

Carols
AND
Lessons

DECEMBER 1

Read: Isaiah 7:3-17; Matthew 1:20-23

O Come, O Come, Immanuel

They shall call his name Immanuel (which means, God with us). (Matt. 1:23)

One of the most familiar and best-loved of all Advent hymns is the haunting “O Come, O Come Immanuel,” sung to a tune based on the Gregorian chant of the ancient church. The text goes back to an 8th-century antiphon, a “call and response” hymn that was used by choirs of monks and nuns during Advent. Each verse begins with an invitation to Jesus to come and save his people. Each one also addresses Jesus using a different name or image for him drawn from the Old Testament, some of which include *Immanuel* (Isa. 7:14), *Adonai* (“Lord,” used in Exod. 19:16 in connection with the giving of the law at Mt. Sinai), *Branch of Jesse* (Isa. 11:1), *Key of David* (Isa. 22:22), and *Bright Morning Star* (Num. 24:17).

Each of these images speaks in one way or another of the various promises of God to come to the aid of his people, bringing salvation and blessing—promises, as the apostle reminds us, that all find their “Yes” in Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 1:20). God’s Old Testament people looked for a coming king, as so many of the prophetic titles were bound up with the promised Messiah from the royal line of David. Christians sing these titles with longing for our King to return for our final deliverance, but with one big difference. Because he’s already come once, we also know his name—Jesus. And we know he is Immanuel, “God with us,” always; we have his word on that. —David Bast

As you pray, thank Jesus for being with you.

I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day

I wait for the Lord . . . and in his word I hope. (v. 5)

I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day” is a poem written by one of the most popular poets in 19th-century America, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. The first line tells us the circumstances of the poem’s composition, but the key to its message lies in the year it was written—1864. On the Christmas day when Longfellow heard the church bells in Boston “their old familiar carols play,” the American Civil War was in its fourth year, and Longfellow felt the ironic contrast between the Christmas message of “peace on earth, goodwill to men” and the horrors of that fratricidal conflict. But as he listened to the bells, suddenly the Christmas gospel felt stronger to Longfellow than the hatred and killing of the battlefields. *Then pealed the bells more loud and deep: / “God is not dead, nor doth he sleep; / The wrong shall fail, the right prevail, / With peace on earth, goodwill to men.”*

One of the hardest lessons Advent has to teach us is that we need to wait—to wait for the Lord to make good on his promises. We wait with longing; as the psalmist says, we look for the Lord’s coming the way night watchmen look for the morning. We wait by not giving in to despair at the brokenness of the world or of our own lives. We wait even when it seems like we’re making little progress toward the prophesied shalom of God’s kingdom. With the psalmist, we wait in hope, because we believe God’s word is true, and trustworthy. —David Bast

As you pray, ask God to help you wait in hope.

Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming

There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse. (v. 1)

This lovely German carol dates from the 14th century. The biblical verse on which it was based is Isaiah 11:1. The Rose of whom we sing is a flower on the “shoot from the stump of Jesse,” which is a symbol of the promised Messiah whose coming Isaiah foretold.

Lo, how a Rose e'er blooming / From tender stem hath sprung! / Of Jesse's lineage coming / As men of old have sung. This was a favorite biblical image in the Middle Ages, depicted not just musically but visually. Some medieval cathedrals have stained glass windows that feature the “Jesse Tree.” It shows a sleeping figure—Jesse, King David's father—from whose side a stalk grows upward, sprouting kings along the way and climaxing in the figure of Jesus enthroned at the top.

A tree stump is dead, or at least it seems to be. When Judah's last king was taken away into exile in Babylon, it looked like the house of David, the line of Jesse, was dead as well. But ours is a God who can bring life out of death, like a green shoot from a dry stump. He did it once when he sent Jesus into the world as the true Son of David, the King whose reign shall have no end. He did it again when he raised Jesus from the grave and exalted him in glory. He will do it finally when Jesus comes again to raise us from death in order to share in his reign. —David Bast

As you pray, thank God, the giver of life, for giving you life and hope.

