

CHRIST  FELLOWSHIP



SING

IN

EXULTATION

2016 ADVENT DEVOTIONAL

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“For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given;
and the government shall be upon his shoulder,
and his name shall be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Of the increase of his government and of peace
there will be no end,
on the throne of David and over his kingdom,
to establish it and to uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time forth and forevermore.
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.”
ISAIAH 9: 6-7

Introduction

*“Sing choirs of angels, sing in exultation
Sing all ye citizens of heaven above;
Glory to God, all glory in the highest:
O come, let us adore Him, Christ The Lord”
-O Come All Ye Faithful*

This year’s Advent Devotional sets its sight on the songs of the church, particularly, the songs that the church sings at Christmas time. Many of the church’s Christmas hymns are among the greatest songs in the church’s musical canon when it comes to teaching theology through song. This is so because the primary focus of true Christmas songs is the most momentous theological event in history – the incarnation of Jesus Christ. In many ways, the theological richness of these songs is unmatched.

But despite their profundity, we often sing through the lines of these songs without much reflection. Our hope is that this Advent season, and perhaps by the help of this devotional, that changes for many of us. That this Christmas season, we would be more thoughtful, more reflective, and more responsive to the grace of God in Christ Jesus by reflecting on the magnitude of what God has done for us, even as we sing these Christmas songs.

With those goals in mind, this devotional seeks to provide theological and biblical insight into some of these magnificent Christmas songs. Each day of the Advent season, the devotional selects a lyric or verse from a song, followed by a brief reflection or explanation rooted in Scripture. The reflections are all written by Christ Fellowship Church members. It is our prayer for you this Advent season that your heart is formed with deeper affections for and greater joy in Jesus Christ, and that this love and joy produces praise.

When we turn to the Gospel of Luke, we see in Luke 2:13-14 that the response of heaven to the birth of Christ was praise. “And suddenly, there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on the earth peace among those with whom He is pleased.’” For these heavenly beings, those who even beheld the preincarnate Christ in heaven, their immediate response is praise. C.S. Lewis helps us to understand why praise is the only fitting

response, both for the angelic host and for us today: “[Previously] I thought of [praise] in terms of compliment, approval, or the giving of honor. I had never noticed that all enjoyment spontaneously overflows into praise.” That is, for us to truly enjoy Christ, we will inevitably respond in praise. Lewis continues: “I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation.” Our praising of Christ is the means by which our joy in Christ is made complete.

So let us think deeply on these beautiful songs this Advent season. And let us sing with engaged minds and full hearts brimming with joy. Let us sing in exultation! We invite you to make your joy complete this Advent season by joining in the songs of exultation with brothers and sisters. As a citizen of heaven (Philippians 3:20), join your voice with the angelic hosts, “Glory to God in the highest!” Indeed church, this Advent season, come let us adore Him, Christ the Lord!

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

At the outset of the Biblical story, we see the created order as it should be. God spoke the world into being, and it was very good. On the sixth day God created Adam and Eve, and they were the crown jewel of His creation. But instead of perfectly reflecting the glory of God, humanity was forever marred because Adam and Eve sinned. God would have been just to eternally punish Adam in His sin, but instead, He showed mercy. God promised on that day recorded in Genesis 3 that He would use the offspring of the people who rebelled against Him to crush the head of the tempter, Satan.

The promise of a redeemer brought hope on that dark day, but it would be a hope deferred for thousands of years and countless generations. From Abraham to Isaac to Israel and her offspring, God remembered His promise to show mercy to His people. But ultimately these “died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar” (Hebrews 11:13). Even in the rebellion of Israel and their punishment in exile, God did not forget his promise to send a snake crusher. They knew there was one coming who would “proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound” (Isaiah 61:1), but how long, O Lord, would they have to wait?

The coming of Jesus Christ is certainly a joyous event, but in our joy on this side of the cross, we should not make light of the desperate longing for hundreds of years from the people of God for Him to intervene. When we hear “O come, o come, Emmanuel,” we should remember the centuries of longing and waiting from God’s people. Knowing that Jesus did come, we can indeed rejoice, knowing that God has ransomed us, His captive people, from our sin. And on this side of the cross as we long for Christ’s second coming, we now join our voices this Advent season with both our spiritual ancestors of old and with the final prayer of the Bible, “Come, Lord Jesus!” (Revelation 22:20).

*“Hark the herald angels sing
Glory to the newborn King!
Peace on earth and mercy mild
God and sinners reconciled”*
-Hark the Herald Angels Sing

Each of us is familiar with catastrophe: the abrupt outbreak of calamity and heartbreak. The lesser-known opposite of catastrophe is eucatastrophe, a term coined by J.R.R. Tolkien, the famous author of *The Lord of the Rings* and other fantasy stories. In literature, eucatastrophe is the most happy plot twist—a sudden bursting of good fortune for the main character, especially in a moment when all seems lost. In the story of mankind, our eucatastrophe occurs at the birth of Christ. The joy of this blissful reversal of man’s fate came spilling over Heaven’s edge as the herald angels exulted, *“Glory to the newborn King!”*

Luke 2:14 tells us the angels exact words, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased.” The message of these heralds is peace: *“God and sinners reconciled!”* Romans 5:10 says, “For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.” What a plot twist! Reconciliation has not come to us through our good merit, our worthiness, or our effort. Reconciliation is brought about by a God who loves eucatastrophies; when the chance of deliverance by our own means was exactly zero, a child was born.

