
Singing our
Advent
Joy!

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Advent Greetings!

FOR CHRISTIANS, ADVENT MARKS A TIME OF GREAT anticipation of the coming of the Christ child. We adorn our homes, reflect on the year, and sing with joy as a way of preparing our hearts and minds for the hope, peace, and love promised by God through the gift of Jesus Christ.

Austin Seminary's 2020 Advent Devotional—Singing our Advent Joy!—is our gift to you in this very special season.

The hymns and songs chosen for this devotional are found in the hymnals used for worship in Shelton Chapel at Austin Seminary: *Glory to God*, *The United Methodist Hymnal*, *African-American Heritage Hymnal*, and *Santo Santo Santo*. They have been thoughtfully curated by Eric Wall, assistant professor of sacred music and dean of Shelton Chapel. Unique to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) seminaries across the country, Eric's position is funded through The Gene Alice Sherman Chair in Sacred Music, established with a gift from Trustee Emeritus Max Sherman of Austin, Texas, to honor and preserve his wife's love of and appreciation for sacred music.

Let us sing together with great joy, even as we are apart!

Advent Week One

Isaiah 64:1-9
Psalm 80: 1-7, 17-19
1 Corinthians 1:3-9
Mark 13:24-37

OH THAT YOU WOULD TEAR OPEN THE HEAVENS and come down. This is the word from Isaiah that begins Advent's first week: a keening wail, a raised fist that implores God's presence, even if the cosmic curtain is ripped apart. The outward cry is also an inward look: we have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. The plea for God to turn back to us is echoed in Psalm 80: Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved. Paul reminds the Corinthians, and us, that it is God who gives growth: you are God's field, God's building. And so we are led to Mark's gospel, calling us to watchfulness: you do not know when the time will come ... keep awake.

Each year, we anticipate and rehearse a familiar story which begins by reminding us of how little we actually know—a story that is always ahead of us, bigger than us. In the second of C.S. Lewis's Narnia books, the divine lion Aslan says to the child Lucy, "Every year you grow, you will find me bigger." What is bigger to us this year, in this story, these texts, these songs?

In this first week of devotions and songs, an Advent-Christmas-Epiphany arc is traced. The drama of Isaiah's vision and the psalmist's prayer sound in "Steal Away" and "Restáuranos, oh Dios." Lamps are lighted in two songs that evoke Mark's wakefulness. Midnight is transformed in the angels' song of Jesus, light of the world; sages see in that light from afar a glory made manifest.

Sunday, November 29

"Steal Away"

Steal away to Jesus. I ain't got long to stay here.
My Lord, he calls me, he calls me by the thunder.

This spiritual is sublime, transcendent. Its long phrases arc and ache; between them we breathe deeply. Its deep beauty seems to rest in the earth itself. It is, in fact, a song of earth. Like so many of the songs composed and sung by enslaved African Americans, "Steal Away" is not spiritualized or metaphorical. It stands and sings from an earthly reality of suffering and an equally earthly expectation of liberation. It is a song not just of transcendence beyond this life, but transcendence in this life.

My Lord, he calls me by the lightning; the trumpet sounds within my soul —
I ain't got long to stay here.
Steal away to Jesus.

Advent begins this year in Isaiah 64: "Oh, that you would tear open the heavens and come down." The lightning and thunder that splits the sky show a God of power and a creation of earth-and-cosmos that is bigger than us. In quarantined spaces, in political echo-chambers, in all the upper rooms in which we huddle, we have yearned this year to reach another place.

I ain't got long to stay here.
Green trees a-bending; poor sinners stand a-trembling.

God's earth-and-heaven-shattering power is invoked, yet our sin is all too real: "... our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth ... our iniquities take us away." Is God able to smash injustice, yet still forgive our complicity? Will God crush a virus, yet still forgive our recklessness? Will God shake creation, yet still reach out to us?

And so the psalmist prays: "Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved."

Steal away to Jesus. I ain't got long to stay here.

– Mr. Eric Wall
Assistant Professor of Sacred Music
& Dean of the Chapel

Monday, November 30

"Restáuranos, Oh Dios"

I love short hymns. Nothing against the roaring stanzas of those songs of faith we all belted out together (and we all miss singing together, for sure), but short hymns have a power to themselves. They allow me to focus in on a single theme which is so very helpful to my busy mind and soul.

In "Restáuranos, oh Dios" we have a hymn that allows us to focus and connect with one core thought: restoration. Advent is a season of eager anticipation. A season when a complex narrative of the one whom we know and love is finally joining us. I can think of few Advent seasons where restoration has been more needed and sought, where the complex narratives of our lives have ever been more in the forefront. So often when we hear "restoration," we go to the prodigal son. When the son returned home, the father, who had been anxiously waiting for him, brought him back into the family and "restored his son to his prior condition." There was not any punishment rendered to the son for his disobedience; there was a huge celebration, and the son was given all that he had squandered.

In any other Advent, this is where my heart would be as well: dwelling on the hope that my God is looking to welcome this sad wanderer back with love and joy. But in COVID time, my need for restoration goes beyond where my heart is and sits squarely on my loss of community.

The blessing of restoration that God gives is not confined to our souls and the end of days, but it invades our time and space here and now. We beg, we truly cry out, as the hymn models, for a restoring of our land, our homes, our faith in each other. And the joy I find—beyond it being a hymn that is compact enough to almost be a breath prayer—is that I know we are an Advent people. We know how to wait. We are a people who know what being a bit anxious is like as we wait for the blessing that is to come in God's time.

– Reverend J.D. Herrera
Vice President for Enrollment Management

Tuesday, December 1

"Keep your Lamps"

The song "Keep Your Lamps Trimmed and Burning," originally recorded by Blind Willie Johnson in 1928, has multiple meanings for me. The first is perseverance in the excellence of mindfulness, especially in our spiritual lives. The song alludes to the parable of the wise and foolish virgins (Matthew 25, Luke 12); the foolish virgins were without oil when the bridegroom arrived, while the wise ones had oil and were invited to the banquet. The lesson here, and that which I take away from the song with the refrain "keep your lamps trimmed and burning," is that we should put our best efforts into maintaining spiritual health and minding our p's and q's. The refrain produces a rhythm that sets me to the task of trimming and burning my lamp, with the promise that I will "see what the Lord has done."

