



# Heaven AND Nature Sing

Advent Devotional 2025

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Dear Friends,

I recently watched a discussion on what faith was. One of the speakers said that faith was learning to live in 'hopeful expectation'. It's a phrase I keep turning over in my brain. Sure, we all have expectations for our families, for our personal lives, for our holiday experiences.

The tenacious planners among us look for ways to will those expectations into reality. And the hardened cynics will expect things to unravel again, as they always seem to do. Expectations come in both positive and negative wrappers.

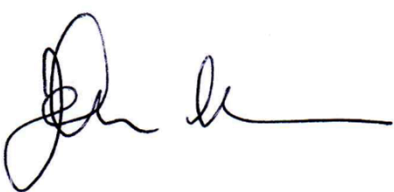
But when we wrap our expectations in hope, or clothe our hope in expectation, we put flesh on anticipation. We don't just expect an event will transpire. We expect it will occur with a measure of beauty, even wonder. This is the heartbeat of Advent. Christ is coming.

It's been said that music taps the unconscious recesses of the human soul. So maybe the way we choose to listen to our Christmas music can tip the scale from a backwards looking nostalgia, to a forward-looking hope-laced expectation.

This devotional is my meanderings as I ponder some of the carols that we sing in the season. So often we sing them because the meeting leader has chosen them. Some will be favourites, others not so much, but because it is the season to be jolly, we keep singing knowing that they will be put away for another year soon enough.

My prayer is that as you choose to engage each day with a different carol, my thoughts will create a space for you to engage with Jesus, encounter Jesus and get excited by His presence in your life. It is also my prayer that something old can become something new as you reconnect with the carols and learn to join with heaven and nature to sing praises unto God.

Blessings,



Major John Mclean



# Dec 1      O Come, O come Immanuel

## Read

*'Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with Child and will give birth to a son, and you will call him Immanuel.'* (Is. 7:14)

## Reflect

There are some hymns and carols that flavour your senses. What I mean is that the words, the tune and the whole meaning are a package that affects every aspect of who we are. As a teenager I discovered this carol and ever since it has become a favourite. I can't explain why, although I find my hope levels rising as I anticipate the coming King. Maybe it is the flowing tune, the longing wording and the hope that in the coming of this child is the fulfilment of the deepest longing and waiting. As a teen when we were at 'churches together' events or school assembly, during the singing I liked to think it was about setting the us free from all the studies and the Scottish dancing we all had to learn each Christmas.

From the above verse in Matthew, we understand the meaning to the name 'Immanuel' is 'God is with us' and that is just who Jesus came to the earth to be – God living in and amongst His people. This carol has its origins in the 8th or 9th century as a monastic 'O antiphon' or chant in Latin. But in 1851 John Mason Neale translated it into English. The tune has its origins in 15th century France, but in 1851 the tune adapted by Thomas Helmore was paired with the words and published in an early hymnal for the Episcopal Church. There were originally seven verses but through revisions the five verses remain in our current Salvation Army songbook.

Sometimes it is easy to dismiss the older carols, especially if they are not part of our noisy carolling programme or we do not feel that they relate to life today – both in style and music. Maybe through these devotions and through gaining further understanding to the deeper story and meaning, some of the carols we sing may be seen in a different light and become new again. No matter the century we live in, we are always in need of a Saviour who was sent to earth by a loving God. We wait expectantly for Jesus' coming at Christmas and the return and we know that in Jesus is the victory and in that we rejoice!

## Reflect

O come to my heart, Lord Jesus,  
there is room in my heart for you.



# Dec 2

# The First Noel

## Read

*‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.’ (Luke 2:14)*

## Reflect

The story of the birth of Jesus is not something new. Neither are the carols played in the shopping centres something of modern times. But this carol ‘The First Noel’ was thought to have begun in the theatre as one of the songs in the ‘Miracle Plays’ from Cornwall, England. These plays originated in the Pre-Renaissance period. It was so popular that it is said people continued singing this carol on the streets outside churches and then it took on a life of its own, bringing the joy and hope of Christmas to all hearing the words.

And by the light of that same star  
three Wise Men came from country far;  
to seek for a king was their intent,  
and to follow the star wherever it went.

Coming from the country in Scotland there is something beautiful about looking at the stars at night, especially when lying in a field in the winter. The stars don’t have to compete with lots of city lights. On some nights, when I was younger, I’d take a minute to stare at the stars. I’m not overly educated in understanding constellations, but the view was certainly beautiful.

The Wise Men, however, weren’t recreational stargazers. They weren’t looking for shapes; they were looking for a sign. For them, the night sky was loaded with clues to help them unlock the mysteries of life. The Wise Men were tracking a rare astronomical event, possibly a conjunction of planets, with critical implications. So, they picked and packed specific gifts and began a 700-mile journey. It would have taken weeks, if not months.