*“Joy to the world the Lord has come
Let earth receive her King
Let every heart prepare Him room
And heaven and nature sing”
-Joy to the World*

Parents know the feeling. They’ve strategized to maximize space in their tiny home, doing their best to accommodate all that comes with a growing family and young kids. Their house is an odd combination of storage bins, Pinterest ideas, and IKEA inventions, all of them designed to give as much living space as possible. And then Christmas comes. Specifically, Christmas with the grandparents. And despite conversations and pleas leading up to that day, they will now head home with, among other things, a life-sized toy kitchen and a 4-person inside-only tent. “Where are we going put all this stuff?” they ask.

Well, it’s not just parents of young children who struggle with adequate space and room. In fact, we all struggle with this, spiritually. Consider your own life. Is it not true that Jesus sometimes exists in the margins? That he is peripheral rather than central? Maybe even an afterthought rather than a burning passion? To put it plainly, our hearts are full, but we confess that too often they’re full of the wrong things. Room must be prepared.

That’s what this song is calling us to do. The Lord and King who lovingly made us, powerfully saved us, and gently rules has come in the flesh. We must prepare him room by crowning him as Lord and King of our lives, regarding him as our rightful Sovereign and our gracious Master. He will suffer no rivals. He will entertain no competitors. But this too is gospel, for in preparing him room we are at the same time being prepared for true, even “great joy” (Luke 2:10).

*“Why lies He in such mean estate,
 Where ox and beast are feeding?
 Good Christians, fear, for sinners here
 The silent Word is pleading.
 Nails, spear shall pierce Him through,
 The cross be borne for me, for you.
 Hail, hail the Word made flesh,
 The Babe, the Son of Mary.”*
 -What Child is This

It is not the “ox and beast” imposing the meanness upon the infant Savior’s estate. Friend, it is the sinfulness of man—the sin of each of us—which befouls his surroundings. Yes, the Lord Christ was born into the humblest of earthly settings; but in so doing, he shows that he will humble himself to far greater lengths than to merely lie amongst livestock. His beggarly material state ultimately foreshadows the greatest act of humility this world will ever know: that the holy God of all creation would descend into the likeness of men to take our place on the cross, bearing the wrath our sin has earned, and be buried in death.

The arrival of Jesus is the grand revelation prophesied to Israel for generations. He is the promised Messiah, the one for whom the people of God had waited! Indeed, the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and even as he lies sleeping on Mary’s lap, his presence pleads on our behalf. For his purpose is singular: “Nails, spear shall pierce Him through, the cross be borne, for me, for you.” As depicted in Isaiah 53, the advent of Christ and the crucifixion of Christ are sides of the same predestined object, necessitated by the helpless condition of man.

But the coming of Jesus demands that you and I answer this question: “What child is this?” Is he Emmanuel, *God with us*? The Bible resounds, “He is!” He is the Lion of Judah become the Lamb, who has come to take away the sin of the world. And he comes not to walk with us in our natural state, but that we might one day walk with him, perfectly, in his.

*“The King of kings lay thus in lowly manger
In all our trials born to be our friend”*

-O Holy Night

Jesus is the Lord. From everlasting to everlasting, he is God. As the Son, he is sovereign, utterly independent, and limitless. He was begotten, not made. He is the uncreated Creator and we are his creation. He came down from heaven for our salvation. All of God’s intentions to glorify his name by creating humans and saving them is centered on him. From the very beginning, Jesus has been the one. His kingdom will never end. He is *King of kings*.

Altogether, he is different - until he *lay thus in lowly manger*. When the fullness of time had come he was born of woman, born under the law. He became a great high priest who can sympathize with our weaknesses, a friend in our trials, and our victorious Savior. He became a human like us. He breathed the same air; his feet touched the same ground.

Jesus experienced everything we do. He was tempted like us in every way. In every way that sin has crouched at our door, in every way that iniquity has gestured a bad promise, he knows. He experienced it. He was there — yet he never sinned. He knows our need; our weakness is no stranger. And this is how he died for us. The wrath he suffered in our place was for sins he resisted in perfect faithfulness. He suffered the Father’s fury for transgressions that were not his own. Of all the ways he is different from us, it’s in his becoming like us that his love was shown.

The Jesus who is supremely glorious is the Jesus who became like us to die in our place. Let us fall on our knees in worship and behold our King!

*“Yea, Lord, we greet thee, born this happy morning;
 Jesus, to thee be all glory given;
 Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing:
 O come, let us adore him, Christ the Lord.”*

-O Come All Ye Faithful

What a truth-packed verse—32 words that capture John’s confession in John 1:14 in its entirety. Not just that God took on flesh, but that God *lived among us*.

