John 4:25). So when you encounter the title "CHRIST" in the New Testament, you are really encountering "MESSIAH."

- from *preceptaustin.org*

PRAYER

Father, I want this holiday season to be filled with light instead of darkness. Please help me discard my emotional masks and be real before You as well as my family and friends. Father, help me make this holiday season an offering of praise to You. In Jesus' Name, Amen.+

Two very different versions of the Hymn "O come, O come Emmanuel"

- Traditional Choir https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7xtpJ4Q_Q-4

- Neil Diamond <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6QYnPOYdAaw>

The anticipation of national deliverance through a Man anointed by God has been a theme of Judaism throughout the ages, even as many first century Jews were "eagerly waiting for the Messiah to come and rescue Israel... looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem" (Luke 2:25,38). John the Baptist asked the question every pious Jew had been asking for centuries "Are You the Expected One?" (Matthew 11:3, Luke 7:19-20), which is another way of asking "Jesus, Are You the Messiah, the Anointed One, the Deliverer?"

The 12th article of the orthodox Jewish creed says "I believe with a perfect faith in the coming of the Messiah, and though He tarry, yet will I wait daily for His coming." The first century Jews expected a conquering king who would free them from Rome, but instead this Messiah died a shameful death on a Roman cross. And so there was great disappointment because Jesus did not appear to be the Expected One. Have you ever been discouraged because someone in whom you placed your hope let you down? Then you can identify with the two disciples who walked on the dusty road to Emmaus and were joined by a resurrected Stranger whose identity was veiled. Jesus saw they were "looking sad" for they "were hoping that [Jesus] was [the Messiah] Who was going to redeem Israel" (Luke 24:17, 21).

- from *preceptaustin.org*

The prophet Isaiah, living over 700 years before Jesus, prophesied that "the glory of the Lord will be revealed" for the "sovereign Lord is coming to rule with power" (Isaiah 40:5, 10). And the coming of this promised one, this Anointed One, this Messiah would be prefaced by the message (Isaiah 40:3):

"Prepare in the wilderness a road for the Lord!

Clear the way in the desert for our God!"

John the Baptist "spoke out openly and clearly, saying: "I am not the Messiah... "Then tell us who you are," the Pharisees asked. "John answered by quoting the prophet Isaiah: 'I am the voice of someone shouting in the desert: Make a straight path for the Lord to travel!'" (John 1:20, 22-23).

PRAYER

Lord, thank you for being a God who keeps your word and fulfills your promises.

Strengthen our commitment to keep our word and fulfill our promises.

Make us more like You, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

"Do not dare not to dare." - C. S. Lewis

There was a good deal of government involvement in the first Christmas. This will surprise some and anger others. I'm almost sure I can hear someone muttering, "What did you expect? Have you ever seen anything where politicians or the government couldn't work their way in?"

Most of us are ambivalent about government. Many of us complain that there's too much of it, but we're quick to call the police if our home is broken into, and were glad for the fire department in the threat of emergencies. And if you think I'm staying close to those agencies of government that everyone favors (except, perhaps, when getting a traffic ticket), let me remind you of a phrase that so frequently slips into our conversations: "The government ought to do something about it!"

In any event, the government got in on the first Christmas. And probably someone then said what someone says now: "What did you expect?"

The government involvement began with taxes. The Roman government was a big operation, and a very efficient one. But even efficient operations need a lot of money if they're to function; and ancient governments, like modern ones, were constantly under a strain to find new methods of taxation.

It was this registering by the Roman government that forced Joseph and Mary to make the seventy-mile trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem at a most inconvenient time. Mary was great with child, and the trip, by foot and donkey, would take roughly five days over difficult terrain. There could hardly have been a less propitious time for travel. But there was no arguing with the Roman government. Joseph would have to return to this ancestral village, Bethlehem... Bethlehem is where the Messiah was to be born; the prophet Micah had said so. ✱

"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origin are from of old, from ancient times."
(Micah 5:2)

PRAYER

Gracious God, thank you for arranging things so that your will is done and your promises are fulfilled. Continue to watch over us and provide for us... through our own efforts, through the blessing of others, through the government, however you choose. And we thank you for it, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Hear the story behind the hymn *O Little Town of Bethlehem* by Philip Brooks

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Klwll6WhAfU>

Emperor Augustus was being very helpful. He didn't know it, of course. I suspect he didn't even know that his far-ranging empire included a young carpenter and his wife; and if he had known, he could hardly have cared. But he did his thing, signing a routine document, following a pattern that existed in his government for three centuries or more, never knowing how big a matter this particular document would turn out to be.

In truth, Augustus was a very great ruler. He was an effective military leader, but he chose peaceful negotiations whenever possible. He famously said that he "found Rome brick and left it marble," and it was no idle boast. His roads, buildings and bridges, and his encouragement to sculptors made Rome a worthy capital to on the greatest empires of all time. But his name is known most widely today, in the roughly two thousand languages into which Luke's Gospel has been translated, for a routine governmental document that expedited the Christmas story. The emperor thought he was simply implementing a new tax program, but in the purposes of God, the point was to get Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem. If there had to be an imperial order to bring it to pass, so be it.

And then there was Herod. Where Augustus participated in the Christmas story through taxation, Herod's issue was pure politics. On the whole, Herod was not a nice man. Let me use a strong word, and say that Herod was *insanely* fearful of losing his relatively small portion of the Roman Empire. So fearful, in fact, that over a course of time, he murdered his wife, his wife's mother, his eldest son, and two other sons, lest they take away his throne. So it is that Augustus said that it was safer to be Herod's pig than Herod's son -- a line that was a neat pun when Augustus said it, since the words pig and son are only a letter different in the Greek.

So when Herod heard from the wise men that a new king of the Jews had been born, he panicked. And, seasoned politician that he was, he turned his panic into ingratiating speech: "Go and search diligently for the child," he told the wise men, "and when you have found him, bring me word that I may also go and pay homage" (Matthew 2:8).

Herod's idea of homage, of course, was the sort of thing he did for his wife, mother-in-law, and three sons. *

I will honour Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year. I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future. The Spirits of all Three shall strive within me. I will not shut out the lessons that they teach.

- Charles Dickens



Thus, where Augustus was an unwitting aid to making Christmas happen, Herod's aim was to prevent it; although, like Augustus, he had no idea what he was doing. But Herod's government wasn't the last to try to put a stop to Christmas. There's a fairly long list of countries in our own day where one had better not celebrate Christmas publicly.

Herod played his own unique role in unfolding the Christmas story. He enters the plot through the wise men, who visit him because of their own interesting mix of mysticism and logic. They had followed a star, which was a pretty mystical thing to do, but when they got to Palestine, they went to the capital city, Jerusalem, which was a quite logical act, because they reasoned that of course any new king would be found in the capital. So it's Herod who calls together "all the chief priests and scribes of the people," to inquire "where the Messiah was to be born" (Matthew 2:4), and here it is made known that the Messiah is to be born "in Bethlehem of Judea" (2:5).

Herod then played another role in the story. As we noted earlier, he appealed to the wise men to bring him word when they had found the Baby. Instead, the wise men, "having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod," courageously ignored his orders, and went home "by another road" (Matthew 2:12). By his psychotic fears, Herod opened the door for a heroic decision by the wise men -- a decision that, in its own way, evoked one of the first acts of allegiance to Jesus Christ.

So it is that two rulers, one the leader of a small province and the other the head of the greatest government of ancient times, each played his part in the first Christmas. I repeat, neither intended to do so; nevertheless their roles were crucial in the unfolding of the plot. It's hard to imagine the Christmas story without them. ✱

PRAYER

Restore to me the wonder that came with Jesus' birth,
When He left the riches of Heaven and wrapped Himself in rags of earth.
Immanuel, God with us, Your presence came that night.
And angels announced, "Into your darkness, God brings His Light."
"Do not be afraid," they said, to shepherds in the field.
Speak to my heart today, Lord, and help me to yield.
Make me like those shepherd boys, obedient to Your call.
Setting distractions and worries aside, to You I surrender them all. Amen. ✱

The Man of Galilee sometimes makes an uncomfortable presence in the halls of state.