DECEMBER 4

Read: Matthew 1:1-17

Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus

So all the generations . . . were fourteen generations. (v. 17)

Charles Wesley, measured by both quantity and quality, was the greatest hymn-writer in church history. He wrote something like 6,000 hymns (estimates vary). Of all those thousands, ten or twelve are still commonly sung today, including “Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus.”

Jesus really was “long-expected.” Think about how long the people of Israel had to wait for their Messiah. Matthew says that there were fourteen generations from Abraham to David, fourteen more from David to the deportation to Babylon, and a final fourteen between the exile and Jesus. (And he condensed the list some, especially in the first part.)

Even one generation is a long time to wait. But then imagine having to wait fourteen generations, and not just fourteen, but three times fourteen! Like ancient Israel, the church has been waiting too, and for about the same length of time. We’re waiting for our long-expected Messiah to return and complete his great work of salvation.

Perhaps you are also waiting today for some personal “coming”—better health, maybe, or greater happiness; for a spouse to return to a marriage, or a child to return to the faith. You’ve been praying for it, and long-expecting God to answer. Whatever it is you are waiting for, wait with the assurance that God is working out all things in his time. —David Bast

As you pray, thank God for the assurance that he is coming, and ask God to guide you as you wait.

Joy to the World

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth. (v. 4)

Joy to the World” has been a popular carol, right from when it was written. One reason is that its author was the best-known hymnwriter of the time (and one of the greatest of all time), Isaac Watts. Another is that it’s not really a Christmas carol, though we have pigeon-holed it that way. It’s a psalm paraphrase, and Watts wrote dozens of them, publishing them in a hymnal in 1719.

The psalm in this case is Psalm 98, which opens with a call to “sing to the Lord a new song” because of the marvelous and powerful things he has done in salvation. The psalmist goes on to invite the world of creation to join with the people of God in offering praise. “Let the sea roar . . . Let the rivers clap their hands . . . Let the hills sing for joy together” (vv. 7-8). All of these show up in stanza 2 of “Joy to the World,” as the “fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains, repeat the sounding joy.” But in the third stanza Watts takes a detour from Psalm 98 and looks back at Genesis 3: *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.*

Remember how even the ground was cursed because of Adam and Eve’s disobedience? Well, Jesus comes to undo all the consequences of sin, including the consequences in nature itself. Joy to the world, indeed! —David Bast

As you pray, praise God for the wonders of his love.

DECEMBER 6

Read: John 3:13-16

Of the Father's Love Begotten

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son. (v. 16)

Of the Father's Love Begotten" is the best-known hymn of Aurelius Clemens Prudentius, a Roman government official born in northern Spain in AD 348. By his mid-forties Prudentius grew tired of the hustle and false glamor of the world, and retired to a humble life devoted to the writing of Christian poetry. This hymn tells the story of the incarnation of the Son of God, who *was of the Father's love begotten / ere the worlds began to be.*

In the New Testament, a mystery is a deep truth that we cannot fully understand, that we could never discover on our own, but that God has made known to us in Christ. The mystery of the Holy Trinity is that God has eternally existed in a community of love comprising three divine persons. The mystery of the incarnation is that the second of those persons became a real flesh-and-blood human being without ceasing to be God.

His coming is the measure of God's love—that's the point of the Bible's most famous verse. Love isn't measured by words but by actions, not by what you say but by what you are willing to do for the sake of the beloved. John 3:16 doesn't just say that God loves us; it says he loves us so much that he gave his one and only Son to save us. All we need to do is believe in him. —David Bast

As you pray, thank God for the gift of Jesus and give your heart to him.

DECEMBER 7

Read: Genesis 3:22-24

Jesus Christ the Apple Tree

Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good! (Ps. 34:8)

You have made us for yourself,” prayed St. Augustine famously, “and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” This truth is expressed with incomparable beauty in the carol “Jesus Christ the Apple Tree.”

This folk hymn compares Jesus to the tree of life from the Garden of Eden. *The tree of life my soul hath seen, / Laden with fruit, and always green, / The trees of nature fruitless be / Compar'd with Christ the appletree.*

When Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit—traditionally, an apple—God pronounced a curse upon them. Their lives would be painful and hard, and they would die and return to the dust. Then God banished them from the garden, posting an angel at the entrance to prevent them from returning and eating from the tree of life. This seems cruel but was actually merciful. If humankind found a way to live forever in its fallen state, that wouldn't be heaven; it would be hell. God had a different plan. He would provide another apple tree, Jesus, who would redeem the lost race and be the source of eternal life.