The word that John translates as “dwelt” is an interesting word. It’s a Greek word that simply means, “to put up one’s tent” or “to tabernacle.” The readers of John’s Gospel would have understood the significance of this word. In the old covenant, prior to the construction of the temple, the tabernacle was a tent that contained the Ark of the Covenant and God’s glory—His physical presence before the people of Israel. The tabernacle was many times referred to as “the tent of meeting,” for this was the place where man meets God. But in terms of access to God’s presence, it was limited; only once per year could the high priest enter into the innermost part tabernacle (the Most Holy Place, where God dwelt) to offer a sacrifice for the sins of the people. People—people like you and I—had no access to God and no sacrifice for sins apart from the high priest, who had to offer the sacrifice every year, as it was an imperfect and incomplete offering.

So it’s no accident that John, through divine revelation, uses the word “tabernacle.” John is confessing that the mystery of the birth of Christ is that the Word (Jesus) took on flesh in the incarnation. But God didn’t stop there, at being born as a man. Jesus, through his sinless life and sacrificial death, has become our tent of meeting—our access to the Father. No longer will men and women require a high priest for a sacrifice for sins or our access to God, for God now dwells among His people. That is worth our adoration! Come, let us adore Him.

*“He rules the world with truth and grace
 And makes the nations prove
 The glories of His righteousness
 And wonders of His love”*
 -Joy to the World

Isaac Watts wrote “Joy to the World” in 1719 as a meditation on Psalm 98. Thus the words of what has become a beloved Christmas song were actually written to celebrate not the coming of Jesus on that first Christmas but His second coming as ruler, judge and King.

Let’s look more closely at the last stanza. *He* [Jesus] *rules the world with truth and grace* – drawn from John 1:14, where we’re told that the incarnate Christ is the glory of God on display, “full of grace and truth.” And in his ruling, [He, Jesus] *makes the nations prove* [or to test the reliability and certainty] of *the glories of His righteousness and wonders of His love*. In writing this hymn, Watts shows us how in Psalm 98, the Lord judges with righteousness and love, comparable to grace and truth found in John 1.

Jesus, the Word who became flesh, is full of both grace and truth. Often we struggle to balance grace and truth. Those of us who are truth oriented love studying Scripture and theology, but are sometimes quick to judge and slow to forgive. Grace oriented believers love forgiveness and freedom but may neglect Bible study or see moral standards as “legalism” to be avoided. Our countless mistakes in dating, marriage, parenting, ministry and other relationships reveal our constant failure to properly balance grace and truth.

The good news is that Jesus has come! He perfectly balances grace and truth; He is 100 percent grace and 100 percent truth. As we sing this Christmas season, let’s be reminded that Jesus is our King who rules and reigns! He deals with us perfectly in truth and bountifully in grace. And He is coming again. This is good news! Let’s celebrate with great joy and let’s go tell the world of this joy that has come to us and is truly and graciously offered to them!

*“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 All Ye Faithful*

Just imagine how it must have felt to be one of the shepherds on the night of Christ’s birth. A multitude of angels appearing would alone have been a spectacle. But to witness them, in all their magnificence, announcing and worshipping a newborn’s birth was more than that. It was glorious and captivating – so much so that the shepherds could not help but go and see the good news for themselves.

This stanza is an invitation. It invites us, a people who could only be considered “faithful” through the birth and blood of Jesus, to join the shepherds. Like them, we get to come and behold the baby in a manger who was sovereign over even the angels. Because he was born, we can we adequately present ourselves to worship God faithfully, joyfully, and triumphantly.

Advent is a season for celebrating Christ’s first coming and yearning for the day He comes again. Let’s be a church that spends this season beholding the birth of Christ and adoring our King: the King of angels, the King of kings, the King of glory.

*“Who would have dreamed or ever foreseen
That we could hold God in our hands?
The Giver of Life is born in the night
Revealing God’s glorious plan
To save the world”*

-Who Would Have Dreamed

(This is a new song for us at CFC this year. But it is filled with profound and beautifully written lyrics.)

It almost sounds blasphemous at first. How can a human being presume that God could be confined to the point of being held in our hands? This is the One who holds the oceans in his hands (Isaiah 40:12). This is the One who knows stars by name and whose fingers put them in place (Isaiah 40:26). If our theology is remotely correct, then how could we have the audacity to presume to hold this God in our hands? Heaven and earth cannot contain him (1 Kings 8:27), so how could our hands? It almost sounds like God-belittling heresy.

And it probably would be heresy if any human being could have dreamed up such a scenario. But that is precisely the point. We could have never dreamed this; we could have never foreseen this. Instead, God himself dreamed it and planned it from time eternal, so that he might save the world. God himself would come to us in the most surprising of ways—as an absolutely dependent, infant child. And in this way, God came as one defenseless in order to gently break through all of our defenses, that we might know the extent of his love for us.

How could human beings hold the One who holds the universe? It’s inconceivable, unless God himself conceived it. And that’s precisely what he did. One night some two thousand years ago, a young Galilean virgin girl welcomed God in the flesh into her hands and into the world. All young mothers’ have their hands full. But in this case, this young mother’s hands were filled with God himself. Who could have dreamed?