They ‘followed the star wherever it went.’ This is still the essence of a vibrant spiritual journey. Faith is dynamic, not static. I don’t make a decision to follow Christ, I need to make thousands of decisions to ensure my spiritual trajectory still points towards Jesus.

## Reflect

Jesus so often I lose my way on my journey of faith. Help me to follow one step at a time.



# Dec 3 Go, tell it on the mountain!

## Read

*'Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...'* (Matthew 28:19)

## Reflect

When we got married, we realised we had too many nativity sets in our home. There's the family heirloom passed through the generations, there's the carved wood version that has space for a candle to light it up, there is the white pottery version and the child-like characters that happens to be my favourite!

Lydia and I discuss and debate exactly how each figure should be placed. We're looking at spacing, they can't be too bunched up, story lines, the Magi clearly belong in their own grouping, and the angel needs to be placed where it stands out.

If you want it to look nice, the staging matters. But the divine staging and plan of the first Christmas is different. It's in the lowly manger that the humble Christ is born. The lowly manger isn't ornate, and it doesn't have clean lines. It's rough and messy. The hay is damp with donkey drool, and the edges are clearly splinter hazards.

The stable is not a snowcapped, rustic barn from a country music Christmas album cover. There are no strings of Christmas bulbs like there were at the barn for your cousin's wedding. Some historians claim the manger was in the back of cave adjacent to the Bethlehem Inn.

God cares less about how this picture looks on a postcard and more about what it means to the shepherds who came. Christmas isn't about beauty, though it is beautiful. It's about proximity.

Why does the manger matter? Because it says Christ meets us where we are. Christ embraces humility because we need a Saviour who knows where we live, who refuses to put on airs, who comes with everything to give and nothing to prove. This is a message worth broadcasting, a missive to shout with a megaphone: 'Christ is born close to us!'

## Reflect

Jesus, I thank you that you meet me where I am. My experience allows me to share with those struggling that you are in the darkness bringing light.



# Dec 4 Ding Dong, merrily on high!

## Read

*'Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly... as you sing psalms, hymns and songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.'* (Col 3:16)

## Reflect

There are some songs that fill your head and heart with happy memories. I remember when I was at school and decided it would be good to sing in the school choir for the Christmas carol concert. This Christmas carol is one I remember being a favourite because it was fun to sing, lending itself to be sung in parts, in quick time and just so joyful. It was also fun to be able to sing words like 'Ding Dong' - I was a thirteen-year-old teenager! Thinking about it even now, all these years later I remember the fun and joy in my heart each time we sang it.

I think that is the sort of deep joy that Paul is talking about in his letter to the Christians in Colossae. A joy that wells up inside and just needs to come out. It is a joy that God plants in our hearts for us to praise God. It is the same sort of overwhelming joy that comes with seeing or having a new child. When you look at that child you cannot but marvel at this beautiful creation who is a gift from God. The angels sang with such joy to herald in the birth of God's Son and as the first chorus in the carol says: 'In heav'n the bells are ringing...', as the carol is sung, I can picture this!

This carol wasn't originally written as a Christmas carol; it was a secular dance tune written in the 1500s. The Christian words were only written to this tune in 1924 by George Ratcliffe Woodward who had a real interest in bell ringing, which shows in the lyrics. Even though the lyrics don't specifically speak of Christmas, the fact that the bells in heaven are ringing and the angels are singing and the 'Gloria' refrain - well, it really must be Christmas!

As you sing or listen this year to this carol watch it bring a smile to your heart and picture the angels in heaven singing this to the surprised shepherds.

## Reflect

Heavenly Father, as I commence this day, I take time to thank you for the joy to be found at Christmas. I take time to thank you for...



# Dec 5 Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus

## Read

*“I will shake all nations, and the desired of all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory,” says the Lord Almighty.” (Haggai 2:7)*

## Reflect

We are in the season of Advent – a time set aside to remember the baby Jesus in the manger, and a time when we wait for Jesus to return again in glory. The Israelites had been promised throughout the Old Testament that God would send a King to rule over the world and bring peace. This was fulfilled back over 2000 years ago when Jesus was born in Bethlehem to human parents, yet also the Son of God. When Jesus left the earth for the last time, and ascended into heaven, He promised to return, but no one knows when or where, so we eagerly wait for His second coming (the second Advent).