The children of Adam and Eve still wander the world, looking for whatever can satisfy their hunger for life and longing for happiness. How wonderful to learn that Jesus can, and does. *For happiness I long have sought, / And pleasure I have dearly bought; / I missed of all but now I see / 'Tis found in Christ the apple tree.* —David Bast

As you pray, rest in God today.

DECEMBER 8

Read: Mark 1:1-8; John 1:6-8

On Jordan's Banks

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. (Matt. 3:2)

In one way or another, each of the four Gospels starts with John, that austere wilderness preacher of repentance. Matthew and Mark bring him onstage just before the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. Luke tells about the announcement of John's birth before the more famous annunciation by Gabriel to Mary, and the fourth Gospel mentions John in its prologue. We know him as John the Baptist, which makes him sound like a fundamentalist preacher (and he was!). But the ancient church called him John the *Prodromos*: the Forerunner.

John dressed funny, ate weird food, worked in the boonies, and said a lot of harsh things. But all of this served a purpose. John was a one-man messianic advance team, looking and living like Elijah, meeting the people in the wilderness like Moses, speaking words from Isaiah. In fact, when the Jerusalem authorities sent representatives to investigate him, John told them he wasn't even a prophet, let alone the Messiah. He was just a voice, crying, "Prepare the way!" Get ready; God is coming!

How do you prepare the way for God to come to you? By doing what John urged: repenting. An 18th-century Frenchman named Charles Coffin wrote the Advent hymn "On Jordan's Banks." Its message is simple. If we want to get ready for the Lord's coming, do what John the Baptist says: *Then cleansed be every life from sin: / make straight the way for God within, / and let us all our hearts prepare / for Christ to come and enter there.* —David Bast

As you pray, ask God to help you turn from sin and back to him.

Read: Philippians 2:5-11

In the Bleak Midwinter

He made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant. (v. 7 NIV)

Have you ever seen a painting of the manger scene by one of the Renaissance masters? The setting is clearly European, with Italian ruins or snow-covered German villages in the background. The poet Christina Rossetti does something similar, setting the Christmas story in her native England “in the bleak midwinter,” when “*frosty wind made moan, / earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone; / snow had fallen, snow on snow, snow on snow.*”

Of course, we don't actually know when Jesus was born, not even the exact year let alone the season. And it is highly unlikely that the ground around Bethlehem was frozen solid and buried in snowdrifts on the first Christmas. But this much is true: God did enter our world in the dead of winter, symbolically speaking, when our prospects were bleak and hope seemed frozen.

What a comedown it was for him! In two lines Rossetti paints the contrast between the glory of the Son of God and the lowliness of the baby Jesus: *In the bleak midwinter a stable place sufficed / the Lord God Almighty, Jesus Christ.*

Such condescension, such voluntary self-humbling by God, makes an impossible demand: what could we ever give in response? Rossetti's answer is to give him my heart, which really means myself—all of me. —David Bast

As you pray, give God your heart.

DECEMBER 10

Read: Ephesians 3:14-21

O Little Town of Bethlehem

That Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. (v. 17)

There is a beautiful story behind this popular carol. Phillips Brooks was one of the most famous preachers in 19th-century America. He was pastor of Trinity Church in Boston for many years and later became the Episcopal bishop of Massachusetts. While Brooks was touring the Holy Land in 1865, he visited Bethlehem on Christmas Eve and stood in the shepherds' field that overlooked the town, where local tradition said the shepherds were "keeping watch over their flocks" on the night Jesus was born. Three years later Brooks recalled that scene in a simple carol he wrote for his Sunday school's Christmas service. Neither Phillips Brooks nor his church organist, Lewis Redner, who wrote the tune, thought that "O Little Town of Bethlehem" would ever be sung again after that service. But today it is known and loved throughout the world.