*“Israel’s strength and consolation
 Hope of all the earth Thou art
 Dear desire of every nation
 Joy of every longing heart”*
 -Come Thou Long Expected Jesus

We all have “longing hearts”—wanting things the world cannot perfectly provide. We are confronted daily with our weakness, our frailty, our unmet desires, and our yearning for that which makes us feel whole. Much like Israel. Desiring prosperity, protection, and abundance, Israel all too often failed to recognize the God who alone can bestow these things.

As believers, we are God’s chosen people, like Israel was God’s chosen nation. And yet, even in the midst of Advent and in light of that truth, it is possible to feel deserted. Bruised by the world or haunted by past sins, Christians can view Advent as something that is not for them. But oh, how they want it to be! Believer, you are Israel and Jesus is your strength and consolation. You have hope and it is more real and lasting than any gift under the tree. Those of you filled with longing for what you don’t have or for that which you’ve lost, it is possible to experience joy. Our consolation this Christmas is this: Jesus has overcome the world, and by his love we—you and me—are more than conquerors. As Charles Spurgeon put it, “Yes, I cast myself upon my living Lord; and He is mine.”

We long to be known and loved. We long not to stumble. Our Heavenly Father knows this. In Isaiah 45:2-3, He tells us that He goes before us leveling mountains, breaking down barriers that stand in our way, and giving us treasures and riches that the world has tried to hide. He does this “so that you may know that it is I, the LORD, the God of Israel, who calls you by name.” Longing heart, you have a heavenly comfort and promise which cannot be taken from you. Rest in that today.

*“And in this Child we’ll find our rest
 And all the meek and lowly blest
 An infant tongue could sing the hymn
 Of Hallelujah and Amen
 Amen, Amen
 Amen, Amen
 I found my life
 I found my life in Him
 Amen, Amen”
 -Amen, Amen*

Almost all good movies have a villain, and almost no movie has one as unlikable as Hilly Holbrook, the well-to-do socialite in the 2011 film, *The Help*. Set in 1960s Jackson, Mississippi, the movie powerfully portrays the struggles of black maids working for white families in the Jim Crow South. One of those maids is Aibileen Clark, and it’s her exchange with Hilly that ends the movie on such a poignant and even theological note. After being framed and falsely accused of theft by Hilly, and thereby losing her job, Aibileen confronts the woman who has caused her so much pain, who has heaped upon her great labor and intense burdens:

“All you do is scare and lie to try and get what you want. You a godless woman. Ain’t you tired, Miss Hilly? Ain’t you tired?”

Aibileen is exactly right. Sin has a wearying effect. It wears us down and wears us out. Like Hilly, whenever we go against God’s design and God’s rule, sin robs us of vitality and strength. And like Aibileen, whenever we experience the effects of the Fall, we are reminded that life isn’t supposed to be this way. Indeed, life doesn’t feel like life at all when death is what we experience.

But, as the song says, there is a Child who can give us rest. Rest from our own sins and rest from all sin’s wretched effects. He is the One in whom we can find life, rest, and even eternal blessing. He is the One by whom and to whom we sing our hymn and utter our Hallelujah. He is the One through whom we say, “Amen, Amen.” If you’re tired, then come and find your life in the One who invites, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28).

*“O come, Thou Rod of Jesse, free
 Thine own from Satan’s tyranny
 From depths of Hell Thy people save
 And give them victory o’er the grave”*
 -O Come, O Come, Emmanuel

Of all the consequences of the Fall that we see around us every day, none of them affect us like death. Adam and Eve believed the serpent’s slippery suggestion that “You will not surely die.” But as they buried their son, Abel, who was killed by his own brother, the lies of Satan would surely ring in their ears as a judgment against their rebellion. Death, which was once an outsider of God’s good creation, now made itself at home and ruled over humanity (Romans 5:17). Its tyranny leaves people oppressed and desperate, crying out with Paul, “Who will deliver me from this body of death?” (Romans 7:24)

People have been asking and answering that question for millennia. Whether it’s the fountain of youth, a search for Nirvana, or age-defying eye cream, we all want to find a way out of the curse of death. But all of these are mere cover-ups, Band-Aids put on gaping wounds that ultimately end up with the same result: death.

There is, however, one Man who has an answer for death. Like everyone before him, Jesus tasted death and felt its sting, though He did not have to (Philippians 2:6-8). But unlike everyone before him, Jesus was raised from the dead. Death would not reign over him. Satan’s tyranny, the depths of hell, the grave: these things were all mortally wounded as Jesus walked out of the tomb alive. Death lost its sting (1 Corinthians 15:54-55). What’s more, Jesus’ victory over death is not only for Him, but for His people as well. For those who have trusted in him, He is just the firstfruits, an initial promise of what’s to come (1 Corinthians 15:20). So what is the answer to Romans 7:24, and who delivers us from death? “Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 15:57).