So there's always a tension where Christmas and government meet, just as there was twenty centuries ago, when our Lord was born in Bethlehem. Caesar Augustus didn't know that he was a party to the Christmas story; Jesus was unknown to him, even though Augustus was cooperating in ways he didn't understand. Herod, on the other hand, was afraid of the Baby he never saw, and tried to destroy him.

Dorothy L. Sayers, the British novelist, playwright, and lay theologian, described Jesus as "the Man born to be King." Those of us who have accepted him as our Lord confess that he is our King. We cannot simply use him or manipulate him; we can accept his Lordship. He seeks no alliance with ruler, legislature, power bloc, or political party, nor does he need such. He is King, by authority beyond any authorization this world can give. Tyrants do well to fear him, because when Christ comes into human lives, those he fills gain a dignity and a sense of self-worth that makes them inherently dangerous to those who would exploit human life. Those who truly acknowledge the lordship of Christ are the best of public servants, but they are no solace to those who misuse government or who are careless of justice.

The writer of Revelation promised that some day, "The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ; and he shall reign for ever and ever" (Revelation 11:15 KJV). I'm very sure this will someday happen. And to think that it all began with an emperor who implemented a new tax law, and a provincial king who got the wise men in touch with scholars who would direct them to Bethlehem! ✱

PRAYER

Dear God, thank you for being close to us when we are far from home. We always need you, and we thank you for surrounding us with your presence and love. Help us rid our lives of some of the clutter in order to make more room for you. Amen. ✱



Day 7 Saturday 4th December 1st Saturday in Advent

Isaiah would understand what I mean. He was a prophet in Judah over twenty-seven centuries ago, which means that he went about his work some seven centuries before the birth of our Lord. But he got a preview of Christmas, a preview so good that it can help correct and enlarge our perception of Christmas still today.

Isaiah was the patrician among the ancient Jewish prophets. He dated his prophetic call from the year that King Uzziah died, because for him, Uzziah's death was more than just a change in the monarchy: Isaiah had been close enough to the throne that later he would write a biography of the king (see 2 Chronicles 26:22). When Hezekiah, perhaps the greatest of the late kings of Judah, was in power, Isaiah was his spiritual advisor.

So Isaiah was accustomed to thinking politically, with a natural inclination for seeing the big picture... God generally uses people in ways for which the circumstances of their lives have prepared them, and Isaiah was prepared to spread out his message on a large canvas. He watched his nation go through good times and bad, and with it all, he envisioned an utterly better day. Listen:

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness --
on them light has shined. (Isaiah 9:2)



And what is this great light?

For a child has been born for us, a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named Wonderful Counselor,
Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. (Isaiah 9:6)

Isaiah knew that we needed more than a new political system, even though he couched his story in political terms. As the King James Version put it, “And the government shall be upon his shoulder” (Isaiah 9:6). But its a government with a high God-content, with results that will go far beyond our usual political platforms. Isaiah is talking about more than jobs and working conditions, food and world trade, significant as these issues are; indeed, he is reaching even into matters of heart and thought.

We humans have always dreamed of a world of such perfection... But of course all these dreams are flawed, because those of us who implement them are sinners. We need the One described in Isaiah's vision. ✱

“Who can add to Christmas? The perfect motive is that God so loved the world. The perfect gift is that He gave His Son; The only requirement is to believe in Him; The reward of faith is that you shall have everlasting life.” (Corrie Ten Boom)

Hymn 141 “To Us a Child of Royal Birth” by Charles Wesley

This hymn, originally entitled ‘The Incarnation of Christ,’ was not published in Charles Wesley’s lifetime. It was found in a manuscript entitled *Hymns on the Four Gospels*, and was first printed in the 1830 Supplement to John Wesley’s *A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People called Methodists*.

Beginning with the proclamation that the ‘Child of royal birth’ is the fulfillment of God’s promises, He is described as the invisible God of heaven appearing on earth. Wesley declares His purpose for coming is to save (raise “fallen souls”) and redeem His people. He accomplishes this “in love supreme” and with the “fulness of His grace.”

The “Child of royal birth” in verse 1 is called a “Saviour” in verse 2, “the Christ” in verse 3, and the “Lord of Hosts” in verse 4. These titles all point to the Messiah, the ‘Anointed One’ who is sent by God to redeem his people. Wesley points out that this coming of the Messiah (the Christ) was foretold, and He comes to fulfill His roles as:

Prophet - a messenger sent by God, who speaks for God
see Matthew 21:11; Luke 4:24

Priest - a mediator between God and people, who offers the sacrifices required under the Law
see Hebrews 4:14-16 & 10:11-12; 1 Timothy 2:5

King - the one who is placed in authority by God to rule
see Luke 1:31-33; Revelation 19:16

The wonder of the incarnation is expressed in such a simple, yet profound way, in the last verse: “God most high... quits His throne” and comes “on earth to live.” This is reason for joyful celebration as “we welcome” Him “into our hearts” -- the true meaning of **Advent** (God is coming) and **Christmas** (God is with us)!

*Away in a manger,
no crib for a bed...*



*The little Lord Jesus
asleep on the hay.*

“And therefore be merry, set sorrow aside;
Christ Jesus our Saviour was born on this tide.”

- Traditional Carol (MHB 128, refrain)

Advent brings us close to Christmas. Christmas is the event that cleaved history, that gave humanity a new start. We never write a letter or sign a legal document without doing it in reference to that far-off event. It touches our lives when we are hardly aware of it. Paul, writing of that time when God took bold and daring action, said: “But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons” (Galatians 4:4-5 RSV).

It all happened when time was full. It was propitious time. It was as if time were pregnant, ready to give birth to something great.

The Bible knows of two kinds of time, quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative time is the kind you can measure, the kind we read on our watches and calendars. We speak of it in terms of seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, and years.

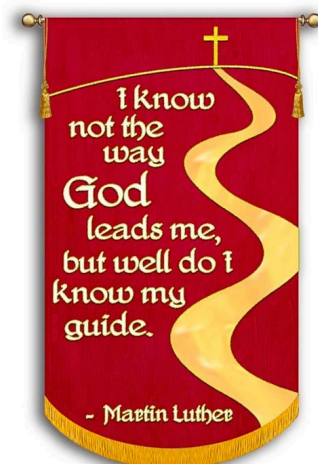
What is the nature of qualitative time? Its essence is not its duration but its meaning and quality. In such time, one day may seem to be packed with the meaning of many days, a year may seem to be the fulfillment of many years.

Jesus was born in qualitative time... It was one of those great, creative moments when history was ready to give birth to something really significant. The world was like dry fields lifting their parched faces to full skies ready to give their rain. It was full time when God was ready to act, when history was ready to take one of those mighty leaps forward.

What a night that was! It was as if it were the point toward which all the long and tedious years of our history had been moving. Into such time Jesus Christ was born. ☆

PRAYER

O Lord our God, make us watchful and cheerful as we await the coming of your Son, Christ our Lord, that when he comes and knocks, he will find us not sleeping in sins but awake and rejoicing in his praises; through Jesus Christ our Lord. ✠



Christmas is forever old.

Much of the pageantry, stories, and music of Christmas remind us that it is old. In its pageantry we will see kings, scribes, and wise men dressed in Persian garb. We will see shepherds, sheep, donkeys, and camels which are unfamiliar to most of us in our modern, urban world.

The church dares not forget Christmas. If it does, it cannot know who is, what its message is, and what its mission is. It has to keep hearing the story about Jesus being born in Bethlehem of Judea. It has to keep listening to the angel announcing good tidings that a Savior for all people has been born, and it has to keep hearing the heavenly chorus sing of glory to God in the highest and on earth peace and goodwill among men. It has to keep going back to that manger where it remembers the crude signs of identification: "You will find a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger" (Luke 2:12 RSV).