Charles Wesley wrote the beautiful words to this hymn. As he was writing, he considered the verse Haggai 2:7, thinking of the orphans and the class divide in Britain and how Jesus will get rid of all of this when he returns again. He published a prayer at the time: *‘Born Your people to deliver, born a child and yet a King, born to reign in us forever, now Your gracious kingdom bring. By Your own eternal Spirit, rule in all our hearts alone, by Your all sufficient merit, raise us to Your glorious throne. Amen.’*

Jesus’s aim in coming at Christmas is bigger than one definition of freedom for one group of people. He doesn’t come to shuffle the political scenario for our party’s preferences. The scope of his redemptive work is infinitely wider; he comes to free us from our fears and sins.

Within The Salvation Army we have added the chorus, *Sweet chiming bells, oh how they ring, to welcome Christ the newborn King!* The Christ who comes to free us truly is good news!

## Reflect

Thank you, God, that Christ coming into the world wasn’t a historical event that has very little to do with today, but that actually our prayer should always be that in a world so dark and lost you would come again as The Light of the World.



# Dec 6 Mary, did you know?

## Read

*'My soul glorifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour... for the Mighty One has done great things for me – holy is His name.'*

*(Luke 1:46-47-49)*

## Reflect

Many Christmas carols work through the events of the first Christmas based on Scripture and can appear pretty clinical, removing the emotional responses of the humans involved in the story. I personally like to understand the minds and hearts of the characters behind the story. Of course, this is often inferred rather than a known emotional response.

Many pieces of Christian music and Christmas carols are not written by theologians but rather by those with a personal story to tell. Every Christmas I think about Mary and the whole experience of being told she was to carry the Son of God. As a young girl, not yet married, it was scandalous and even worthy of death. What an incredible woman of faith who trusted without question... so why do we have a Christmas carol filled with questions?

Written by Mark Lowry when contemplating the questions that were scripted for a Christmas play at his church it led to Lowry stating that if anyone knew the answers it would be Mary. The lyrics are asking Mary if she knew the eventual significance and salvation that her son, Jesus, would have for all of humankind for all time and the miracles he would perform. This song connects Christmas and Easter – the birth and the glory.

The song Mary sings in Luke 1 expresses her faith and love in a loving God who has given such a blessing on her. King David in the Psalms wrote songs to a loving God who forgives and is gracious to a people who don't deserve it.

This Christmas, lift up your own songs of praise to a loving God who would share the most important person to Him, His Son, with a world not deserving (but needing) love and forgiveness. Praise with your hearts and voices to a loving Father.

## Reflect

Dear God, even though I often have many questions that I don't know the answer to, help me to follow the example of Mary and to praise in the question.



# Dec 7    O Come, all ye faithful

## Read

*'The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.'* (John 1:14)

## Reflect

Since marrying Lydia I have discovered I love to travel. In the new year, Lydia has booked a city break to Venice and Verona, just because we enjoy understanding the history and significance of each place. Many people love to travel and journey to places of significance to them. We like to visit the places that formed our ancestor's faith, where Christianity seemed historically to flourish, where the challenges were met with faith.

During the Advent season we are invited through the hymns and carols we sing to journey back to the first Christmas where Jesus was born. In ancient Jewish faith, the Jews made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem at the Passover wherever possible. As 21st century Christians we take a pilgrimage each Advent to reflect on the miracle of God becoming man as a baby. We listen to the angels, marvel with the shepherds, follow the star to the manger where our Saviour was born to be the King of the World. Every Christmas we relive and celebrate the moment when God sent His Son to earth as a baby to grow as a human and die for our sins.

O come, all ye faithful. Take a moment to reflect – are you one of the faithful? Do we really trust Jesus and follow Him each day? Are we faithful to Him in every aspect of our lives? Even so, God still asks us to 'Come!' We are invited to come and see and behold this Son of God and to sing with the angels and rejoice that He is born our Saviour.

## Reflect

Calming Father, be with us this Advent. As we reflect on our personal faith journey and take some time to ask ourselves the question of our faithfulness, we ask for peace in your presence as we respond to the call to being faithful to you.



# Dec 8    O little town of Bethlehem

## Read

*'But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.'* (Micah 5:2)

## Reflect

Bethlehem, just a few miles outside of Jerusalem, is a quiet town. Except when it isn't. It lies on the border of Israel and the West Bank; it sits on the fault line of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It's nestled in the southern part of the Judean Mountains, and, on starless nights, the sky is black.

On a recent tv programme on Bethlehem, the presenter said their sleep was dreamless but interrupted. He said it was not uncommon for street demonstrations to take place on Hebron Road by the imposing guard tower and concrete barrier, which woke him up. Eventually, soldiers disperse the small crowd with tear gas. The pop-pop-pop-BANG and BANG-silence-BANG-BANG, remind him that while he was not in any danger, the hopes and fears of Bethlehem are very much alive.