*“No more let sins and sorrows grow
 Nor thorns infest the ground
 He comes to make
 His blessings flow
 Far as the curse is found”
 -Joy to the World*

At one point, the city of Pripjat, Ukraine was a busy and growing city, dotted by apartment buildings, pristine parks, and even an amusement park. The city was only officially established in 1979, but by 1986 there were nearly 50,000 people living, working, and playing in the city. But all of that changed dramatically on April 26, 1986, when the nuclear power plant at Chernobyl, just a few miles away, exploded. Within two days Pripjat and the surrounding areas were abandoned. Thirty years later and the once promising city is now overgrown, a town taken over by weeds, animals, and decay.

What once was beautiful is now broken. That’s not just the story of Pripjat, but also our own story. When Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden (Genesis 3), the results were farther reaching than they could have possibly anticipated. Sin spread to all men, and with it sorrow, pain, struggle, and death. And it was not just humanity that felt its effects. The once fertile soil began to sprout thorns and weeds. The curse of sin meant the fracturing of all creation, so that all of creation groans in pain, waiting for redemption (Romans 8:21).

But what began that first Christmas in Bethlehem proved more powerful than the Fall, further reaching than we could ever hope. Christ came to overturn the curse of the Fall. He came not only to comfort sorrow, but to utterly uproot sin and all its effects. His blessings flow and begin unraveling the effects of the curse. The great day Isaiah saw coming has dawned: “Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come the myrtle; and it shall make a name for the LORD, an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off” (Isaiah 55:13). The once groaning creation and our own withering bodies will one day be remade beautifully. Who can help but sing!

*“Adam’s likeness now efface
 Shine Thine image in its place.
 Second Adam from above,
 Reinstat us in Thy love.
 Hark! The herald angels sing,
 “Glory to the newborn King!”
 -Hark the Herald Angels Sing*

Throughout C.S. Lewis’s *Chronicles of Narnia*, human beings (as opposed to the other creatures in the world of Narnia) are referred to as “sons of Adam” and “daughters of Eve.” Such language is intended to draw our minds to our first ancestors, and to the Biblical account where we learn of them. But any long look at Adam and Eve inevitably brings despair, for it is through Adam and Eve that the curse of sin enters the world, and the pain of death is introduced. The apex of God’s glorious creation, formed out of dust like a potter forms a vessel out of clay, is now destined to die as a result of sin. God tells Adam that he and all of his offspring would suffer the same fate: “For you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (Genesis 3:19).

As we bear the likeness of Adam, we know that we too share the destiny of Adam. We sin like Adam, and we will die like Adam. We ourselves are dust, and to dust we shall return. But, as this song reminds us, the Son of God came to “efface” Adam’s likeness. Efface is not a word that we use too often, but it simply means to erase or blot out. This is not to say that Christ will make us un-human, but instead, that he will make us fully human. The likeness of Adam that will be removed from us will be the likeness of sin and death. And in place of Adam’s likeness, Christ will shine his perfect image – the image in which we were originally created. First Corinthians 15:47-48 tells us that as the first Adam came as a man of dust, the second Adam – the true and better Adam – comes from heaven, and his name is Jesus.

Apart from Christ, our destiny is dust. But in union with Christ, our lowly bodies will be transformed to be like his glorious body (Philippians 3:21). Our perishable, dust-destined bodies will put on the imperishable; our mortal bodies will put on immortality (1 Corinthians 15:53). And all of this is possible, because Jesus Christ, the God-Man emptied himself, being born in the likeness of men (Philippians 2:7). Christ put on flesh, so that we could put on Christ, and so be reinstated in the love of God. Christ came that we could exchange our dust for the divine.

“Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we [who are in Christ] shall also bear the image of the man of heaven” (1 Corinthians 15:49).

*“This day is born a Saviour
 Of a pure Virgin bright,
 To free all those who trust in Him
 From Satan’s power and might.”
 O tidings of comfort and joy”
 -God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen*

Luke 2:8-20 tells us how shepherds watching their flocks in a field suddenly became the first to hear God’s comforting news to his distressed people of a rescuer: Jesus, whose very name means “Savior.” He would save his people from their sins if they would only trust in Him; he would save them from the guilt of sin by the merit of his death on the cross, and the power of sin by his Holy Spirit.

The virgin Mary’s thoughtful obedience to God is worthy of our imitation. The miraculous, virgin birth of Jesus fulfills Old Testament prophecy and therefore is astonishing grounds for our confidence in God. “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call His name Emmanuel (Isaiah 7:14b).

Satan’s name means “adversary.” The picture we have of Satan in the New Testament is of deception and cruelty against humanity and God’s people in particular. He actively undermines faith, hope, and the Christian’s character.

To acknowledge Satan’s existence and power does not mean he is God’s equal. He is an already defeated foe, having no more power than God allows. To say that we are constantly at war with him does not take away our responsibility for our actions. Yet, we will triumph over him through the spirit of Christ. “Greater is he that is within you than he that is within the world” (1 John 4:4).

Surely that young virgin girl would have acutely felt Satan’s shaming power as she underwent scorn and shame for her “unplanned pregnancy.” Surely she would have known experientially Satan’s might as she and her newlywed husband fled from kings to save the life of their newborn son. But oh how the fear and trouble she felt from the first foretelling of Jesus’ birth (Luke 2:29) would turn to comfort and joy! What comfort it must have been to her –and to us– to know that as the angels sang of the publication of Jesus’ birthdate, they were simultaneously singing of the publication of Satan’s expiration date. Indeed, what comfort and joy it is to know that “the reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil” (1 John 3:8).