The carol breathes a spirit of peace and draws us into the stillness of that Christmas Eve scene. We're standing in the shepherds' field with Phillips Brooks, watching Bethlehem under the stars. With him we pray for the "wondrous gift" to be given to us too—that "Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith." It doesn't necessarily happen dramatically. "How silently, how silently" our receiving Christ by faith can be, as Brooks exclaims. But it's real nevertheless. *No ear may hear his coming, / but in this world of sin, / where meek souls will receive him, still / the dear Christ enters in.* —David Bast

As you pray, silently receive the gift of Jesus.

Once in Royal David's City

And . . . among the elders I saw a Lamb. (v. 6)

On Christmas Eve 1918, a service was held in the chapel of King's College in the University of Cambridge. The bloodbath of World War I had ended barely a month before, and many a Cambridge man lay buried in Flanders fields. It was a somber Advent season. The college chaplain wanted to celebrate Christmas with a special new service, so he selected a series of Scripture readings to retell the story of God's saving purposes. The readings began in Genesis with the story of the fall, and climaxed with John 1: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (v. 14).

The King's College service of Lessons and Carols has become the world's most widely broadcast Christmas celebration. The lessons remain the same; the carols that illustrate them mostly change each year. But the service always opens with a boy soprano from the choir singing the first verse of the processional hymn, "Once in Royal David's City": *Once in royal David's city / stood a lowly cattle shed, / where a mother laid her baby / in a manger for his bed.*

Then, verse by verse, the hymn builds, first with the choir joining, then adding organ, and finally the whole congregation singing the final stanza—*Not in that poor lowly stable, / With the oxen standing by, / we shall see him, but in heaven, / set at God's right hand on high.*

Jesus is no longer in the stable. One day everyone will see that. —David Bast

As you pray, praise God for his glory.

DECEMBER 12

Read: Luke 1:5-25; Psalm 103:20-22

Angels, from the Realms of Glory

I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent . . . to bring you this good news. (Luke 1:19)

Angels don't mess around. The angel Gabriel was sent to Zechariah to announce the impending birth of his son, John the Baptist, who was to become the Messiah's forerunner. So Gabriel went, and did as he was told. That is one thing (there are obvious others) that makes angels different from us. Angels are defined not just by their glory and strength, but by their prompt obedience to God's commands (Ps. 103:20). No wonder then that Gabriel became a bit testy when old Zechariah seemed to doubt the possibility of God's commands being carried out.

Two hundred years ago an English hymn writer and newspaper editor named James Montgomery gave God's angels another command when he wrote this: *Angels from the realms of glory, / wing your flight o'er all the earth; / ye who sang creation's story / now proclaim Messiah's birth.*

Obviously, Montgomery wasn't really trying to order any angels around. This is a poetic way of retelling the Christmas story. In subsequent verses this carol calls on shepherds, sages (wise men), and saints to join in the joyous refrain: *Come and worship, come and worship, / worship Christ, the newborn king.*

Christ isn't just the newborn king of the Jews; he is the newborn King, period. Every creature, both human and angelic, should come and worship him. And one day, we hope, they will.
—David Bast

As you pray, worship God with the angels.

DECEMBER 13

Read: Luke 1:68-79

The First Noel

To give light to those who sit in darkness. (v. 79)

The French word for Christmas is noel; a noel is also a Christmas carol. The first one, as we well know, was sung “to certain poor shepherds, in fields as they lay.” Its text was the “Gloria in Excelsis”; “Glory to God in the highest,” sang the angels to the shepherds, “and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!” (Luke 2:14). The first noel was a short song, but it pretty well summed up the Christmas message. “The First Noel,” on the other hand, is quite long. This anonymous English carol combines the story of the shepherds (from Luke 2) with that of the magi (Matt. 2). If you have the stamina, singing all of them will get you through the whole Christmas story.

The carol connects the shepherds to the wise men via the star of Bethlehem. Stanza 2 imagines the shepherds looking up to see a star in the east. Then in stanza 3, “by the light of that same star,” the wise men come traveling toward Bethlehem, and we follow them as they followed the star all the way to the place where the child lay, where we watch them come reverently in and open their gifts to him.