While Christmas is forever old, it is also forever new. It is like a householder who brings out of his treasure things that are not only old but also new.

Many things lose their newness. They grow stale and musty. They lose their freshness, vigor, and beauty. They become obsolete and useless. But not Christmas.

Christmas is rich in the holy with its wonder and mystery. What season is as holy as Christmas? "O holy night," "O holy child of Bethlehem," we sing.

Who has not seen the wonder in the eyes and heard surprise in the laughter of a child at Christmas? I remember how as a child I was almost overpowered by the sense of mystery. The heavens seemed to carry more wonder in them than at any other time. I sensed something almost mystical about them. I am sure that as a child I was much nearer to the truth than a person who, seeing no wonder in the heavens, remarks most matter-of-factly, "There is where we put our satellites." ☆



PRAYER

O Lord, incline your merciful ears to our prayers and enlighten the darkness of our hearts by the light of your visitation; through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen. ☆

"What Child Is This?" by Andrea Bocelli and Mary J. Blige
with pictures from *The Nativity Story*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wix14BuE09o>

Earth was being invaded... long before we knew about rockets, satellites, and spaceships, the church has known that our planet has been invaded. It happened at Christmas. Christmas is of earth. It tells about shepherds, a manger, and swaddling clothes. Yet, it is of heaven, too. There is something extraterrestrial about Christmas. There is the bright light from heaven, a heavenly chorus that sings, and an angel that announces: “For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:11 RSV). Christ with great love and grace, like a beneficent invader, has come to earth at Christmastime.

Like most invasions, it came at night.

Luke tells us that “there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night” (v. 8 KJV). And we sing, “While shepherds watched their flocks by night.”

Jesu came while the world slept. And the world awoke the next morning, wiped the drowsiness from its eyes, and went about its work, not knowing that our planet had been invaded.

It was a strange invasion. There were no ships, no troops, no instruments of war, no clashing of arms.

But it didn’t look like an invasion, it all seemed so weak. There was a baby, who may have whimpered during that first Christmas night. Watching lovingly over the baby was his mother, a Galilean peasant maiden, and standing beside the mother, with a careful eye on the child, was a brawny carpenter from Nazareth. They didn’t look like an invading army.

Yet, have we not learned that often things that look weak are strong, while things that look strong are really weak? Love isn’t weak, love is strong. Maybe it is the only thing that is really strong. “God is love” (1 John 4:8 RSV). Love is the extension of God in our world.

Power that doesn’t feel sure of itself will always come with pomp and ceremony, will always parade and strut. But love, knowing itself to be strong, dares come in what appears to be weak, in a thing as frail and fragile as a baby. ✨

PRAYER

Dear Lord God, awaken us, that we may be ready when your dear Son comes, that we may receive Him with joy and serve you with pure hearts; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. ✨



Never has anyone spoken more eloquently of great religion than did the heavenly host on that first Christmas. They sang: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased” (Luke 2:14 RSV).

Great religion is concerned with heaven and earth, God and people, people in relation to God and to each other. Great religion is spiritual and ethical, personal and social, individual and corporate. It encompasses the whole of life.

No one has written more movingly of the transcendent God than Isaiah. He had the right to write that way about God since that is the way he experienced Him. In the 40th chapter of his book, Isaiah speaks of God who measures the waters in the hollow of his hand, marks off the heavens with a span, stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them out like a tent to dwell in. He weighs the mountains in scales (see verses 12 & 22).

We need to constantly remind ourselves how important this kind of God is for our worship. We pray best and worship best as we stand on the frontiers of mystery... We worship the God who dwells in mystery yet who has let us know that He is loving and trustworthy. Such a God Christmas has revealed; such a God Jesus has disclosed.

Yet, God is not so transcendent that He is out of touch with our earth. Isaiah heard God saying, “Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool” (Isaiah 66:1 RSV). But God does more than touch the earth with His feet. He is present redemptively in His world, and there is no nook or corner where He is absent.

He is the God who comes down to show concern for poor, oppressed, and enslaved people. God comes down as a liberator and redeemer.

Christmas is about God who comes down to be with His people, to set them free and liberate them. The Child of Christmas would be called Emmanuel “which means, God with us” (Matt. 1:23 RSV).

Never has heaven bent so near to earth, never has God stooped so low to our need as at Christmas. Never has earth lifted its paltry hands in such hope as at Christmas.

Heaven and earth! They are held together at Christmas. It is not only glory to God in the highest, it is peace among men of goodwill with whom God is pleased. ✨

PRAYER

O Lord, look mercifully on us, and grant that we may choose the way of peace. Rescue us from the captivity of the sins which have oppressed us, that we may attain the dwellings of the heavenly Jerusalem; through Jesus Christ. Amen. ✨

God had been active in His world. He had spoken to people in historical events, through prophets, and in other ways. But here was a strange, daring, new way of speaking. God came to men and women, clothed in their flesh and speaking their language. Eternity entered time. God was no longer only everywhere; He was somewhere. God was no longer just a timeless reality; he entered our time with its calendars, hourglasses, and sundials.

When God took upon Himself our human flesh at Christmas, He came down to us. He made Himself little the way we are little. While knowing the weakness of analogies, we may say that He was like a brilliant astronomer who on Christmas morning got down on the floor with his three-year-old boy and played with him. He played with toys and talked about things like Santa Claus, Christmas trees, and the things that appeal to the imagination and fancy of a child's mind. In some real sense, he became a child again, thinking the thoughts and speaking the language of a child. Yet, as an astronomer he used language, concepts, and mathematical formulas which are difficult for highly trained lay minds to understand. On Christmas Eve night he had talked with a friend about interstellar space, how it takes 41/2 years for light to reach the earth from the nearest star, 30,000 years for light to reach us from the center of the Milky Way. He had talked about how the most distant star is beyond the reach of our most powerful telescope. The universe is so vast, he said, that it seems to shade off into infinity. We cannot find its boundaries. But on Christmas morning he was a father, not an astronomer. He talked about simple things in a simple way to a little child. In a sense, he became a child again.

Does the father lose stature when he is on the floor with his little boy? No. Maybe he is never so tall. He is in relationship with another human being, his son, and that is more wonderful than the relationships he has with the heavens as an astronomer. The heavens cannot think, respond, or love, but the boy can. There is more mystery in the face of his child than there is in the heavens, more wonder in his eyes than in the light of a star.

Maybe simplicity is the key to greatness. The test of a great man is not how comfortable he is with his peers but how comfortable he is with simple people. The test of a great writer is not how intricate and involved his style but how simple, vivid, and concrete it is. The test of the artist is not how elusive the beauty of his work but how obvious. The test of God is not how great He is but how little He is willing to make Himself in order to save us. ☆

PRAYER

This Advent, Lord, come to the manger of my heart and fill me with Your presence. As I prepare for the holidays and gifts to be given, remind me of the gift You gave when You sent Your Son from Heaven. ☆

If Christmas Comes!

Is there a possibility that it will not? Yes, a very good possibility. We may go through the forms of Christmas, observe the customs of Christmas, say the words of Christmas, sing the hymns of Christmas. . . yet miss Christmas. Christmas will not come to vast numbers of people, many of whom will worship in Christian churches during the Christmas season.

Christmas Day Will Come.

It is certain the Christmas season will come. It is less certain that Christ will. It is certain that things associated with Christmas will be here. It is less certain that Christmas itself will be present.

Christmas Day will come. The earth will make its 359th revolution, and December the 25th will be here. Its coming is decreed in the heavens. It will come inexorably.

But Will Christmas Really Come?

Christmas comes when Christ is born again into human hearts. John, who does not tell the story of Christmas in his Gospel, tells the meaning of Christmas: "The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us" (1:14 KJV). And John might have added: "in our kind of world."