I was asked to set aside academics for this essay, but the rebel in me points out the irony that some recent re-recordings frame the lyrics much more tragically than Johnson. Moreland and Arbuckle recorded the song under the album title *Caney Valley Blues* (2005), Red Molly under the album title *Love and Other Tragedies* (2008), and Tim O'Brien and Darrell Scott under the title *We're Usually A Lot Better Than This* (2012). Johnson's lyrics have been passed down, but in terms of album titles, contemporary versions effuse a sense of fatigue and exhaustion: "heaven's journey is almost over." The spiritual path expressed in these versions has become a lonelier one than that perceived by Johnson, whose 1929 album title *Lord I Just Can't Keep from Crying* exhibited a sense of the nearness of God to the world and among the disinherited. I also like the version recorded by Corey Harris under the album title *Between Midnight and Day* (1995). Harris, as well as the version in the Presbyterian hymnal *Glory to God*, testifies that although life is no "crystal stair," we can still climb, turn corners, and reach landings. Joy comes with the break of the morning, and midnight ends "with my folded arms" as symbol for newfound forms of self-love.

– Dr. Asante Todd
Assistant Professor of Christian Ethics

Wednesday, December 2

"A Stable Lamp is Lighted"

I love this poem (originally entitled, "A Christmas Hymn") because it is so classically Richard Wilbur. Wilbur (1921-2017) was a formalist who worked within the constraints of meter and rhyme to express great emotions in simple language. In the schools of modern poetry, such formal constraints are often regarded as silly and sentimental, but in Wilbur's hands, they still possess a power and a glow.

I love it because of its central image, "and every stone shall cry." The stanzas are vignettes from the Christ story, woven together in a single narrative by the image of the stones in the central two lines. The image is repeated verbatim, but each time it functions differently. In the first, the stones share the joy of creation—the "stars shall bend their voices"—at the news of Christ's birth. In the second, they form the silent roadway ("heavy, dull, and dumb") on which Christ rides into Jerusalem at the beginning of Holy Week. In the third, they weep for the tragedy of the crucifixion and in their stoniness reflect "hearts made hard by sin." Then, in the final stanza, they shout in triumphant "praises of the child / by whose descent among us the worlds are reconciled." Indeed, the stones—pieces of the bedrock of creation—serve as the common denominator between "the worlds" of God and humankind. Echoing the first stanza, once again "the stars shall bend their voices," bringing the story to a sort of mythic completion.

But I think I love this hymn most because it resolutely refuses to remain "A Christmas Hymn." In the image of the crying stones, Wilbur forces us out of the soft glow of the stable-lamps of the nativity and into the footlight-glare of the drama of human sin. The stones—the very ones that, in Luke, Jesus declares would "cry out" if the Palm Sunday crowds fell silent—draw us like a magnet through the Christ-story—indeed, through the whole story of creation and redemption—insisting that we cannot understand the meaning of the beginning of the story until we have seen it through to its end. That, it seems to me, is the real message of Advent.

– Reverend Dr. Paul Hooker
Associate Dean for Ministerial Formation and Advanced Studies

Thursday, December 3

"Jesus, Jesus, O What a Wonderful Child"

The song's history has not been well-preserved—listed at the bottom of the song in the *Glory to God* hymnal are the words: "Specific sources for the words and the music of this piece from the African American heritage remain uncertain." Horace Boyer, credited with the arrangement and music, attributed this song originally to a black gospel ensemble, the Angelic Gospel Singers, founded and led by Margaret Wells Allison, who came out with "Glory to the Newborn King" in the 1940s.

Why does this matter? It matters for a number of reasons as we devote ourselves to considering music during the Christmas season. For one, it helps us remember that there are still today many black women who are not given the credit they deserve. Whether they be artists or musicians, co-workers or colleagues, black women are often overlooked for recognition.

Secondly, it reminds us of the gifts of communities of color that are often overlooked. Predominantly white churches may sing songs written by people who are not white, and yet, do they acknowledge the other gifts of talent that such persons bring, enough to actively reach out and recruit a more diverse congregation?

Another reason it is important is that the Jesus this song sings about has come to give us "new life, new hope!" As we acknowledge the sins of our past and present, we can change our future. Christ has come to give us new life and a new hope for how we can relate to one another. In a country still deeply divided by racism, we need to name the ways racism still shows up in subtle ways, as well as in the more obvious ways of hate crimes and the rise of alt-right white nationalist groups. Ultimately, it is this new life and new hope in Christ that keep us singing songs of joy, as well as doing the work of Christ today in making the world a place where all God's children feel God's love.

– Reverend Dr. Carolyn Helsel
Associate Professor in The Blair R. Monie Distinguished Chair in Homiletics

Friday, December 4

"It Came Upon a Midnight Clear"

I hadn't thought 'til now to feel sorry for those angels. They start off so hopefully (v.1), believing the news of Jesus's birth will change everything. "Peace on the earth, good will to all," they sing to the shepherds (Luke 2:14). It is midnight; the sky is clear; the world is perfectly attentive, listening "in solemn stillness," poised to be transformed.

But then it isn't. So the angels try again—and this time they have to work a little harder. They "unfurl" their wings and push their way past the clouds forming in the no-longer-clear sky, singing more loudly to overpower the "Babel sounds" we weary people make as we build our worldly kingdoms (v.2). Still they fail to get our attention.

Two thousand years of war and sin go by. The world becomes so noisy that we have trouble hearing the angels' glorious song altogether (v.3). The angels cannot sing any louder; all they can do is wait for us to grow weary, to rest, and to "hush" enough for their message to break through (v.4).

I feel sorry for those angels, but even sorrier for us. What is it about us that pushes away the message of peace? We yearn to escape the war and the sin, the weariness and the babble, but instead we amp it up. Something is seriously wrong with us.

I am somewhat reassured by the fact that the angels keep on singing whether or not I hear them. "Heaven's all-gracious king" has come and is coming; God has brought peace to the world by way of the Christ child, whether I recognize it or not.

But the story told in this carol disturbs me, because it attaches an uncomfortable "or else" to the gospel of grace. There is something I have to do to have it take actual effect. It is this: I have to find a way to live with a perception of Christ's coming, otherwise there is no way I can be changed by the reality of it.

Dare we hope that Christmas 2020 will find us weary enough to hush, so we might finally hear the angels' song and experience peace?

– Reverend Dr. Cynthia L. Rigby
The W.C. Brown Professor of Theology

Saturday, December 5

"What Star is This, with Beams So Bright"

Everything about the first verse of this hymn says "relax." The melody is inoffensive and the words are simple. My earliest memories of this hymn are from Choristers. It's an easy one for kids to sing, and it makes great filler in a service of lessons and carols, in between more virtuosic fare. The last verse is a doxology with not so much as a descant to worry about.