In the last stanza we’re all invited into the light to worship our Lord, worship that echoes Zechariah’s song in today’s reading: *Then let us all with one accord / sing praises to our heavenly Lord; / that hath made heaven and earth of naught, / and with his blood mankind hath bought.* —David Bast

As you pray, ask God to accept your praises today.

DECEMBER 14

Read: Luke 2:1-14

Angels We Have Heard on High

Glory to God in the highest . . . ! (v. 14)

Not surprisingly, angels figure prominently in a lot of Christmas carols. “Angels We Have Heard on High” is another one. This traditional French carol and tune has us once more reliving in song the familiar story of Luke 2, this time from the perspective of the shepherds. *Angels we have heard on high, / sweetly singing o’er the plain / and the mountains in reply, / echoing their joyous strains.*

This Christmas favorite is also one of the very few times that Protestants enthusiastically sing in Latin, as we belt out the carol’s refrain, *Gloria in excelsis Deo!*

That refrain, of course, is the angels’ praise song—“Glory to God in the highest!” In singing this we seem to be playing the part of the mountains, “echoing their joyous strains.” Maybe this is what the psalmist meant when he said, “Let the rivers clap their hands; let the hills sing for joy together before the LORD, for he comes” (Ps. 98:8-9).

The carol’s final stanza invites us to join the shepherds in Bethlehem’s stable: *Come to Bethlehem and see / him whose birth the angels sing; / come, adore on bended knee / Christ the Lord, the new-born King.*

We have even better reason to come and adore than they did. True, the shepherds actually saw and heard the angels. But we know the whole story—not only that he came, but why; not only that he would save, but how. —David Bast

As you pray, join with all creation in praising God for coming to us in Jesus.

DECEMBER 15

Read: Romans 8:18-25, 28-30

Away in a Manger

Predestined to be conformed to the image
of his Son. (v. 29)

No one really knows who wrote this carol, which began appearing in American hymnals in the late 1800s. It's sometimes attributed to Martin Luther, perhaps because Luther loved Christmas and he loved children, and he wrote a lot of good songs.

One of the problems with Christmas is that it can easily become too sentimental. Indeed, our secular culture has made a sort of mush out of the season. But this can even happen when we focus on the real Christmas story. We sing about peace, and the warmth of the stable, and the animals there with Joseph and Mary, and—“Why, the baby doesn't even cry.” I'm pretty sure baby Jesus did cry when he woke up, cold and hungry and lying in a cattle trough, just as I'm sure that Mary felt the pains of childbirth and groaned literally, as Paul says our fallen creation does metaphorically.

But even in a sentimental carol like “Away in a Manger” we are reminded of the very unsentimental work Jesus has come to do: *Bless all the dear children in your tender care, / Prepare us for heaven, to live with you there.*

Jesus came to make us like himself. His redemptive project is also transformative. We will be transformed until we are conformed to his image, and the creation will be transformed until all traces of evil have been wiped away. Then we will be fit for heaven, and heaven will be fit for us. —David Bast

As you pray, ask Jesus to bless you, and all the dear children in his tender care.

DECEMBER 16

Read: Mark 4:35-41

What Child Is This?

And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?” (v. 41)

One of the most beautiful old English tunes is “Greensleeves,” which dates at least to the Middle Ages and was mentioned by Shakespeare. In the 19th century another of those prolific Anglican hymn writers named William C. Dix wrote the lovely words of “What Child Is This?” to fit this tune.

It’s a good question: what child is this? As we see with faith’s eye the baby with Mary his mother watching over him in the stable, and realize that at the same time this helpless infant is the eternal Word of God through whom all things were made, we should be filled with wonder. It reminds us of the question his disciples would later ask, after they saw him silence a stormy lake with a single word of command. “What manner of man is this . . . ?” (Mark 4:41 KJV). And just as the disciples were awestruck and frightened when they caught a glimpse of Jesus’ true nature, so Dix urges us to a kind of reverential fear at the sight of God lying in a feed box. *Why lies He in such mean estate, / Where ox and ass are feeding? / Good Christian, fear: for sinners here / The silent Word is pleading.*

But we need to do more than wonder at the mystery of God made man. We need to respond to him appropriately. *So bring Him incense, gold, and myrrh, / Come, peasant, king to own Him. / The King of kings salvation brings; / Let loving hearts enthrone Him.* —David Bast

As you pray, offer Jesus your heart as his throne, today and every day.