If Christmas comes, it means that Christ will be born and dwell among us in our kind of world... What will enable Christ to be born in us?

Christ will be born if our lives do not crowd Him out.

Christ will be born if we really want Him in our lives and in our world.

Christ will be born if in humility we are open to Him.

Whatever the way to the manger in Bethlehem this Christmas, whether by pageantry or music, sermon or prayers, selfless deed or act of service, when we get there our prayer should be: "Let the Word become flesh and dwell among us. Let Christ be born again." ✨

Hymn: "Cradled in a manger" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9aRTPXGG4qg>
Read the words prayerfully... especially the last verse.

PRAYER

This Christmas, Jesus, come to the manger of my heart.
Invade my soul like Bethlehem, bringing peace to every part.
Dwell within and around me, as I unwrap Your presence each day.
Keep me close to You, Lord. It's in Your wonderful Name I pray. ✨

“A virgin will become pregnant and have a son, and he will be called **Immanuel**”
(which means, “God is with us”). - Matthew 1:23 (GNT)

Immanuel appears in the same Hebrew form as it did two thousand years ago. *Immanu* means “with us.” *El* refers to *Elohim*, or God. So Immanuel is not an “above-us God” or a “somewhere-in-the-neighborhood God.” He came as the “with-us God.” God with us. Not “God with the rich” or “God with the religious.” But God with *us*. All of us. Russians, Germans, Buddhists, Mormons, truck drivers and taxi drivers, librarians. God with *us*... He is *with us*.... *God* is with us.

Prophets weren’t enough. Apostles wouldn’t do. Angels won’t suffice. God sent more than miracles and messages. He sent himself; he sent his Son. “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14 NKJV).

For thousands of years God gave us his voice. Prior to Bethlehem he gave us his messengers, his teachers, his words. But in the manger God gave us himself. Extraordinary, don’t you think?

I imagine even Gabriel scratched his head at the idea of “God with us.” Gabriel wasn’t one to question his God-given missions. Sending fire and dividing seas were all in an eternity’s work for this angel. When God sent, Gabriel went.

And when word got out that God was to become a human, Gabriel was no doubt enthused. He could envision the moment:

The Messiah in a blazing chariot.

The King descending on a fiery cloud.

An explosion of light from which the Messiah would emerge.

That’s surely what he expected. What he never expected, however, was what he got: a slip of paper with a Nazarene address. “God will become a baby,” it read. “Tell the mother to name the child *Jesus*. And tell her not to be afraid.”

Gabriel was never one to question, but this time he had to wonder. *God will become a baby?... The heavens can’t contain him. How could a body? Besides, have you seen what comes out of those babies?... Some mother burping God on her shoulder? Why, that was beyond what even an angel could imagine.* †

PRAYER

Lord Jesus Christ, your birth at Bethlehem draws us to kneel in wonder at heaven touching earth: accept our heartfelt praise as we worship you, our Saviour and our eternal God. Amen.*

Hymn 242 "Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus" by Charles Wesley

This is not so much a hymn about Nativity as it is about Incarnation. The details of the birth are never mentioned: no manger, no shepherds, no angels. Yet there is an awareness here that the larger mystery being celebrated leads to the sending of the Holy Spirit and comes full circle in Christ's reign in glory, when God's people will find freedom from fear and sin, when hope will be fulfilled, and when human hearts will be aligned with God's saving purposes.

- Carl Daw *Glory to God: A Companion*

In 1744, Charles Wesley considered Haggai 2:7 and looked at the situation of orphans in the areas around him. He also looked at the class divide in Great Britain. Through this train of thought, he wrote "Come, Thou long expected Jesus" based upon Haggai 2:7 and a published prayer at the time which had the words:

"Born Your people to deliver, born a child and yet a King, born to reign in us forever, now Your gracious kingdom bring. By Your own eternal Spirit, rule in all our hearts alone; by Your all sufficient merit, raise us to Your glorious throne. Amen."

Wesley adapted this prayer into a hymn in 1744 and published it in his "Hymns for the Nativity of our Lord" hymnal.

"Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus" was the first of a number of Wesley's hymns that became known as the "Festival hymns". These "Festival hymns" were published outside of Methodism by German John Frederick Lampe in 1746. The hymn came into popular knowledge across Christian denominations in England via popular Baptist preacher, Charles Spurgeon. Spurgeon made a Christmas sermon in London in 1855 when he was 21 and included sections of "Come thou long expected Jesus" in it. He did this to illustrate his point that very few are "born king" and that Jesus was the only one who had been born king without being a prince.

from godtube.com

Here's another version of this hymn, different from the way we usually sing it:
<https://www.godtube.com/popular-hymns/come-thou-long-expected-jesus/>

So Gabriel scratched his head. *What happened to the good old days?* Global floods. Flaming swords. That's the action he liked.

But Gabriel had his orders. Take the message to Mary. *Must be a special girl*, he assumed as he traveled. But Gabriel was in for another shock. One peek told him Mary was no queen. The mother-to-be of God was not regal. She was a Jewish peasant who'd barley outgrown her acne and had a crush on a guy named Joe.

And speaking of Joe, what does this fellow know? Might as well be a weaver in Spain or a cobbler in Greece. He's a carpenter. Look at him over there -- sawdust in his beard and a nail apron around his waist. You're telling me that God is going to have dinner every night with him. You're telling me that the source of wisdom is going to call this guy "Dad"? You're telling me that a common laborer is going to be charged with providing food to God?

What if he gets laid off?

What if he gets cranky?

What if he decides to run off with a pretty young girl from down the street? Then where will we be?

It was all Gabriel could do to keep from turning back. "This is a peculiar idea you have, God," he must have muttered to himself, but he followed through. He wasn't about to rebel against his boss, who also happened to control the universe.

He visited Mary and told her:

Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name JESUS. (Luke 1:30-31 NKJV)

The story of Jesus begins with the story of a great descent. The Son of God became the child of Mary. He became one of us so we might become one with Him. He entered our world in the high hope that we will enter his. †

PRAYER

Christ born for us,
Son of God,
given for us,
help us to know you,
to worship and
to serve you.
Amen.*

HYMN

Thou didst leave Thy throne and Thy kingly crown
when Thou camest to earth for me;
But in Bethlehem's home was there found no room
for Thy holy nativity:
O come to my heart, Lord Jesus;
there is room in my heart for Thee.

- Emily E. S. Elliot (MHB 150)

Only one word describes the night [Jesus] finally came -- *ordinary*.

The sky was ordinary. An occasional gust stirred the leaves and chilled the air. The stars were diamonds sparkling on black velvet. Fleets of clouds floated in front of the moon.

It was a beautiful night -- a night worth peeking out your bedroom window to admire -- but not really an unusual one. No reason to expect a surprise. Nothing to keep a person awake. An ordinary night with an ordinary sky.

The sheep were ordinary. Some fat. Some scrawny. Some with barrel bellies. Some with twig legs. Common animals. No fleece made of gold. No history makers. No blue-ribbon winners. They were simply sheep -- lumpy, sleeping silhouettes on a hillside.

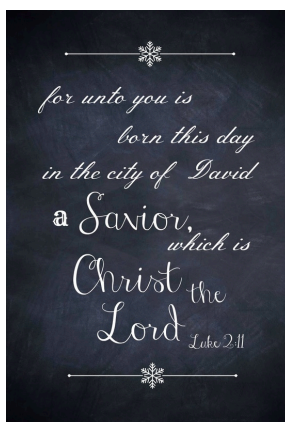
And the shepherds. Peasants they were. Probably wearing all the clothes they owned. Smelling like sheep and looking just as wooly. They were conscientious, willing to spend the night with their flocks. But you won't find their staves in a museum or their writings in a library. No one asked their opinion on social justice or the application of the Torah. They were nameless and simple.