And that seems fine—especially for 2020. We've had a challenging year. It's time to sit back and listen to treble voices reminding us that the Star is an outward light, but the real light is Jesus. PUER NOBIS is the tune we'll be humming while we brush our teeth on Christmas Eve.

But I was surprised to realize that I had no recollection of the middle stanzas, so I checked, and there in verse three sits a term I didn't expect: "slothful." Well that's a bit harsh. Whatever else my heart has been in 2020, I don't think "slothful" is accurate.

I also wasn't expecting the affable song to turn into a call to action. I thought we were talking about the Magi, not about me.

But that's the thing about Christmas: just when it's time to eat cookies and bask in the joy of the new Baby, we remember that Christmas is the start of a path, not the end of it. Parts of the path get very dark. Good thing we've got a light to guide us.

– Ms. Bee Moorhead
Lecturer in Theology

Advent Week Two

Isaiah 40:1-11
Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13
2 Peter 3:8-15a
Mark 1:1-8

COMFORT, O COMFORT MY PEOPLE. It is not comfort only, and it is not just for us: mountains and valleys remake the world, and all flesh sees it. Isaiah sings this week, as last week, of comfort and cataclysm. The psalmist tells us that steadfast love and faithfulness will meet ... and righteousness will look down from the sky. In 2 Peter, we read that days and millennia are alike in God's patience, and yet, in Mark's gospel, John proclaims a baptism and a Coming One that seem very near.

Each year, we anticipate and rehearse a familiar story which tells us that everything familiar will change—changes that will not only shift what we see but will shift us. What ground is moving under our feet, what mountains and monuments are being made low, what does "all flesh" mean in this story, these texts, these songs?

In this second week of devotions and songs, an Advent–Christmas–Epiphany arc is again traced. Preceding us, all earth—all creation—waits for change, for God's upheaval and comfort. We, too, wait for a long-expected one. With Isaiah, we glimpse those who walk in darkness, a Wonderful Counselor, a Prince of Peace. With shepherds, we kneel before one born not alone for me. With Magi, we see the star, vanquishing the gloom of night. And what does the poignant farewell to the child mean in "Niño Lindo"?

Sunday, December 6

"Comfort, Comfort Now My People"

Comfort, comfort now my people; tell of peace! So says your God.

This hymn's tune, from the 1551 Genevan Psalter, is buoyant, elegant—a lively fanfare, rising and falling like the mountains and valleys in the text. John Calvin's church wouldn't have had an organ, much less a tambourine—but tambourine-like it is, as though Miriam and her companion singers had leaped from Exodus into Isaiah. There is a spring in Isaiah's step; the comfort is spirited; the herald's voice dances.

It is not just musical energy that is dance-like in this hymn. The hymn's paraphrase of Isaiah 40 was written by Johannes Olearius in 1671 and translated to English by Catherine Winkworth in 1863. Where Isaiah says that "every valley shall be lifted up and every mountain and hill made low" (NRSV), the hymn's text sings an inflection:

Now prepare for God a way. Let the valleys rise in meeting and the hills bow down in greeting.

Suddenly these familiar words are an image of delight: valley and peak approach each other and the Coming One with the grace of dance partners. The image recalls the Shaker hymn, "Simple Gifts":

... to bow and to bend we shan't be ashamed;
to turn, turn will be our delight, 'til by turning, turning we come round right.

This hymn offers Isaiah's vision not less as cataclysm and more as courtesy, and courtesy we sorely need in these days. "Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteous and peace will kiss each other. Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness will look down from the sky," writes the psalmist. What does it mean, in Advent, to meet God, so that we can meet each other a little better and perhaps glimpse in culture and communities the meeting of love, faithfulness, righteousness, peace? To assemble on the dance plain, to bow and take hands, to partner our steps with each other and with the Coming One?

– Mr. Eric Wall
Assistant Professor of Sacred Music
& Dean of the Chapel

Monday, December 7

"Toda la Tierra" (All Earth is Waiting)

This year we have faced unexpected world upheaval. Distress and unrest seem to reign in this season of watchful waiting, and like many of you, I wonder what lies ahead. So, this Advent season has me reflecting on the triumphant return of Jesus at the Second Coming, and I have found myself praying "Come, Lord Jesus ..."

This hymn talks of "*un mundo que lucha por la libertad, que clama justicia y busca la verdad*"; of a world that fights for freedom and justice and seeks truth. And I have pondered on these issues, precisely justice, freedom, truth, and how long it takes for them to prevail. It truly is the struggle of a lifetime. As a justice seeker myself, I see it move so slowly. In the quest for justice, the destination may seem so distant that the lack of progress, compassion, or commitment, can be discouraging and exhausting. This waiting though, can be endured, because it is the kind of waiting that is sustained by hope.

And as our journey continues, we keep on going, wondering, waiting, but hoping. For in this hope we were saved, and we need to remember that *the story isn't over yet.* We are waiting for the day when everything will be made right, when the old order of things will pass away, and the new will come. In a sense, all of creation has been groaning for our Savior's return. The hymn chants that in him, hope will return to the world, "*con él l a esperanza al mundo volverá*." We are hope-driven people. We need hope or else we die. Christ knows this and he himself became Hope for us.

Whatever happens now, we can endure because we have something to look up to, a place we can call home, and a Father waiting with many rooms, in a city paved with gold, where love, truth, and justice will finally reign.

And the hymn goes, "*toda la tierra, espera al Salvador,*" all the earth is waiting for our Savior. "*El señor está cerca";* the Lord is close, indeed. Every day that passes, his coming is closer, but until he returns or calls us home, here we are, in the "waiting season," continuing to seek him and his truth, and doing the good work that he has called each one of us to do.

– Ms. Monica Tornoe
Director of Latinx Studies

Tuesday, December 8

"Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus"

If you have to choose between reading this or listening to the hymn, it's a no-brainer. Google "Come Thou Long Expected Jesus" and pick a version, preferably one with French horns. I recommend listening to it every day this week. We need the deeply calming yet strongly stirring promise held in this beautiful music.

You are reading this after the election; I write it twenty days before. I don't know whether violence will come; the images of citizens carrying assault rifles scare me. Today I read that one in six Americans with jobs before the pandemic do not have jobs now. Walking my dog through the neighborhood, I imagine the families in every sixth house wondering what will become of them. My friend in Oregon tells me he uses one kind of mask to get from home to car because the air is toxic from the fires and another kind once he gets in the grocery store because of the COVID-19 threat. We don't know whether it is safe for our family to gather for Christmas with my 84-year-old mother. But how can we leave her alone?