DECEMBER 17

Read: Isaiah 6:1-6

Let All Mortal Flesh

Let all God's angels worship him. (Heb. 1:6)

With this Christmas hymn we are brought into the worship of the ancient church. “Let All Mortal Flesh” was originally written in Greek and is found in the Liturgy of St. James, which may go all the way back to the early church in Jerusalem. It certainly breathes awe and a sense of mystery into our worship. *Let all mortal flesh keep silence, / And with fear and trembling stand; / Set your minds on things eternal / For with blessing in his hand, / Christ our God to earth descended, / Come our homage to demand.*

The Nicene Creed speaks of the Son as “God from God, Light from Light.” So does this hymn, with the added thought that all the angels of heaven rise to honor and accompany him—clearing his path, so to speak—as Christ descends to earth to take on human flesh in order to defeat the powers of darkness. *Rank on rank the host of heaven / Stream before him on the way.*

In Isaiah's vision the angels surround God with praise: “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts” (v. 3). “Let All Mortal Flesh” echoes that scene, but the cherubim and seraphim sing their praise to the incarnate Son. *At His feet the six wingèd seraph; / Cherubim, with sleepless eye, / Veil their faces to his presence, / As with ceaseless voice they cry: / Alleluia, Alleluia / Alleluia, Lord Most High! —David Bast*

As you pray, worship Jesus, the Son of God.

DECEMBER 18

Read: Matthew 2:1-12

We Three Kings

And they fell down and worshiped him. (v. 11)

The first line of this familiar carol makes three claims about the magi, and of the three only one is certainly true: they were from the Orient. This doesn't mean they came from China or Japan; the Latin word *oriens* is literally "the place of the sun's rising," meaning coming from the east. But Matthew doesn't say how many of them there were, and they definitely weren't kings—magi were scholars who were a cross between astronomers and astrologers, and were especially numerous in Babylon and Persia.

The magi understood the heavens, so the Lord spoke to them in their own idiom and led them by a star. At Words of Hope, we have seen the way that God still reaches people in all sorts of places and in ways that we wouldn't expect him to use. He'll spark an interest in Jesus through a conversation or a dream, and then he'll lead them to his Word, the way he led the magi to the Bible scholars in Jerusalem, so they can meet God and come to know him personally.

The magi were gentiles. Jesus was born, as they themselves said, the king of the Jews. But his kingship was not intended just for one people. The blessings of his reign—peace and joy and hope—are meant for everyone. Jesus is the light of the whole world, and the magi were a preview of the nations who have come, and who continue to come, to worship Christ the Lord. —David Bast

As you pray, ask God to bring all nations to worship him.

DECEMBER 19

Read: Isaiah 40:9-11

Go, Tell It on the Mountain

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation. (Isa. 52:7)

Go, Tell It on the Mountain” was first printed in a collection of spirituals published in 1907 by John Wesley Work, a professor at Tufts University, and was popularized through performances by the Tufts Jubilee Singers. The spiritual picks up on references in Isaiah to preaching the good news of God’s message from the mountaintops.

Why does Isaiah say that those who proclaim the gospel have beautiful feet? I don’t think he’s talking about physical beauty. It’s not as though these preachers have just had pedicures. Their feet may be dusty and calloused, but they’re beautiful because of what they have undertaken in spreading God’s gospel of salvation. Why are these feet especially beautiful when they are walking on the mountains? Maybe it’s because mountains are difficult to climb and cross, but the preachers have done so because they want to reach those who haven’t yet heard the good news. That kind of sacrifice is beautiful to God.

Words of Hope exists to go “tell it” on any number of mountains—and valleys, deserts, cities, towns, and villages. We believe that it’s not enough just to celebrate Christmas for ourselves. Every believer, from every nation—even you!—is called by God to preach the Christmas gospel to the world. Go tell it! —David Bast

As you pray, ask God to help you share the gospel as he leads you.