An ordinary night with ordinary sheep and ordinary shepherds. And were it not for a god who loves to hook an *extra* on the front of the ordinary, the night would have gone unnoticed.

But God dances amid the common. And that night he did a waltz.

The black sky exploded with brightness. Trees that had been shadows jumped into clarity. Sheep that had been silent became a chorus of curiosity. One minute the shepherd was dead asleep. The next he was rubbing his eyes and staring into the face of an angel, who declared, "There is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:11 NKJV).

The night was ordinary no more. ✚



PRAYER

Holy Jesus, by being born one of us,
and lying humbly in a manger,
you show how much God loves the world.
Let the light of your love
always shine in our hearts,
until we reach our home in heaven,
and see you on your throne of glory. Amen.*

Day 17 Tuesday 14th December 3rd Tuesday in Advent

As dark gave way to dawn, the noise and the bustle began earlier than usual in the village of Bethlehem. People were already on the streets. Vendors were positioning themselves on the corners of the most heavily traveled avenue. Store owners were unlocking the doors to their shops. Children were awakened by the excited barking of the street dogs and the complaints of donkeys pulling carts. The owner of the inn had awakened earlier than most in the town. After all, the inn was full, all the beds taken. Every available mat or blanket had been put to use. Soon all the customers would be stirring, and there would be a lot of work to do.

One's imagination is kindled, thinking about the conversation of the innkeeper and his family at the breakfast table. Did anyone mention the arrival of the young couple the night before? Did anyone ask about their welfare? Did anyone comment on the pregnancy of the girl on the donkey? Perhaps. Perhaps someone raised the subject. But, at best, it was raised, not discussed. There was nothing novel about them. They were possibly one of several families turned away that night.

Besides, who had time to talk about them when there was so much excitement in the air? Augustus did the economy of Bethlehem a favor when he decreed that a census should be taken and people should return to their hometowns. Who could remember when such commerce had hit the village?

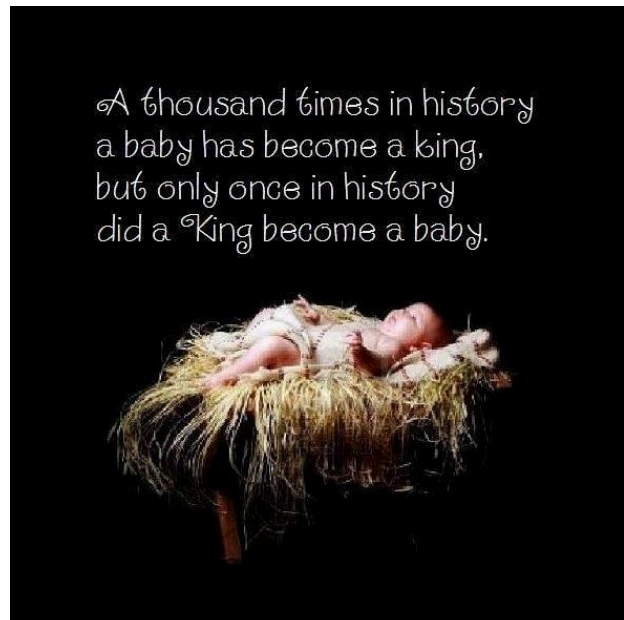
No, it is doubtful that anyone mentioned the couple's arrival or wondered about the condition of the girl. They were too busy. The day was upon them. The day's bread had to be made. The morning's chores had to be done. There was too much to do to imagine that the impossible had occurred.

God had entered the world as baby.

Yet were someone to chance upon the sheep stable on the outskirts of Bethlehem that morning, what a peculiar scene they would behold.

The stable stinks as all stables do. The stench of urine, dung, and sheep reeks pungently in the air. The ground is hard, the hay scarce. Cobwebs cling to the ceiling, and a mouse scurries across the dirt floor.

A more lowly place of birth could not exist. †



Off to one side is a group of shepherds. They sit silently on the floor, perhaps perplexed, perhaps in awe, no doubt in amazement. Their night watch had been interrupted by an explosion of light from heaven and a symphony of angels. God goes to those who have time to hear him, so on this cloudless night he went to simple shepherds.

Near the young mother sits the weary father. If anyone is dozing, he is. He can't remember the last time he sat down. And now that the excitement has subsided a bit, now that Mary and the baby are comfortable, he leans against the wall of the stable and feels his eyes grow heavy. He still hasn't figured it all out. The mystery of the event puzzles him. But he hasn't the energy to wrestle with the questions. What's important is that the baby is fine and Mary is safe. As sleep comes, he remembers the name the angel told him to use -- *Jesus*. "We will call him Jesus."

Mary is wide awake. My, how young she looks! Her head rests on the soft leather of Joseph's saddle. The pain has been eclipsed by wonder. She looks into the face of the baby. Her son. Her Lord. His Majesty. At this point in history the human being who best understands who God is and what he is doing is a teenage girl in a smelly stable. She can't take her eyes off him. Somehow Mary knows she is holding God. *So this is he*. She remembers the words of the angel: "His kingdom will never end" (Luke 1:33 NIV).

He looks anything but a king. His face is prunish and red. His cry, though strong and healthy, is still the helpless and piercing cry of a baby. And he is absolutely dependent on Mary for his well-being. Majesty in the midst of the mundane. Holiness in the filth of sheep manure and sweat. Divinity entering the world on the floor of a stable, through the womb of a teenager, and in the presence of a carpenter.

She touches the face of the infant God. *How long was your journey!*

This baby had overseen the universe. His golden throne room had been abandoned in favor of a dirty sheep pen. And worshiping angels had been exchanged for kind but bewildered shepherds.

God's nature would not hold him in heaven.
It led him to earth. In God's great gospel
he not only sends, but he also becomes;
he not only looks down, but he also lives among;
he not only talks to us,
but he also lives with us as one of us.

God with us. †

Beautifully illustrated,
with lyrics,
Mary J. Blige's
version of
"Mary, Did You Know?"

[https://www.youtube.com/
watch?v=cpu00qCq-yc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cpu00qCq-yc)

Do you know the most remarkable part of the incarnation? Not just that God swapped eternity for calendars, though such an exchange deserves our notice.

Scripture says that the number of God's years is unsearchable (Job 36:26 NASB). We may search out the moment the first wave slapped on a shore or the first star burst in the sky, but we'll never find the first moment what God was God, for there is no moment when God was not God. He has never not been, for he is eternal. God is not bound by time.

But when Jesus came to the earth, all this changed. He heard for the first time a phrase never used in heaven: "Your time is up." As a child he had to leave the temple because his time was up. As a man he had to leave Nazareth because his time was up. And as a Savior he had to die because his time was up. For thirty-three years the stallion of heaven lived in the corral of time.

That's certainly remarkable, but there is something even more so.

Do you want to see the brightest jewel in the treasure of the incarnation? You might think it was the fact that he lived in a body. One moment he was a boundless spirit; the next he was flesh and bones. Do you remember these words of king David: "Where can I go to get away from your Spirit? Where can I run from you? If I go up to the heavens, you are there. If I lie down in the grave, you are there. If I rise with the sun in the east and settle in the west beyond the sea, even there you would guide me" (Psalm 139:7-10 NCV).

Our asking "Where is God?" is like a fish asking "Where is water?" or a bird asking "Where is air?" God is everywhere! The dominion of God is "from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth" (Psalm 72:8 NIV). We cannot find a place where God is not.

Yet when God entered time and became a man, he who was boundless became bound. Imprisoned in flesh. Restricted by weary-prone muscles and droopy eyelids. For more than three decades his once limit-less reach would be limited to the stretch of an arm, his speed checked to the pace of human feet. †

PRAYER

Christ, for whom there was no room in the inn,
give courage to all who are homeless;
Christ, who fled into Egypt, give comfort to all refugees;
Christ, who fasted in the desert, give relief to all who are starving;
Christ, who hung in agony on the cross, give strength to all who suffer.
Lord, in your mercy... Hear our prayer.*

I wonder, Was he ever tempted to reclaim his boundlessness? In the middle of a long trip, did he ever consider transporting himself to the next city? When the rain chilled his bones, was he tempted to change the weather? When the heat parched his lips, did he give thought to popping over to the Caribbean for some refreshment?