We long for what seem like such simple things—safety, work, air, health, connection, home. It was the same when Charles Wesley wrote this hymn. He wrote in a time of political polarization with threats of war. He wrote in a city with dire homelessness and extreme poverty among adults and especially orphaned children. He wrote knowing the simple longings of the human heart in the midst of the gritty public sin on display at every hand. He took the memory and promise of our Christian story and made it a claim and a plea: Come, thou long expected Jesus. Born to set us free from fear and release us from this awful sin. Come on, we beg you. We wait for you, the joy of our longing hearts.

Let our waiting be sweet. Let us wait knowing that our expectant hope is not in vain, that God is born in the midst of our grief, that we do indeed find rest in Jesus.

– Ms. Melissa Wiginton
Vice President for Education Beyond the Walls & and Research Professor in Methodist Studies

Wednesday, December 9

"The People Who Walked in Darkness"

Writing a reflection on an Advent hymn felt like an invitation to frolic in my favorite part of any hymnal. Over forty years of congregational ministry, annually planning and sharing in Advent worship was a high and holy privilege. I love hymns both old and new and (no surprise) have many thoughts about these beloved songs. My assignment, however, brought me a text and tune I'd never sung before.

The words were familiar, of course. In many versions of Lessons and Carols, the readings highlight the contrast between darkness and light, and some lucky basso gets to sing from Handel's Messiah. He sings, I listen. Year, after year, after year.

Not this year. This year I read/sing/listen to a new song, as a new voice rehearses the old story once again. Throughout Isaiah, remember, we overhear the prophet speaking to people swallowed up in the darkness of a kingdom divided. People who are plunged into oppression, war, destruction of their homeland, and exile to an alien land.

While I cannot feel their pain, I deeply connect with the feeling of immersion in a disruptive and dark season. And I, too, am looking to the stars. In fact, nightly I walk the length of my city block and home again to look up and see what light I can. Light amidst the darkness.

Hymn author Mary Louise Bringle is my age, as is Sally Ann Morris, composer of the hymn tune ISAIAH. I imagine the three of us sitting together to share and pray verse 3: "the yoke of despair and bondage, the chains and the slave-master's rod are shattered and scattered like dust in a windstorm loosed by the justice of God."

I affirm the promise of hope arising year after year and surely again. The light of God which bursts forth on a field near Bethlehem and an Austin city block.

"Silent night, holy night, wondrous star, lend thy light"—light upon all God's people whose way is darkened still.

– Reverend Bobbi Kaye Jones
Professor in the Louis H. and Katherine S. Zbinden Distinguished Chair of Pastoral Ministry and Leadership

Thursday, December 10

"When Shepherds Lately Knelt"

"I come in half-belief, a pilgrim strangely stirred."

Half-belief. I know this. Which half of me believes? Some days my faith is firm. Some days it is entirely absent. I doubt that I am ever free from doubt. And yet, I want to believe. I long for a certainty that never quite seems to come. Nevertheless, I will not abandon my faith. I will not abandon my Lord. I have nowhere else to go. I am like the father of the suffering child, who pleads with Jesus: "I believe, help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24)

"Sweet new-born babe, how frail ..."

I have held new-born infants in my arms. They are indeed frail. They feel fragile. They seem helpless. Their tiny limbs flail to no purpose. I remember the admonition of my liturgy professor: "Whatever you do, don't drop the baby!" So I, coward that I am, ask a parent to hold the child, and I content myself with the water.

"The Prince of Peace for me ..."

And yet, the one in the manger is the Prince of Peace, the savior of the world. How can this newborn child be the Almighty? I am so much larger than he is, so much stronger, so much more powerful! And yet, I must not let appearances deceive me. I am tiny. I am weak. I am helpless. I am the frail one, not him. I am at his mercy. If I am ever to have peace, it must come from him.

"To die, to live, and not alone for me."

This is the movement of the faith: from them—the shepherds, to me—the pilgrim, to us. That is how the church is built. We hear something, we see something, someone, some stranger. We follow, perhaps against our will. We come to the one who calls us, not knowing that we are called. And we encounter the one who greets us, who heals us, and who saves us. A part of our healing is that we join together. It's me, there at the manger, but it's not just me. It's never just me.

– Reverend Dr. David W. Johnson
Associate Professor of Church History and Christian Spirituality

Friday, December 11

"In the Heavens Shone a Star"

This hymn from the Philippines, like so many of our traditional Christmas songs—"Silent Night," "Angels We Have Heard on High," "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing," and "O Little Town of Bethlehem"—features a star dancing in the night sky. I once lived in Alaska for a few years in my early adulthood where, for the first time in my life, I was struck by the astounding beauty and vitality of the night sky. My congregation had a phone tree where church members notified each other when the aurora borealis was in the sky. Many nights I lay in the snow on my back watching the dancing colors, the blues, greens, yellows, purples, and sometimes reds that animated the northern sky in the winter months. Even on "ordinary" evenings, the stars, more vivid without streetlights, seemed to come so close that you could reach out and touch them. Even apart from the nativity story, the star exists as a symbol of wonder—a burst of light against the dark void of night. What hard-bitten soul can look on a shining star and not feel a stir of emotion? It is no accident that ancient cultures saw in them monsters, heroes, and gods. What an enormous loss to our imaginations we suffer when as modern people we look up and see only what can be explained as physical forces, gaseous formations, or distant suns. Vincent Van Gogh saw this clearly.

The Greeks and many Patristic theologians recognized the cosmos as a theophany bearing witness to God who dwells in inaccessible light. They saw the light of God shining in and through all created things in their beauty, pointing through them to the Creator. This light is most transparent to God in the Incarnation of Jesus, the Light of the world. In modernity we neglect this covenant of light, a responsibility to perceive all things in wonder, when we reduce the world as objects to be used or merely to reflect our egos. I take great delight in Christmas hymns that speak of the child of glory and of dancing stars.