Read: 1 Corinthians 15:51-57

Good Christian Friends, Rejoice

○ death, where is your victory? ○ death,
where is your sting? (v. 55)

Here is a joyful invitation to celebrate the good news of the Christmas gospel. “Good Christian Friends, Rejoice” is another of the many hymns we owe to the linguistic and poetic gifts of John Mason Neale, a scholarly Anglican minister of the 19th century who translated numerous ancient hymns from Latin and German. In this instance, he translated “Good Christian Friends, Rejoice” from both Latin and German, because each line had a phrase written in each language. Originally titled “In Dulci Jubilo,” this medieval carol was used to teach the peasants (who could follow the German parts) what the priests (who chanted the Latin parts) were telling them on Christmas.

One 14th-century writer said that the angels sang “In Dulci Jubilo” while they danced on Christmas. I like the idea; it’s a rollicking tune. The climax of the carol comes in the last stanza, when we sing about why Christmas can help us dance even in the face of death. *Good Christian friends, rejoice / with heart and soul and voice; / now ye need not fear the grave: / Jesus Christ was born to save! / Calls you one and calls you all, / To gain his everlasting hall. / Christ was born to save, / Christ was born to save!*

Now that Jesus has come, death is a general whose army has been defeated. It’s a scorpion that has lost its stinger. It’s still ugly and mean, but it can’t keep us from him. —David Bast

As you pray, thank God and rejoice in Jesus, who gives you the victory.

DECEMBER 21

Read: Philippians 4:4-7

God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen

The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious
about anything. (vv. 5-6)

To understand the message of this jaunty old English carol, the most important thing to do is to observe the comma in the title. It's not "God rest you, *merry gentlemen*." It's "God rest you *merry*, gentlemen." The gentlemen—and gentle ladies are included, this being 18th-century English—are not merry, as if they've had a little too much Christmas cheer. Nor is God being asked to make them rest, as if they've all been dancing too hard. The blessing that the carol asks is, "(May) God rest (make) you merry (happy), gentle people all."

Why should we be joyful, no matter what our circumstances? Because Christmas reminds us of the Good News, "tidings of comfort and joy." We have been given a Savior, and he changes everything. The apostle wrote a wonderfully ambiguous phrase to the Christians in Philippi: "The Lord is at hand." The Lord is at hand, meaning he is about to return? Or the Lord is at hand, meaning he is close by us? The answer is, both. That's why we can "rejoice in the Lord," why we need not be anxious about anything. Cares may come and go, but happiness will be forever, because Jesus has come once and is coming again someday soon. Meanwhile, because he is close to us now through his Spirit, we can know joy, and even happiness, despite our sorrows.

Someone once asked an old preacher if Jesus ever laughed. "I don't know," he replied, "but he sure fixed me so I could." —
David Bast

As you pray, thank God for tidings of comfort and joy.

DECEMBER 22

Read: Titus 2:11-15

O Come, All Ye Faithful

... the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ. (v. 13)

This Christmas hymn was originally written in Latin (*Adeste Fideles*) by an English musician named John F. Wade, who was living in France because of his Roman Catholic faith. It was translated into English by an Anglican priest, Frederick Oakeley, who was forced to leave Oxford because of his Roman Catholic sympathies, and who eventually was ordained as a Catholic priest. And it's been sung ever since at every Christmas by just about every Protestant in the world. Go figure.

Have you ever sung a creed? You have, if you've sung the original second stanza of "O Come, All Ye Faithful": *God of God, Light of Light eternal, / lo, he abhors not the virgin's womb; / Son of the Father, begotten, not created; / O come, let us adore Him, Christ, the Lord.* Those phrases are from the Nicene Creed, which was adopted by a universal council of the church in AD 325. The whole Christian church was in turmoil then because of a heresy called Arianism, which claimed that Jesus was a created being and less than God. One of their slogans went, "There was a time when the Son was not." "Not so!" said the orthodox. The Son is the same as the Father in divine nature, and he is equally eternal. In the words of the Creed, he is "God of God, Light of Light, True God of True God, of one being with the Father . . . begotten, not created."