If ever he entertained such thoughts, he never gave in to them. Not once. Stop and think about this. Not once did Christ use his supernatural powers for personal comfort. With one word he could've transformed the hard earth into a soft bed, but he didn't. With a wave of his hand, he could've boomeranged the spit of his accusers back into their faces, but he didn't. With an arch of his brow, he could've paralyzed the hand of the soldier as he braided the crown of thorns. But he didn't...

Throughout Scripture thorns symbolize, not sin, but the consequence of sin. Remember Eden? After Adam and Eve sinned, God cursed the land: "So I will put a curse on the ground... The ground will produce thorns and weeds for you, and you will eat the plants of the field" (Gen. 3:17-18 NCV). Brambles on the earth are the products of sin in the heart.

What is the fruit of sin? Step into the briar patch of humanity and feel a few thistles. Shame. Fear. Disgrace. Discouragement. Anxiety. Haven't our hearts been caught in these brambles? The heart of Jesus, however, had not. Jesus never knew the fruits of sin. . . until he became sin for us -- one of the most remarkable parts of his coming. But I can think of something even greater. Want to know what it is? Want to know the coolest thing about the coming?

Not that the One who played marbles with the stars gave it up to play marbles with marbles. Or that the One who hung the galaxies gave it up to hang doorjambs to the displeasure of a cranky client who wanted everything yesterday but couldn't pay for anything until tomorrow... Not that he kept his cool while the dozen best friends he ever had felt the heat and got out of the kitchen... Not that he refused to defend himself when blamed for every sin of every sex worker and sailor since Adam... Not even that after three days in a dark hole, he stepped into the Easter sunrise with a smile and a swagger and a question for lowly Lucifer: "Is that your best punch?" That was cool. Incredibly cool. But want to know the coolest thing about the One who gave up the crown of heaven for a crown of thorns?

He did it for you. Just for you. ✚

PRAYER

Jesus, Saviour,
son of Mary,
you know us
and love us,
you share our lives
and hear our prayer.
Glory to you for ever.
Amen.*

Matthew was a public tax collector. Private tax collectors hired other people to do their dirty work. Public publicans, like Matthew, just pulled their stretch limos into the poor side of town and set up shop. As crooked as a corkscrew. His given name, Levi, was a priestly name (Mark 2:14; Luke 5:27-28 NIV). Did his parents aspire for him to enter the priesthood? If so, he was a flop in the family circle.

You can bet he was shunned... everybody kept his distance from Matthew. Everyone except Jesus. ““Follow me and be my disciple,’ Jesus said to him. So Matthew got up and followed him” (Matt. 9:9 NLT). In short order Matthew’s shady friends and Jesus’ green followers were swopping email addresses. “Then Levi gave a big dinner for Jesus at his house. Many tax collectors and other people were eating there, too” (Luke 5:29 NIV)... And so Jesus ends up at Matthew’s house, a classy split-level with a view of the Sea of Galilee. Parked out front is everything from BMWs to Harleys to limos. And the crowd inside tells you this is anything but a clergy conference.

Earrings on the guys and tattoos on the girls. Moussified hair. Music that rumbles teeth roots. And buzzing around in the middle of the group is Matthew, making more connections than an electrician... And Jesus? Beaming. What could be better? Sinners and saints in the same room, and no one’s trying to determine who is which.

But an hour or so into the evening the door opens, and an icy breeze blows in... Enter the religious police and their thin-lipped piety. Matthew is the first to feel the heat... he doesn’t know whether to get mad or get out. Before he has time to choose, Jesus intervenes, explaining that Matthew is right where he needs to be. “Healthy people don’t need a doctor -- sick people do. I have come to call not those who think they are righteousness, but those who know they are sinners and need to repent” (Luke 5:31-32 NLT).

The Pharisees saw no need for Jesus. Matthew and the gang, on the other hand, made room for Jesus. As a result Jesus made room for them. Do we?

One of the most difficult questions is “What do we do with Levi?”

Your Levi is the person with whom you fundamentally disagree. You follow different value systems. You embrace different philosophies. You adhere to different codes of behavior, dress and faith. How does God want us to respond to the Levis of the world?

I wonder if the best answer might be found in the short admonition to “accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God” (Romans 15:7 NIV). †

Hymn 142 “Let Earth and Heaven Combine” by Charles Wesley

In “Let earth and heaven combine”, Wesley describes the wonder and the paradox of the incarnation in two memorable lines that reveal his gift for poetry as much as his grasp of the theology:

*our God contracted to a span,
incomprehensibly made man.* (v.1)

With tongue only partly in cheek, hymn writer Ian Worsfold says that this is one hymn he wishes he'd written himself - "because Wesley managed to squeeze the word 'incomprehensibly' into a hymn!" He goes on: "This is inspired and inspiring writing. Wesley is able to capture such a deep theological concept in such a short space. It is an economy of language that gives you so much."

John Vickers comments that, among the traditional carols and 19th century hymns we sing at Christmas, Charles Wesley's hymns "stand out by their lack of sentimentality". In verse 2, the image of a baby "wrapped in swaddling clothes" and surrounded by placid animals is transformed into a statement of God's humility and nearness. God is not a distant being that lords it over creation; rather "he laid his glory by", takes up our shape and form ("our clay") and slips into our lives almost unnoticed; "unmarked by human eye, the latent Godhead lay".

As a result (verse 4), not only may we now understand our lives and physical presence (our "human condition") as good in the eyes of God who has shared the experience with us, we can also experience "the life of God" in whole new way because it has been made "manifest below".

More than that - God's intimate involvement with, and commitment to, our lives draws us into God's holiness. Wesley expresses this in startling phrases: God makes us "all divine" (v.4); we will be "made perfect first in love, and sanctified by grace".

Indeed, Wesley gets more and more excited as the hymn goes on so that, at its close, he can barely contain himself as he encapsulates perhaps more succinctly and profoundly than anyone else the Christian understanding of death and the fulfillment of God's vision for creation:

*his love shall then be fully showed,
and we shall all be lost in God.*

from *Singing the Faith* PLUS
methodist.org.uk

"Almost Peace."

[Here] is the tension we face every Advent season. We speak of a Jesus who is coming to be among us, even though we know he is already here. We speak of the presence of "peace on earth, good will to all," though the evidence around us feels like it is a long way from coming. Even though society sings of it as "the most wonderful time of the year," we know that the distance to that destination feels very far indeed.

It doesn't take much to realize how many miles we have to go before we get to the destination of an altogether peace. Just read the headlines about the latest flare-up in another troubled spot in the world. Think about violence and war going on between many nations and people groups, or the damage we are doing to the planet itself. Think about the harm we cause one another, not just with our actions but with our rhetoric and prejudice as well. Think about the broken relationships you have with loved ones and friends, and the layers of bitterness, betrayal, and heartache that you've seen over the miles.

And think about the lack of peace within your own heart. About the unsettledness you feel about your future, the conflict you have against your own inner demons of guilt and shame, and the inability you have to tame the wild horses of anger, fear, and powerlessness.

It should be no wonder that each of the characters in Jesus' birth narrative had very similar struggles. The Gospels would want to remind us that none of Jesus' closest family and associates had perfect, trouble-free lives when he was born. That's why, for each of them, the angels' first message was "Don't be afraid."

The first character that Luke introduces us to in his birth narrative was Zechariah, the old childless priest who was visited by the angel (Luke 1:5-25). And when Gabriel brought him some amazing news, Luke says he was "startled and overcome with fear" (1:12). He was in need of peace.