– Reverend Dr. David White
The C. Ellis and Nancy Gribble Nelson Professor of Christian Education & Professor of Methodist Studies

Saturday, December 12

"Niño Lindo"

When I hear this hymn sung in Spanish, it reminds me of my home church, Iglesia Bautista Central in Kingsville, Texas. During the Advent season, my home church would be transformed for the yearly Christmas play, with the smell of hay and a manger scene at the center of the stage. The first night of the play was electric. Parents and their children, aunts, uncles, grandparents would all come and fill every pew in the church. I can still see the faces of the people standing in the back and proud parents moving into the aisles to take photos of their daughter "Mary" and son "Joseph." Yet the real excitement came when the real baby Jesus was placed in his crib. This hymn also reminds me of my home church's Christmas caroling tradition. On the night before Christmas Eve, we would crowd into the church van and go around town to different houses to sing carols. I was not always on key, but I did enjoy the warmth of our fellowship.

This hymn brings to mind the beauty of every child and the importance of family unity during Christmas. In a world where not all children are valued equally, and, in some countries, they are even forced to separate from their parents, this hymn places a high value on a child who would later teach us to love all the little children of the world.

As a Christian, this hymn not only reinvigorates my love for baby Jesus but more importantly, it reiterates Jesus's charge to love all people, young or old. The first-person voice in the hymn makes its message of valuing children very personal. Indeed, family unity and the joy of children should be personal to all of us during this season. Personal to the degree that when people in power seek to devalue children and separate families, we engage in person to counter such power with the love of Jesus.

– Reverend Dr. Gregory L. Cuéllar
Associate Professor of Old Testament

Advent Week Three

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11
Psalm 126 or Luke 1:46b-55
1 Thessalonians 5:16-24
John 1:6-8, 19-28

THEY SHALL BUILD UP THE ANCIENT RUINS. Isaiah and the psalmist sing of restoration, flowering, and gladness. Devotions in the third week emerge from these images of restoration, flourishing, and gladness. Isaiah and the psalmist lift up gardens and cities, plantings and sheaves. Mary's words are a song and a shout of justice. Even as the world glimpses blooming, John points further ahead to the one "whom you do not know."

Each year, we rehearse a story of one whom we do not know and of a world about to change. This third week begins with songs of the justice we know and do not yet know, that we see and do not yet see. Where are we walking in light? Where is the world turning?

On December 17, we begin praying the O Antiphons, ancient prayers from which the great hymn "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" arises. They gather up remembrance of who God is and what God has done: O Wisdom, O Lord of Might, O Root of Jesse. They bring the fullness of our Advent longings to the doorway of Christmas.

Sunday, December 13

"Awake, Awake and Greet the New Morn"

In your mind's ear, recall the first two notes of "Amazing Grace"—just the first two. Then repeat them.

Those two-notes-twice are how the tune of this wonderful hymn begins. Now hear, in your mind's ear, those two-notes-twice with some of the words that begin the hymn's stanzas:

Awake, awake
To us, to all
Rejoice, rejoice

Music is always echoing other music, as scripture is always echoing other scripture. In the Advent 3 scriptures, echoes sound between past, present, and future. Mary seems to be recalling what God has already done, and Isaiah is re-calling the future of what God will do. There is some reminder in these that the Christ birth we anticipate is a mighty act sounding with the memory and expectation of God's other acts.

Love be our song. There is a cheerful, irresistible surge to the music of this hymn, and one of the joyous images is Jesus's own song:

Emmanuel comes a-singing ...
the thunder of his anthems rolls to shatter all hatred and violence.

John's gospel tells us, "among you stands one whom you do not know." C.S. Lewis wrote that our holy yearning is "the echo of a song we have never heard." When questions are asked in churches about the balance of Advent songs and Christmas songs, they are almost invariably asked in terms of singing. If you have asked those questions, you probably didn't ask, "When will we hear Christmas songs?" but instead "When will we sing Christmas songs?" We remember past song and yearn for present and future song. We remember what God has done and yearn for what God is doing and will do. In this quarantined December, we yearn to sing—more than ever, we need the recall, the echo of songs we know and do not yet know. May today's hymn and all our singing be that echo; or, in the hymn's closing words,

May God fill every day we share and bring us at last into glory.

– Mr. Eric Wall
Assistant Professor of Sacred Music
& Dean of the Chapel

Monday, December 14

"My Soul Cries Out with a Joyful Shout"

Any time that I sing this hymn, I remember vividly the first time I ever heard it. It was on a Midwinters Youth retreat with 150 high school students in the Mo Ranch auditorium a few years ago. As you can imagine, the room was filled with exuberant and nervous teenagers, excited and a little uncertain about what the weekend had in store for them. The frenetic energy was palpable. A young woman stood with her guitar at the front of the room and attempted to get the attention of this crowd of young people. Having little luck at quieting them down, she began to sing. At first, it was just her voice and her guitar ... "My soul cries out with a joyful shout that the God of my heart is great," you could barely hear her over the din of conversation. But, as she continued, the energetic melody of the hymn swept up the others in the room and they joined their voices in ... "my spirit sings of the wondrous things that you bring to the ones who wait." When the refrain came, the whole room was singing, loudly, with hope and expectation borne of God's promises. "Let the fires of your justice burn. Wipe away all tears for the dawn draws near, and the world is about to turn." The energy was palpable, yet it was no longer frenetic. This felt like hope. This felt like expectation. This felt like the Spirit was hovering just above our voices. These teenagers sang with conviction, they believed the words they sang that day in the auditorium together. And, as I sang with them, I did, too.

Mary sang words like these when she first learned she would give birth to Jesus the Christ; that very same Spirit hovered just above her voice as she sang the truth with hope and expectation. Mary sang the truth that God is indeed with us, even as we wait. We join our voices in the hope "that the hungry poor shall weep no more for the food they can never earn," trusting that God is, even now, turning the world around. We sing this hymn with joyful expectation for the God of our hearts is great, and as Mary sang, "He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham, and to his descendants forever."

– Reverend Dr. Sarah Allen (MDiv'07, DMin'19)
Lecturer in the Church's Ministry

Tuesday, December 15

"Hark! The Herald Angels Sing"
"Jesus, the Light of the World"

As a child, I learned orally the lyrics to "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing" and "Jesus, the Light of the World." For this assignment and for the first time, I am reading the words. What a difference reading can make? I had been singing one important word wrongly my entire life.

The last line of the final verse is not "Hail, the Son," rather it's "Hail, the sun of righteousness." This is an easy aural and theological mistake. Sun and son are homophones; Jesus is the son of God, making him the son of the ultimate righteousness. However, sun of righteousness carries an entirely different meaning.

As center of our universe, the sun provides the gravitational force that holds the planets in spatial balance, directs their orbits, and sets the rhythm of life. It is the source of light that produces, sustains, and nourishes all life on earth.