*“Veiled in flesh the Godhead see
 Hail the incarnate Deity
 Pleased as man with man to dwell
 Jesus, our Emmanuel”
 -Hark the Herald Angels Sing*

“Show me your glory,” Moses requests of the LORD in Exodus 33:18. To be sure, this is an absurdly bold petition. And God kindly tells Moses in Exodus 33:20, “You cannot see my face and live.” It is a kindness, because there was not a single human being since Adam and Eve who had seen the face of God and lived. Once sin was brought into the equation in Genesis 3, a safe glance at God was no longer possible. All human hearts were now too dark, their eyes now too dim to behold the brilliant perfection of God and not be utterly ruined. From the Garden of Eden onward, every human who entered the presence of God would not dare look at God’s glory full in the face.

But God had a design to make such a thing possible again. Indeed, God knew that ultimately, he intended to have all of his people safely in his presence, with even the ability to look upon and his face and live to tell about it. The final chapter of the Bible reveals God’s vision that one day, humanity would fully and finally see His face (Revelation 22:4). But how could we ever get from Moses’ rejected request to God’s fulfilled promise? God’s answer: through a baby.

“No one has ever seen God,” John 1:18 reminds us. But, “the Only God, who is at the Father’s side, he [Jesus Christ] has made him known.” Jesus Christ, God incarnate, the Godhead veiled in flesh, has been seen. Whether she knew it or not, Mary was granted the request that her forefather Moses had made so long ago. God showed her his glory in the form of a newborn – that is, a newborn King. And as that King grew, he readily rejected a crown for the sake of a cross, and thus earned the right for all of his people once again look upon God. For thirty-three years, Jesus Christ was pleased as man with man to dwell, so that “the dwelling place of God [would be] with man” for all eternity (Revelation 21:3). Glory.

*“Long lay the world in sin and error pining
Till he appear’d and the soul felt its worth.
A thrill of hope the weary world rejoices
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn!”*

-O Holy Night

Years...too many years. Ever since that first sin in the garden mankind had lain in sin. Generations had lived and died with plenty of joys and celebration, true. Weddings, births, wealth and good harvests always brought joy. But invariably the heaviness of sin and its terrible fruit cast a pall over it all (Isaiah 25:7). Sickness, shame, injury, wars, pain and finally the specter of death overshadowed every joy. Indeed, the world laid in sin and error and we were most certainly pining. All mankind suffered a mental and physical decline from a broken heart. Rebellion against the One who loved us to the core broke our hearts, even if we didn't know it.

Then something happened. A plan which was from the beginning took shape. A salvation appeared! The One that the prophets pointed toward and that our ancestors hoped for suddenly appeared. The humblest of births in a lowly manger far from his home brought the most surprising salvation. He appeared, born of a simple woman, attested to by angels and seen first by shepherds and wise men. This helpless baby would be the one who would save his people from their sins. A new and glorious morning had dawned on a very weary world.

When you are *really* loved by those who know you best, you *do* actually get a sense of your worth... your value. But when the Lord of creation invades the dark places of our hearts, well, there is nothing like this. There is a sudden thrill of hope. Could He indeed love me, a sinner? Grasping his undying love for us in spite of our sin brings the thrill of finding the most impossible treasure. Rejoice brothers and sisters! The long awaited One has come to invade the darkest of hearts and take away all sin. Rejoice Christian!

*“Joyful, all ye nations rise
 Join the triumph of the skies
 With the angelic host proclaim:
 ‘Christ is born in Bethlehem’
 Hark! The herald angels sing
 “Glory to the newborn King!”
 -Hark the Herald Angels Sing*

“But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish....The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them light has shone. For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end.”
 –Isaiah 9:1-2, 6-7

Isaiah 9 presents one of the most well known Biblical images of Christmas. Isaiah foresees a day when the nations that long in darkness walked have now beheld a glorious light. Isaiah 9:6 tells us that the light comes from a child being born. From this child, and from the mission that he would accomplish and subsequently send out his disciples to publish, the kingdom will widen beyond all comprehension. No longer would God’s people be a Middle Eastern ethnic minority, but his people would soon include every tribe, language, people, and nation (Revelation 5:9). Carried in the news of Christmas is the news that the gospel of the kingdom is the most ethnically inclusive kingdom the world has ever known. Literally, various people from every skin color, every tongue, and every cranny of the earth would be swept in. Ethiopians and Athenians. Asians and Australians. Americans and Brazilians.

Revelation pictures the appointed consummation of this prophecy. It depicts nations streaming into an eternal kingdom, where there is “no longer any need for sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light and its lamp is the Lamb” (Revelation 21:23), much like Isaiah had foretold. The question for us is whether or not we will play any part in carrying this light to the nations, and share in the joy of seeing them join their voices to ours both now and forever.

As you worship the risen and reigning Christ this Christmas, widen your view to see your brothers and sisters from Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth joining with you and with the angels, singing “Glory to the newborn king.” Can you see it? And don’t you want to?