Later, we meet Mary, the young, unwed girl, who was initially troubled by the appearance of the angel Gabriel (Luke 1:26-38). She wrestled with how to deal with the news that she would be bearing a child. Not just any child, but the very Son of God himself. To Mary, just as to Zechariah, Gabriel gave reassurance with the words "Don't be afraid." ✦

Father, just as You sent John the Baptist to prepare the way for Jesus, help me to clear the path in my heart, too. Show me the distractions in my life that block me from all-out worship of You this Advent. Give me a heart, Lord, that looks for Your coming on a daily basis! Amen. ✨

Then, when Jesus was born, there were those shepherds out in the fields (Luke 2:8-20). And when their night sky was emblazoned with a fireworks display of singing angels, they weren't just afraid; they were terrified. They too were in need of peace, which the angels had come to proclaim. "Don't be afraid," the angels tells them (Luke 2:10).

Skip over to Matthew, and there is a lack of peace everywhere. There we meet Joseph, who was so troubled upon hearing the news that Mary was pregnant that the angel had to encourage him to hang in there (Matthew 1:18-25). Yes, your fiancée is pregnant, and yes, it's not your child, and yes, the law says you should send her away. But don't leave her, Joseph. You can bet that Joseph was in need of peace in his heart.

And then, of course, there was Herod, who was the epitome of all that is contrary to peace. When he found out about the birth of Jesus, he was terrified, jealous, paranoid, and dead set on finding the child and snuffing him out (Matthew 2:1-16). Were it not for the angel warning Joseph in a dream to flee to Egypt with Jesus and Mary, Herod would have had his way.

Over and over again in the Gospels, we are reminded that the world Jesus entered was one that needed a whole lot of peace. Not just in society and in relationships, but deep within the human heart.

I would think you've had moments when you have needed peace within yourself.

.
Moments before his arrest and death, [Jesus] was telling the disciples the most important things he would want them to remember when he was gone, much of which could be summarized with five words, in John 14:27: "Peace I leave with you." ✠



He's Got The Whole World
In His Hand Of Peace

PRAYER

Lord, we ask You to grant us peace. Peace in our homes, peace in our churches, and peace in our hearts, when the world all around us spins out-of-control. Help us to stay focused on You, this Advent season and always. Thank You for loving the whole world enough to send the greatest gift, Your Son, so that we might truly have a very merry Christmas. In Jesus' Name, Amen. ✠

Peace was Jesus' last gift to his disciples before he died.

Yes, this is an Advent journey. And it might seem strange to hear a story from the end of Jesus' life right as we are preparing for the beginning of it. But if we pan the camera out wide and take in the whole of Jesus' life, what we discover is that from the beginning until the end, this has been a recurring, connecting thread: Jesus came to bring peace. He was born into a world that needed peace. He lived in a world that needed peace. And he was leaving behind a world that would need to know peace.

Jesus' idea of peace would have been an understanding derived from the Hebrew word *shalom*, which we often translate as "peace." It's really one of the most important words in the entire Bible. And like most Hebrew words, our English language doesn't have a word that fully captures its nuances.

Unlike our word *peace*, which can simply mean an absence of conflict or war, or a feeling of serenity or contentment, the definition of *shalom* is much bigger and more comprehensive.

Shalom comes from the root word *shalam*, which means "to be completed," "to be healthy or uninjured," or "to keep peace." It means peace but also speaks of wholeness, completeness, and fullness. If we look at the broad biblical witness, we find that shalom often envisions the whole and complete restoration of all creation.

In other words, this kind of peace starts with a wholeness in yourself, but it does not stop there. It then offers wholeness in your relationships with others. The, as more relationships are restored, we can have shalom communities and eventually a shalom world. Shalom doesn't just mean the absence of conflict or trouble. It points to the fullness of health and prosperity for oneself and others.

For three and a half chapters in John's Gospel, for 150 verses, Jesus was conferring that kind of peace -- shalom -- upon his disciples and upon us.

But Jesus even goes one step further than that. Notice, in John 14:27, what I think is one of the most important words in this entire passage. He says, "Peace I leave with you. *My* peace I give to you."

Jesus isn't just wishing them peace. He isn't just offering a blessing for peace... He is offering a part of himself. ✠



Peace, perfect peace, by thronging duties pressed?
To do the will of Jesus, this is rest
Peace, perfect peace, our future all unknown?
Jesus we know, and He is on the throne. (Hymn 501)

I love lighting the candle of JOY during the last week of Advent. Joy is the culmination of our Advent celebration because joy is a gift. Hope is a future destination for which we dream and work. Peace is a daily discipline to put down the sword in whatever form it is known. Love requires a selflessness in order to be shared. Joy is different from the other candles we light during the season because joy cannot be achieved. Joy simply is a gift. Receiving joy often means we have to get out of the way and allow the Holy Spirit to move. An almost joy is something we can produce. Through presents under the tree, gathering around the dinner table, and singing the Christmas hymns and songs we love, we can create an environment where we see a glimmer of joy. Yet often, hours after the presents have been opened, family has returned home, and our playlist has changed to New Year's, we feel that something's missing, which means that the joy we felt was not complete. An altogether joy can only be received by God's grace. It remains even when the Christmas tree has been hauled to the curb. It stays with us even when familiar faces are no longer present. Joy "comes in the morning," even when our eyes are used to the dark. As Paul puts it, joy is "the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding" (Philippians 4:7 NRSV). In the last week of Advent, just before we travel to the manger, our souls are ready to receive this precious gift of joy -- the steadfast assurance that God is with us.



Christ in the manger is the manifestation of this joy. Not only is God with us, but God has put on flesh and surprisingly entered the world as a baby. "God is with us" is no longer a theological treatise, philosophical framework, or helpful metaphor. Joy now has hands that will be outstretched to bless, comfort, and welcome. These hands will also be outstretched and nailed to the cross because we wanted joy on our own shallow and selfish terms. Joy now has feet that will walk with flawed disciples, feet that will be washed with tears, feet that will traverse into Samaritan land. These feet will also be bound together in an attempt to stop the scandalous work of God's grace, justice, and forgiveness.

The presence of God now has a body -- a body that will hunger and thirst, heal and feed. his body will be crucified and raised, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, this body will defy time to become those gathered together, from generation to generation, in mutual and shared adoration of God. This joy is timeless.

Joy is the steadfast assurance that God is with us. There's nothing else we need to know ✦

Dear Lord God, awaken us, that we may be ready when your dear Son comes, that we may receive him with joy and serve you with pure hearts; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. ✨

Day 26 Thursday 23rd December 4th Thursday in Advent

Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God! My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth.

- 1 John 3:1 & 18 (NKJV)

Advent brings us a multitude of opportunities to move from the almost to the altogether. The clichés about the busyness of the Christmas season, the admonishments around consumerism, and the pressure to have a moral, ethical, yet photo-worthy Christmas are loud and distracting. These cultural narratives also set us up to think that we can create, manufacture, and share an “almost-perfect Christmas” -- as though we can possess or own a holiday and a moment in the Christian year.

The Advent narrative -- women saying yes to love and to the unknown, shepherds saying yes to spreading an irrational, hopeful message, angels who spread the news of a king who intends not to possess and oppress, but to love -- this narrative moves us from an almost love to an altogether love.

The church does not own love. Humanity does not own love. Love is too big, too inclusive, too rule-breaking, too reckless to be confined. When we try to define love by simply human terms, we may do good things in the world but we are still stuck in an almost love. The funny thing is that we can’t own or conquer love. Every time we try to confine where love belongs or where love “should” show up, it will pop up in the most unexpected place.

The world was in an almost state when God began showing up and pulling flawed, ordinary human beings into the Advent story. God showed up in the middle of the night in the room of a teenage girl, in the middle of the field to a bunch of shepherds, and in the arms of Elizabeth as she protected her cousin in the face of the unknown. God’s presence in the lives of ordinary people transformed them from the almost to the altogether.