Commonly, we associate righteousness with the virtuosity and uprightness with which we are supposed to worship God, live within our communities, and conduct ourselves in personal affairs. The Greek word *dikaiosyné* for righteousness is the same word for justice; meaning, they are synonyms according to the New Testament.

As the "sun" of righteousness, Jesus is the power that nourishes all life with the light of God's justice. He directs our paths and sets our rhythms in accordance thereof. While encouraging us to rejoice in Jesus's light, the hymn calls us to walk in it—living our lives, setting our minds, and making all our decisions with God's action-oriented love for all, including the seemingly just and unjust. The hymn is an exhortation both to take refuge in and carry forth Jesus's mission of justice in the world.

This remix of an English hymn with an African American gospel song is a clarion call to us as individual believers as well as every nation (including its social, political, and economic systems) to joyfully rise and honor Jesus—the anointed King, everlasting Lord, and Prince of peace—by walking in his beautiful light.

– Reverend Bridgett A. Green
Instructor in New Testament

Wednesday, December 16

"Tu, Jesus, Nuestra Esperanza"

In Advent, the church around the world prays, "Come, Lord Jesus." But come to do what? Often the prayer seeks personal transformation or movement to a more pious, holy life: "from our cares and sins release us, let us find our rest in Thee," in the words of Charles Wesley.

But the cry of Advent longs for more than personal renewal. Advent cries out for the redemption of the entire God-beloved world. In Advent, the church prays for liberty not merely from personal transgressions but from all injustice, for release for the prisoners, for God's ingathering of all peoples in love and understanding.

Jaci Maraschin and Jorge Rodríguez's hymn "Tú, Jesús, nuestra esperanza/ Vem Jesus, nossa esperança" invites us to pray this way. The Spanish and Portuguese lyrics of Maraschin and Rodríguez's hymn raise up to heaven a prayer for *liberdade/libertad*/freedom for all people, a prayer for God to weave (*tecer/teje*) God's kingdom of joy among us. Their prayer ends in the New Jerusalem of Revelation, calling for the destruction of the wall between day and night.

Maraschin and Rodríguez invite us to pray and sing with the world in mind: the oppressed, the prisoners, those who long for freedom, both in our nation and globally. To pray this way we must believe that God cares not only about the souls of individual believers, but also about systems and structures, about nations and governments, about physical freedom as well as spiritual renewal. Such a prayer invites us to imagine God's new creation born among us.

Praying this way also challenges us. What will happen when God weaves us a new world, a world whose warp is truth and whose weft is reconciliation? How will God bring us together, and what walls will God have to tear down, perhaps figuratively, perhaps even literally.

Some of these rich metaphors are lost in the English translation of this hymn and prayer, so this Adventtide, why not sing it in Spanish or Portuguese? As you sing, pray with the whole creation for liberation, reconciliation and joy, singing "Vem Jesus/ Come Lord Jesus."

– Reverend Dr. Margaret Aymer
The First Presbyterian Church, Shreveport, D. Thomason Professor of New Testament Studies

Thursday, December 17

"O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" (O Wisdom) stanza 2

One of my childhood memories is late afternoon, Indiana, December 24. When the light slanted and touched our backyard bare trees just so, I would ask, "Is it Christmas Eve?" Even as a child I learned to love the gathering dusk because it meant that time turned toward the next day, and this turning was especially exciting on the 24th! Our Christmas feasting started that evening as aunts, uncles, cousins, and dear friends gathered for a festive meal before the 11pm church service. More years have passed, but I still watch for dusk time. I join my ancestors and contemporaries in Christ marking one day's end and the new day's beginning at dark: "There was evening, there was morning, the first day" (Gen 1:5).

Every Advent I look forward to singing "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel." Each stanza adds a different scriptural image, describing the One for whom we wait: Christ who is Wisdom, *Adonai*, Root of Jesse, Key of David, Dayspring, true King, Emmanuel. But the liturgist in me loves something else about this hymn: its history is about "keeping watch by night" (Matthew 25:13). Before becoming a hymn, these O Antiphons were sung at evening prayer the seven nights before Christmas. In fact, they were chanted each night just before and after the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55). I love how they were joined with Mary's song, creating a fierce proclamation of the coming Christ! Now, beginning December 17th, I join the saints (past and present) in the final Advent evenings, calling out for this Messiah. And, each year I enjoy the ancient wordplay: look up the Latin for these titles, take the first letter of each, and read those letters backwards: the letters announce *Ero Cras*: "Tomorrow I come."

Advent tells the truth about the conditions of the world. We wait for the dominion of God, for release from suffering, for God's transfiguring mercy here and now. O Wisdom! Scatter the proud! Fill the hungry with good things! Put down the mighty from their thrones! O Wisdom, evening comes. Turn all things toward you and order us in your ways, now and forever!

– Reverend Dr. Jennifer L. Lord
The Dorothy Vickery Professor of Homiletics and Liturgical Studies

Friday, December 18

"O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" (O Lord of Might) stanza 3

This coronavirus pandemic and time of vast political change can be confusing and disorienting, so we look for something that will help life make sense again, some structure for our ethics and for our days. The third verse of this familiar hymn can easily be skipped over in congregational singing, but the passage reorients Advent and provides the structure we need. Sung across the amazing melody, we encounter a message familiar and profound, dedicated to Israel. We are able to recognize Christ this Christmas because we first have been invited to recognize the gift that God gave Israel: leading them out of bondage. God's gracious invitation of relationship to the Hebrew people gets it all started.

Something profound happened at Sinai, and this verse suggests that we should not trivialize it. This relationship was offered by God and undergirded by wonder, and the Law was a central way this relationship was understood. It was a delight to the Hebrew people (Psalm 119) and a sign of God's faithfulness. It was full of concrete instructions, including to leave food behind in the field for the widow and the foreigner traveling through the land. The translation of "Torah" into the English term "law" doesn't do it justice. Torah reflects the fact that God had chosen Israel and called them into community, giving them a life that was recognizably faithful.

It is sometimes easy for Christians to forget that Jesus saw himself as fulfilling the Law. In this verse, we are reminded that we need a God who is other than us to give us direction and shape us into the people we are meant to be. In this time of great confusion and despair, faith reminds us that we are not alone and that God calls us beyond the horizon of our own self-interest. The Law reminds us that we are always dependent on the gracious invitation of God to relationship, that we are called to live faithfully in response, and that such faithfulness results in a life that reflects God's purposes, while not removing suffering.