*“Go tell it on the mountain
 Over the hills and everywhere
 Go tell it on the mountain
 Jesus Christ is born”
 -Go Tell it on the Mountain*

This song is one that we can tend to sing rather casually, but in looking at the Scripture behind the lyrics, we can see that the shepherds’ reaction to the news of Christ’s birth is *anything but casual*:

“When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.’ And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them... And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.” (Luke 2:15-18, 20)

Can you feel the shepherds’ *eagerness* to see Christ and to tell others about him? Imagine yourself in their place and let the hope of this moment wash over you. In the coming of this baby, there is the promise of the longed-for Messiah, joy for all people, and peace and good will among men! No wonder they couldn’t contain themselves! These guys did not care how others would perceive them as they came running through Bethlehem, declaring what these angels had told them... they were *compelled* to share what they had witnessed. And their faithfulness to declare this good news resulted in others being filled with awe and wonder.

We see in their reaction, and in the lyrics to this song, a picture of what our response to the good news of Christ should be: to *praise* God and *proclaim* what we have seen and heard. The angel’s announcement is one not only of good news for Israel, but of “great joy that will be for *all* the people” (Luke 2:10)—that means our neighbors, co-workers, and every person we meet. Do we allow the *hope* of Christ’s birth to fill us up so that it overflows into our conversation with others? Do we feel the same haste as these shepherds to share this Good News? Do we have an attitude of glorifying and praising God for what we have witnessed Him do throughout Scripture and in our own lives? Spend some time dwelling on this hope-filled announcement and ask for the grace, opportunity, and boldness to tell this Good News everywhere we go: “*Jesus Christ is born!*”

*“Hail the heav’n-born Prince of Peace!
 Hail the Sun of Righteousness!
 Light and life to all He brings
 Ris’n with healing in His wings”*
 -Hark the Herald Angels Sing

There’s this wonderful line near the end of Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*. After a fierce battle, many injured men and women are suffering under a severe illness that cannot be cured by normal means. As she looks around at the wounded, Ioreth, the eldest woman who worked in the sick house, longs for a king to come and help, “For it is said in old lore, ‘The hands of the king are the hands of a healer.’ And so the rightful king could ever be known.” In other words, if only there were a king, he would know what to do. He would heal these sick and wounded.

Ioreth spoke more than she knew. It’s true not only in Middle Earth, but in reality: “The hands of the king are the hands of a healer.” We have doctors and nurses who do amazing work, but who ultimately only patch things up as our bodies continue to decay. But as Jesus ministered here on earth, His miraculous healings were not only signs of His compassion. They served as signs that He was indeed the King who had the power over nature, disease, and death itself. Even more so, as He rose from the grave, He now offers healing to all who come to Him. Hope that was lost is now found, not just for His generation or His tribe only, but for all people. King Jesus offers light, life, and healing. And so as we look to him, we say with Micah 4:2, “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.”

*“O come, Thou Day-Spring, come and cheer
Our spirits by Thine advent here
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night
And death’s dark shadows put to flight.”*
-O Come, O Come, Emmanuel

While death has been a part of our world since Genesis 3, it was not so in God’s original plan for the world. The discomfort we feel around death is a constant reminder that it is an intruder in God’s good creation. We may avoid thinking about it and dealing with it for years, but as our bodies age and we see loved ones lost, the shadow of death can become long indeed.

In the face of death’s shadow, Jesus’ coming is like the rising of the sun, the “Day-Spring” as the King James Version puts it in Luke 1:78. When Jesus came, He made a way for His people to overcome the ultimate consequence of sin, which is death. His resurrection is the ultimate hope for the Christian life. We know that because of the resurrection that death no longer has power over the believer. In John 11:25 Jesus says that He is the Resurrection and the Life. That was true for Lazarus back in the time of Jesus, and for anyone who submits to His Lordship, it will be true forever.

Christians in this Advent season should remember that our hope is twofold. First, in Jesus’ first coming, the sun rose on death’s reign, and its shadow began to flee. But secondly, an even greater hope remains that He will come once more. And that second coming will be like the noonday, fully flooding the shadows of death with marvelous light, as our Day-Spring sits in triumph. He will dwell with us, and death will be no more (Revelation 21:3-4). Not only do we rejoice in Christ’s first coming, but we also hope in His second coming when He will restore all things and eliminate death forever.

*“Wondrous gift of heaven: the Father sends the Son
 Planned from time eternal, moved by holy love
 He will carry our curse and death He’ll reverse
 So we can be daughters and sons”
 -Who Would Have Dreamed*

One of the great mysteries of Christmas is that this was not a “plan B” for God. The history of the Old Testament is not just a group of misfits and false starts that God eventually got tired of and scrapped to send Jesus. No, Ephesians 1:3-6 says that this was God’s good grace and plan for us far before we ever deserved it. From the foundation of the world, God determined that He would send His own Son, Jesus, the greatest gift He could ever give.

Think about that radical fact. Do you think that you are just a divine afterthought, a nuisance to God that He begrudgingly deals with? Brothers and sisters, that is not the case! Jesus becoming flesh for us is the sure and steady sign of God’s holy love, that He does indeed care for His people. Before time began, before you ever did anything good that you thought would make yourself worthy before God, God planned to make a way for you to be with Him!