Advent reminds us that love shows up in the most unexpected places, transforming flawed, imperfect people into people redeemed by love. God compels us to move from an almost love (the love that we think is based upon who we are and what we do) into an altogether love (a love that grows to fill all spaces, bringing light wherever there is darkness). ✦

PRAYER

As I prepare for the holidays and gifts to be given, remind me of the gift You gave when You sent Your Son from Heaven. The first Christmas gift was the greatest gift ever. You came as a baby born in a manger, wrapped like the gifts I find under my tree, waiting to be opened, to reveal Your love to me. ✨

“O Holy Night”
Mariah Carey & Choir
[https://
www.youtube.com/
watch?
v=muILOvg0IDU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=muILOvg0IDU)

Heavenly Peace.

In 1818, there lived a German priest named Joseph Mohr, who pastored St. Nicholas parish in Obendorf. River flooding had damaged the church's organ that year, and so the congregation didn't have a way to play music on Christmas Eve.

What to do without an organ to lead the Christmas Eve singing? Mohr was undeterred. He pulled out a poem he had written several years before about the birth of Jesus on the first Christmas and took it to Franz Gruber, the schoolmaster and organist of a nearby town. He asked Gruber to write a simple melody for his poem that could be played on guitar. In several hours, Gruber has the music done and the carol was played for the first time at the Christmas Eve service.

That poem, that carol, was titled "Stille Nacht." We know it as "Silent Night."

Fast-forward almost one hundred years later, to 1914. Still on Christmas Eve, still in Europe, but this time a very different setting. In the trenches of World War I, in northern France, stood battalions of British soldiers staring down their German counterparts, engaged in brutal battle.

Among them was nineteen-year-old Charles Brewer, a British lieutenant, shivering with his fellow soldiers. They had been at war for five months, one million lives had been taken, and there was no end to the war in sight.

As Brewer recalled the story, something amazing then happened. A British sentry suddenly spied a glistening light on the German parapet, less than one hundred yards away. Warned that it might be a trap, Brewer slowly raised his head over the soaked sandbags. Through the maze of barbed wire, he saw a sparkling Christmas tree.

Brewer then noticed the rising of a faint sound that he had never before heard on the battlefield. Singing. In German. The words of "Stille Nacht." The words were unfamiliar to the British soldiers, but the melody certainly wasn't.

When the Germans finished singing, the Brits erupted with applause. And instead of returning fire, they returned in song, singing the English version of that hymn. ✚



maybe you'd like to listen to "Joy to the world" while you read today's devotion

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DLT9dSt8cwg>

For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

(Luke 2:11 NKJV)

What will enable Christ to be born in us?

Christ will be born if our lives do not crowd Him out.

In Luke's beautiful story of Christmas, he tells how Mary and Joseph sought lodging in an inn in Bethlehem. But Jesus was born in a manger. Luke knew the world would be forever curious as to why Jesus was born in a manger and not in an inn. So he gave a simple explanation: "And she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn" (Luke 2:7 RSV).

Luke does not condemn the innkeeper. He does not say he did something wrong. He merely states a fact. The inn was crowded. There was no room for Jesus.

Just so with our lives. We may crowd Jesus out not because our lives are filled with evil things. They may be cluttered up with good things and respectable things. So many of the choices we make this Christmas may not be between the good and the bad, but between the good and the best. But alas, many of us choose the good when the best could be ours. Jesus Christ is God's best gift to us. It is tragic when we choose some lesser good in preference to Him.

Christ will be born if we really want Him in our lives and in our world.

Sometimes we are torn between wanting and not wanting Christ in our lives. And the tension between wanting and not wanting Him closes the door. We often want His comfort but not His cross, His forgiveness but not His radical surgery of judgment. We want His love but not His rigorous demands, His acceptance of us but not His rejection of our prejudices and false values.

We have to become like the merchant about whom Jesus talked. He was a seeker of fine pearls who, when he had found a pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it. Jesus Christ is the Value above all values, the Good above all goods, the Person above all persons. We have to be willing to give all for Him, and we have to be willing to be separated from anything that

keeps Him from us. We so easily forget the radical demands Jesus Christ makes upon us. We forget how costly it is to be His follower.

Christ will be born if in humility we are open to Him.

The manger in which Jesus was born is a symbol of humility. There was no pride, arrogance, condescension, or exclusiveness about it. Through its doors entered lowly cattle. And through those same doors went the mother of the Son of God to give birth to Him. The baby was wrapped in swaddling clothes, and His crib was a manger filled with hay. These, too, speak of humility.

Christ is born still into humble hearts. All pride must go. He turns from hearts that boast of virtue and goodness. He enters hearts that lay claim to no goodness save the goodness of God as known in Christ. It is still true that a broken and contrite heart God will not despise. And Christ will not despise it either.

Whatever the way to the manger in Bethlehem this Christmas, whether by pageantry or music, sermon or prayer, selfless deed or act of service, when we get there our prayer should be: "Let the Word become flesh and dwell among us. Let Christ be born again." ☆

— PRAYER —

Father God, we thank You and praise You today for the miracle of Your Son's birth. Thank You for bringing great JOY to the whole world! Thank You for giving us the assurance that because You came to us in the form of a human, we who believe in Jesus can know with absolute certainty that we'll spend eternity with You. We thank You, Lord, for the many reasons we have been given a merry Christmas, and we rejoice for each blessing. We know, Lord, that You bring the sun and the moon and set the stars in motion. You tell the ocean where to stop and the snow when to start. And we thank You for the mighty gift of Your creation.

Thank You, Father, for spiritual leaders and faith-filled friends who keep encouraging us when we are close to giving up. And although we have many reasons to rejoice today, Lord, we also know December 25 can be not-so-merry for a whole host of reasons. We pray for those who are experiencing loss during Advent: relational, financial, spiritual and physical. We pray for those who are coping with loving a prodigal and our friends and family members whose hearts are far from You. We pray for those dealing with unemployment and addictions and chronic sickness, and unending pain and all the frustrations of the COVID-19 pandemic. ☆

Thank You, Lord, that You are The Wonderful Counselor and Prince of Peace, even in the midst of our not-so-merry circumstances. Amen. ☆

Hymn 117 “Hark! the Herald-Angels Sing” by Charles Wesley

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

Wesley begins not with the prophets, the Annunciation to Mary, the journey to Bethlehem or the search for a room, but in the middle of the action. Rather than citing the final phrase of Luke 2:14 – “good will toward men” (KJV) – he offers his theological interpretation – “God and sinners reconciled.” This is indeed a stronger theological statement.

The hymn that we now sing is the result of many alterations by numerous individuals and hymnal editorial committees. Perhaps the most notable change in this hymn was to Wesley’s first line which originally read, “Hark how all the welkin rings!” *Welkin* is an archaic English term referring to the sky or the firmament of the heavens, even the highest celestial sphere of the angels. Gratefully, George Whitefield (1740-1770), a powerful preacher and friend to the Wesley brothers, changed this to read “Hark! the herald-angels sing.”

The second most significant change from the original is the addition of the refrain, reiterating the first phrase of Luke 2:14. This came about for musical reasons about 100 years after the hymn’s composition. Along with the refrain, two of Wesley’s short stanzas were combined into one to fit this longer tune. There is no doubt that most of the alterations to Wesley’s original text combined with Mendelssohn’s rousing tune have helped to make this one of the most festive and popular of all Christmas hymns.

“Hark! the herald angels sing” highlights the virgin birth, the universal application of the coming of “the Incarnate Deity” to all nations, and that Christ, who was “pleased with us in flesh to dwell,” gives humanity a “second birth.” The final stanza in most hymnals paraphrases the beautiful biblical citation from Malachi 4:2: “But unto you that fear my name shall the Sun of Righteousness arise with healing in his wings” (KJV).

- adapted from article by C. Michael Hawn umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns

A majestic arrangement of this hymn: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?>

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