There is delight shot through the gift of the Law that trickles into Advent. We wait for something recognizable, because, in some mysterious way, it has already come.

– Reverend Dr. Philip Browning Helsel
Associate Professor in the Nancy Taylor Williamson Distinguished Chair in Pastoral Care

Saturday, December 19

"O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" (O Root of Jesse) stanza 4

Around this time of year, the perpetual question of American Christmas seeps into our small talk and dinner table chit-chat. "What do you want for Christmas?" we inquire of children and coworkers, spouses and friends. Whether we ask out of curiosity or to round-out our shopping lists, the usual answers include electronics, gadgets, toys, and clothing. Yet, none of these answers are fully honest, and none captures the deepest longings that lurk beneath the surface of our holiday well-wishes.

Just as our culture glosses the Advent season with images of snow-covered landscapes, warm fires, and joyous Christmas celebrations, so also our requests for neatly wrapped gifts and gadgets beneath the tree fall short of articulating the truth of our world and our longings.

This is the season when we attempt to cover over the bleak realities of our world in garland and lights, and yet—despite our best decorating—we know that all of life is plagued by the tyranny of Evil and Death. Some days we might succeed in suppressing our fears of looming death—until we turn on the television, browse Facebook, or read the headlines—and we're confronted again.

Yet, here, in this fourth verse of O Come, O Come Emmanuel the true business of Advent and our deep yearnings (our wish list!) are laid bare. Here we are reminded that the One who is "God with us" does not enter into the beautiful, peaceful, and serene world that we portray in our Christmas cards. No, Emmanuel enters a world—our world—distorted by Evil, gripped by the ravages of chaos, under the tyrannical rule of Death, and ruled by the finality of the grave. This verse isn't just a historical reminder of a time when people called out for a Messiah to appear; rather, whenever we sing this hymn it is a prayer and cry for God to enter our world now. We cry out, even now, for victory o'er the grave, which is the perpetual longing of all humanity. This is the gift that we truly desire—the one not found on our usual Christmas lists; it is the gift that the coming of the Christ-child harkens and guarantees.

– Dr. Andrew Zirschky
Director, MAYM Nashville Extension
& Research Professor in Youth Ministry

Advent Week Four

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16
Luke 1:46b-55 or Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26
Romans 16:25-27
Luke 1:26-38

O KEY OF DAVID, O DAYSPRING, O DESIRE OF NATIONS, O Emmanuel—the O Antiphons continue, bringing us to the threshold of incarnation. Samuel declares that "the Lord will make you a house." Mary and the psalmist both sing of God's faithfulness to all generations. Paul writes of a mystery made known, and Luke tells the story in which nothing is impossible for God.

Each year, we rehearse a story in which the impossible can happen, the world can turn, and all flesh can witness. There is one among you, writes John.

O come, thou Dayspring, come and cheer our spirits by thine advent here.

Sunday, December 20

"O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" (O Key of David) stanza 5

Somewhere in a drawer, I have a box with some keys to different pipe organs I have played. Organ keys are typically little, but they unlock great sound: insert and turn them, and the organ motor comes to life, summoning the breath of air into the wind chest, readying the ensemble of pipe voices to sound. Throughout all the words and activity of worship, that wind is in motion, at the ready: a faint but ever-present *whoosh* we may not even notice, but which is constant, concentrated, awake, at the threshold of music.

In the texts for Advent Week 4, the past is present. God has been journeying in tent and tabernacle, making a house and a place for the people. Joseph is descended from the anointed and strengthened servant David. Mary's song of God's deeds recalls the promises made to Abraham. It is as though the story of God's promises and faithfulness are a great wind chest: constant, concentrated, awake, at the threshold of a new thing and a new song.

In today's verse of "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel," the prayer is O Clavis David:

O come, thou Key of David, come and open wide our heavenly home;
make safe the way that leads on high and close the path to misery.

In this Advent, Isaiah has pleaded for the heavens to be torn open and for God to come down. Here, too, the prayer is for opening, for home—the house which Samuel tells us God has promised to build. In this Advent, the plea has also been for a way, for God's road to a better world. How often we have yearned this year for the closing of misery's path, of misery's headlines and statistics and breathless sorrow and microscopic terror.

"The Holy Spirit will come upon you," says Gabriel. The Spirit's wind-breath will fill our tired wind chests. God-with-us will come, a key opening wide a threshold of something new.

– Mr. Eric Wall
Assistant Professor of Sacred Music
& Dean of the Chapel

Monday, December 21

"O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" (O Dayspring) stanza 6

Every morning with great anticipation I wait to see the sun appear and rise over the horizon. With its grand appearance the world awakens and all that has been hidden and quieted by the night becomes visible and alive. Just as the arrival of the s-u-n signifies the start of a new day, the arrival of the S-O-N signified the start of a new life. On that blessed day, in the City of David, the angels sang as new life was ushered in. O come, O come Emmanuel.

For generations many awaited the fulfillment of the promise from God that the deliverer would come. Many prayers were prayed and the hope of humanity clung to the words of the prophets as the world looked toward heaven for the revealing of God's plan. Through the words of this sacred hymn we invite the Savior to come, shining in the light of His eternal glory to revive our spirits. His arrival inspires us like the dawning of a brand new day. O come, O Come Emmanuel.

What an awesome privilege we have to invite the light of the world into our lives. As I embrace new mercies each morning, I also offer this invitation to Him. It is no casual invitation to be taken lightly, it gives Jesus permission to intervene in the most intimate aspects of my life. My spirit rejoices when I think about the impact of His arrival. Through power and grace, His words cause the darkness of night to disappear. Through compassion and correction, I am drawn closer to His heart. Through the demonstration of His love, the shadow of death lost its sting and had to flee. With the presence of my Savior comes joy and peace, while victory is proclaimed because He reigns. Like the words of the sacred hymn, my daily invitation remains: O come, O come Emmanuel.

– The Reverend Dr. Daryl Horton (MDiv'15)
Lecturer in the Certificate in Jewish-Christian Relationship Program

Tuesday, December 22

"O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" (O Desire of Nations) stanza 7

I love Advent and Christmas. I love the twinkling lights spiraling around trees and lining roofs in our neighborhood, the solemnly joyful crèches, the aroma of hot cinnamon cider, the "Charlie Brown Christmas Special," finding perfect gifts, gathering with friends for our annual Christmas cookie party. I love "Joy to the World," "Silent Night" and the Christmas Eve candlelight service and its joyful raising of lit candles. I love how Christmas celebration of the *kenosis* proclaimed in Philippians 2 annually *performs,* "Do nothing from selfish ambition or vain conceit ... Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others" (Phil. 2:3–4). Imagine how the world would be changed if everyone followed Paul's exhortation, if in reality the desire of nations were bound by this the spirit of Jesus!