From all eternity, God has planned this great reversal. The eternal, glorious Son becomes a tiny bawling baby. The curse that was meant for you and me is placed on His shoulders. The wrath that we deserved was instead poured out on Christ. And in Christ we find that our death sentence, our slavery to sin, is undone. Death is reversed and rebels are remade. The Son of God has come and welcomes us home as His beloved children. Brothers and sisters, fellow sons and daughters of the One True King, we have cause to sing!

*“Mild He lays His glory by
Born that man no more may die
Born to raise the sons of earth
Born to give them second birth”*

-Hark the Herald Angels Sing

Everything that is born dies. Encouraging, right? But we know that it's the case: every flower born from a seedling, every family dog that we brought home as a puppy, every company that's ever been formed, every country that's ever ruled or reigned. These all, like the milk in our refrigerators, have expiration dates. And we know this truth hits home most pointedly when it comes to human beings. Ecclesiastes 3:1 tells us that there is “a time to be born, and a time to die.” Hebrews 9:27 tells us that it is appointed for man to die. Death, because of the presence of sin in this world, is coming for all of us.

Death, however, is not a problem for God. We're told in Psalm 90:2 that God is “from everlasting to everlasting.” In other words, God has no beginning has no end. God was not born and God cannot die. So here's the two realities we have so far: 1) We can't help but die; and 2) God cannot die. And this is where the incarnation ought to floor us. In the incarnation, Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity, is making himself killable. The incarnation is telling us that Jesus is taking on human flesh, breathing human breath, and making it possible for his breath to be taken away, for his flesh to be stricken. In becoming a man, Jesus is becoming killable for us.

In becoming killable for us, in coming to be born in order to die, Jesus is making it possible that we might not die forever. Jesus' birth, ultimate death, and resurrection purchase for us the possibility of re-birth. Jesus is coming to make it so that our first birth and ultimate death can be upended, so that our second birth results in the power of an indestructible, eternal life. Birth begets death. But re-birth banishes death forever. This is the gospel. Jesus becomes a man, making himself killable out of love for us. He was born to die, that death wouldn't have the last word over us. He was born to rise from the dead, and raise us from the dead. He was born to grant us re-birth.

*“Come, Thou long expected Jesus
 Born to set Thy people free
 From our fears and sins release us
 Let us find our rest in Thee”
 -Come Thou Long Expected Jesus*

The author of Hebrews encourages all Christians to “lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us” (12:1). The Christian life in this fallen world is one of continuous exertion, as we fight against sin, as we fight against our fears, and as we fight against our very fallen nature.

Those who have run a marathon are familiar with the experience of “hitting the wall,” when muscles stop working due to a depletion of glycogen stores. Now imagine hitting the wall with a fifty-pound weight on our back and chains wrapped around our legs. Does trying to live in this world as a Christian feel like this at times?

The author of Hebrews urges us to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, as we each run the race that is marked out for us (12:2). For the Christian, there is a finish line somewhere in the distance, and may this promised eternal rest be a great encouragement to us all! But Jesus isn’t just waiting for us at the finish line. He has already finished His race far ahead of us, and now He has come back to help the stragglers.

One of the many paradoxes of the Christian life is that we can experience rest, even as we run the race. Yes, we must still fight and struggle and run with great endurance, and we are not promised a life of comfort or ease. But our souls can rest secure because Jesus has already secured salvation for all who would trust in Him, releasing us from the weight of our sin and our worldly fears. Surely, this is rest for our souls in this season of Advent!

Hark! The herald angels sing
“Glory to the newborn King!”

-Hark the Herald Angels Sing

“I wasn’t paying attention.” Think of all the contexts in which those words might be uttered. The student who didn’t hear about an upcoming test. A husband or wife who drifts from a conversation after a long day at work. A driver who misses a turn because her mind is somewhere else. All of these examples are somewhat ordinary and, in the end, rather benign.

But there is a kind of neglect and inattentiveness that is unthinkable, at least according to the angels. That is what this song is telling us. The angels are telling us to stop—Hark!—and give glory to the newborn King. And why is that? It is because of this newborn King is actually an eternal King who has humbly and lovingly laid aside His glory and taken up our flesh. He has been born in our likeness that he might die in our place, routing an Enemy we could not defeat and granting to us a life we could not purchase. No wonder they sing, “Glory!” The only wonder would be if we failed to join them.

So take a moment and be still before the Lord today. In Psalm 46:10, the voice of God commands us: “Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.” Be still, and recognize what the angels recognized. Know that this baby that we celebrate is God himself. He will be exalted among the angels, yes, but also among the nations and all through the earth. Psalm 46:11 will go on to tell us, “The LORD of hosts is with us.” That first Christmas night, the LORD of hosts (the God of angel armies) was worshipped by the hosts that he had commanded from eternity past. Even today, they bid us to join them in their song, for the LORD of hosts is Immanuel, God with us (Matthew 1:23).

This Christmas day, stop. Stop and think. Stop and marvel. Stop and sing.