If we are faithful Christians, we're still singing that tune today. —David Bast

As you pray, praise Jesus, God of God and Light of Light.

The Holly and the Ivy

And a sword will pierce through your own soul also. (v. 35)

When Joseph and Mary brought Jesus into the temple to fulfill the requirements of the Law, old Simeon was waiting for them. Spirit-directed and Spirit-inspired, Simeon prophesied over the infant. But it was a mixed and somber message. Simeon expressed joy for the dawning of the light of Israel's (and the world's) hope, but he also foresaw trouble ahead. The child would bring salvation, to be sure; he would also provoke division. And Mary herself would experience piercing pain and sorrow in connection with her son's mission.

Those who celebrate Christmas with the whole Bible in mind can't help but think about where the story is headed. There's plenty of rejoicing today, but suffering is just on the horizon. Nothing captures that aspect of Christmas better than the traditional English carol "The Holly and the Ivy."

The Holly bears a berry, / As red as any blood; . . .

The Holly bears a prickle, / As sharp as any thorn; . . .

The Holly bears a bark, / As bitter as any gall; . . .

The carol's refrain paints a medieval Christmas scene—chasing deer at sunrise, and organ music and sweet singing in church. But the verses point to the holly's red berries, sharp prickles, and bitter bark; in other words, blood, thorns, and gall—the cross, and the cost of our salvation. —David Bast

As you pray, thank Jesus for coming to pay the price for your redemption.

DECEMBER 24

Read: 1 Timothy 3:14-16

Silent Night

Great . . . we confess, is the mystery of godliness. (v. 16)

Of all the Christmas carols ever written, this is one of the best-loved. In the Austrian village of Oberndorf, the assistant priest, Joseph Mohr, had written a beautiful little carol for the Christmas Eve service in 1818. In it, he envisioned the scene in the stable: the virgin mother watching her new-born child, in an aura of holiness. The church organist, Franz Gruber, wrote a tune to go with the text. But the organ in the church was broken, so at that Christmas Eve service when they sang the song together for the first time, Mohr and Gruber accompanied it with guitar. The congregation joined in by repeating the last line:

. . . *Sleep in heavenly peace.*
. . . *Christ the Savior is born!*
. . . *Jesus, Lord at thy birth!*
. . . *Christ the Savior is born.*

“Great . . . is the mystery,” exclaimed the apostle Paul in his first letter to Timothy. He goes on to quote a creedal statement from the early church that outlines the basics of Christ’s career, beginning with incarnation and ending in exaltation. “Great, we confess, is the mystery of our faith,” says the church in its communion liturgy. “Mystery,” as in, “Who can begin to grasp the wonder of this thing that God has done?”

The eternal Creator of the universe came to earth as a baby in order to save us by living a perfect life on our behalf and dying a sacrificial death for our sins. When words fail us, worship in silence. —David Bast

As you pray, contemplate the mystery on this silent, holy night.

DECEMBER 25

Read: John 1:1-14

Hark the Herald Angels Sing

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. (v. 14)

We have Charles Wesley to thank for one of our greatest Christmas carols. The song begins with and returns to the song of the angels, pointing us to the great joy Christ brings. But if you listen closely to the words and think about them while you sing, you will find yourself jumping around in the Bible, from Luke 2 to Galatians 4 to Matthew 1 to John 1 to Malachi 4 to Philippians 2, and then back to Luke 2:14 with the refrain after every stanza.

These passages are a mixture of exclamation, exhortation, and theological reflection. The song's strength does not lie so much in any orderly sequence of thought but in its use of Scripture to teach us. That teaching produces a childlike response of faith; as you sing it out, you too can exclaim "glory to the newborn King!"

My favorite part of this, my favorite Christmas carol, comes in stanza 2, where we sing out the truth of the Incarnation—*Veiled in flesh the Godhead see; / hail the incarnate deity, / pleased as man with us to dwell, / Jesus, our Immanuel.* If anyone ever asks you about the real meaning of Christmas, point them this way. God was pleased to dwell with us as a man; because of that, Jesus truly is "God with us"—now and forever. —David Bast

As you pray, worship Jesus, Immanuel.