But our world celebrates those who most successfully pursue selfish ambition. Global secular elites enjoy increasingly vast disparities in wealth in a world which ever-more exploits the poor—in the United States even the misfortune of disease or accident is seen as a prime opportunity to leverage need for profit. Our world looks distressingly similar to the Roman imperial world which viewed Jesus's call to *agape* as a mortal threat.

I used to dismiss condescendingly Christians who complained about secular society's "war on Christmas." Now I wonder if these Christians—mostly poorer and in marginalized communities—may be the canaries most sensitive to globalizing dynamics at war with agape. The lyrics of *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel* emerge anonymously from the fog of war-torn, eighth-century Europe. The plea of this stanza is rooted in suffering and desperation and testifies to Christianity's realized hope and prophetic realism. Christians live an already/not yet tension: "The Lord has come!" / "O come Lord Jesus!" O come, agape, please, we pray, bind the desire of nations, the desire of Herods, the desire of globalizing elites. By grace we revel in the glory of the "already" even as we are ever driven by the urgency of the "not yet" and live in hope of a world filled with "heaven's peace."

– Dr. William Greenway
Professor of Philosophical Theology

Wednesday, December 23

"O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" (O Emmanuel) stanza 1

The desperation and the longing evident in these words feel more pertinent than ever before. I find it difficult not to hear in this verse a plea, a longing that has become starker and more pressing this past year: "O come, O come, Emmanuel"—"O come, Lord, Come save us."

Save us from the pandemic.

Save us from inequality and racism, which allows the continued mistreatment and murder of people who are brown, black, poor, and marginalized.

Save us from environmental degradation where millions of acres of forests are consumed by fire, where there is mass die-off of living creatures, insects, and other wondrous things of this world.

Save us from the angry and lying words of politicians.

Save us from the fear and anxiety that grips us.

Save us from the hateful rage and anger that threatens to consume us.

Save us from the feeling of defeat and hopelessness, the feeling that we cannot do anything, that we do not matter.

Save us, oh Lord, from ourselves.

And yet embedded in the very same verse is the answer to these pleas: Emmanuel. "God is with us." That is, God is already with us. God is with us despite. God is with us still. God has never left us. God will never leave us. God is with us.

Though Advent celebrates and looks forward to the coming of the savior, this verse reminds us not just to look forward but also to look behind us to the past and to look around us in the present. Even in this present. That Emmanuel in Hebrew literally means, "With us [is, was, will be] El (God)"—with the verb tense unspecified and open. This verse reminds us that the savior has always been with us, is with us now, and will remain with us into the future.

–Dr. Suzie Park
Associate Professor of Old Testament

Christmas Eve

"Lo, How a Rose e'er Blooming"

I don't remember ever singing this hymn in church. The Christmas Eve services of my childhood were filled with other, more familiar carols. But I still have a strong connection to this hymn because I remember my mother playing it on the violin. Weather during Christmas season in the Pacific Northwest is not frigid, but it is damp enough to make the cold sink into your bones. I remember dark, damp December evenings when my family would gather in a warm living room, Mom would unpack her violin, and one of her three children would play accompaniment on the piano. We would sing and sometimes we would simply listen. This hymn connects me to home and family.

One of the most striking—and surprising—aspects of the hymn is its central image: a rose as a metaphor for Christ. It's an image found nowhere in the New Testament. But this absence of biblical precedent does not mean it's inappropriate. Indeed, it might be the most appropriate of all images for the gift of God's son: a rose blooming in mid-winter, a sign of beauty in the midst of darkness and loss. The image reminds us that the incarnation—Jesus's birth—is an event of unsurpassed beauty. In a world beset by the ugliness of violence, discord, and strife, God's gift is beauty in the flesh which opens our eyes to the beauty that surrounds us at every moment: the beauty of voices gathered in winter, the beauty of the violin, the beauty of reunion and reconciliation, the beauty of our gift to one another. Jesus Christ is the rose who blooms anew in these tumultuous and difficult times.

Reformed theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher, in his book C*hristmas Eve Celebration: A Dialogue*, offers a glimpse of this beauty in a conversation among family and friends: "For us the birth of the Redeemer is the uniquely universal festival of joy ..." Beauty and joy indeed. Thanks be to God.

– Dr. David H. Jensen
Academic Dean and Professor in the Clarence N. and Betty B. Frierson Distinguished Chair of Reformed Theology

Christmas Day

"Good Christian Friends, Rejoice"

Advent blooms, at last, into the season of Christmas, and this hymn expresses the joy of this day with such simplicity and exuberance. It invites us to dance as we sing it, and that is appropriate because the word "carol" once meant "to dance in a ring." The British musician Percy Dearmer, who with Ralph Vaughn Williams and Martin Shaw is credited with the revival of traditional and medieval English musical forms, wrote the preface for the first edition (in 1928) of *The Oxford Book of Carols*. "Carols," he said, "are songs with a religious impulse that are simple, hilarious, popular, and modern" (p.v). In fact, he asserts that carols, by moving away from earlier contemplative forms of church music, "began the era of modern music, which has throughout been based upon the dance." We may be surprised by his suggestion that this carol is so contemporary, even revolutionary—its melody, after all, goes back to the fourteenth century—but when that melody is sped up to a tempo that invites us to tap our feet, there is indeed hilarity and it's almost impossible not to dance.

After the year our world has had—the suffering and death at the hands of a brutal pandemic, the social isolation practiced across months by so many of us, the prayers uttered each night before sleep for safety and relief for all whom we know and love (and for all who suffer and whom we do not yet know and love—or even, perhaps, do not yet understand)—we may be more ready for this day than ever before. And, right on time, this charming, simple, toe-tapping carol captures and promotes our joy. In the face of bleakness still around us, the birth of Jesus Christ nonetheless summons our attention.

So gather your instruments (or maybe just your sound system) for the appropriate hilarity of Christmas Day! "Now ye need not fear the grave: Jesus Christ was born to save! Calls you one and calls you all to gain the everlasting hall. Christ was born to save! Christ was born to save!"

– Reverend Dr. Theodore J. Wardlaw
President and Professor of Homiletics

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Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary wishes you a Joyous Christmas!

Professor Wall at the organ in Shelton Chapel

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