It's in these dark, smoke-filled, smelling streets, that the everlasting Light shines. Jesus arrives in Bethlehem, a simple hillside town, with actual people, not some far away, fairy tale kingdom. But it's the beauty of what happens at these specific coordinates that gives hope to the whole of all creation.

*'...the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.'* Which hopes and fears? All of them. For the millions who had lived before that night and the billions who come after it. Every hope, every aspiration, every nightmare suffered, every trauma endured - is met in this moment.

*'...the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.'* Christmas doesn't dispel every fear, nor does it fulfil every hope. But, in the person of Jesus, it transforms them.

*'Where meek souls will receive him still, the dear Christ enters in.'* If it's true, I can pray this:

## Reflect

'Lord, enter into my rich hopes and dark fears. Walk with me as I journey into them and through them and with them.'



# Dec 9 It came upon a midnight clear

## Read

*‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rest’ (Luke 2:14)*

## Reflect

Peace – we all want it! We all need it, but at times it just seems so elusive. Peace is mentioned 329 times in the Bible. It is so important, but it is divided into three different kinds: international peace (1 Sam 7:14), national peace (1 Kings 4:24) and civic peace (Rom 14:19). We can obtain peace from God the Father (Phil 4:7), Jesus Christ the Son (John 14:27) and the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:22). In the Christmas story in Luke 2, we read of the angels singing of peace that is come into the world through God’s Son, Jesus.

The image here is one of back-breaking strain. Road-weary travellers inch uphill under the weight of life’s harsh burdens, struggling to find peace. What crushing load are you carrying this season?

What’s inflicting pain these days? What’s slowing your steps and causing you not to live in the peace Christ promised?

Is it grief? Has the loss of someone dear stolen your ability to breathe, to move?

Is it worry? Are you racking your brain to figure out how the impossible circumstances can resolve?

Is it fear? Does the threat of the unknown press air out of your chest? Or maybe it’s anger?

Resentment towards others for distant hurts or recent wounds is forcing you to bend low as you walk. This song writer has two words of encouragement: rest and know. Rest and find peace in Christ Jesus.

God hasn’t loaded us with many of the burdens we’re carrying. Some, not all, are weights we choose. We can put those imposing packs down by the edge of the road and listen, to focus and receive the gift of peace Christ promises.

## Reflect

Father, I come today recognising that so much goes on in my head that causes me to lose my peace and focus on you. Help me to rest in your peace...



# Dec 10

# In the bleak mid-winter

## Read

*'So, they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger.'* (Luke 2:16)

## Reflect

Wham!'s 1984 hit 'Last Christmas' is one of those songs that you can find yourself humming in December, especially if you listen to Radio 2 as it is played far too often!

If you're not familiar with it, here's the only line you need to capture its, well, heart. *'Last Christmas, I gave you my heart. But the very next day you gave it away.'* As far as songs about holiday betrayal go, it's surprisingly upbeat. But if you've weathered a devastating loss between last Advent and this one, the holiday season is anything but.

What was true about last Christmas that won't be true about this one? For many of us, someone we love will be absent from the table. Or maybe, because of a rift in a relationship, we won't be exchanging gifts with someone we once did. Or there was an unplanned move, and your new place doesn't have any bushes on which to hang those Christmas lights. Somewhere between December 25 of last year and this moment, something dear to you was taken, broken or lost.

Now what? With all due respect to Wham! I'm not sure tossing a fragile heart into the lap of this year's someone special is the answer. More than a century before 'Last Christmas' hit the charts, another writer penned these lines about giving one's heart away. Here's what Christina Georgina Rossetti wrote:

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

It's beautiful in its simplicity. Christina's asking: Come Christmas, who can I trust with my heart, scarred and delicate as it is? The Christ-child. It's the only significant gift I can offer and He's the only one who can be trusted to heal, keep and defend it.

## Reflect

Take some time to bring the 'broken' parts of your heart to Christ this day. Pray for those who are dealing with the challenges of the season.



# Dec 11 The Holly and the Ivy

## Read

*'She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.'* (Matt 1:21)

## Reflect

Some carols at first reading don't have much impact or even seem to have much theological reflection – to be honest this has been my response to the carol we are considering today. Holly and ivy are often used in decorating at Christmas. Holly is often referred to as Christ's thorn – having a sharpness in the leaves representing the crown of thorns and the red berries as a reminder of the blood that was shed for our salvation. It maintains its bright colours through Christmas. You may be thinking that this is more a story for Easter, but we can't have an Easter without first having a Christmas. The Christmas Carol 'The Holly and the Ivy' cleverly relates the Christmas story with the Easter Passion.

In the carol, the holly symbolises Jesus and the ivy represents Mary, His mother. If you listen or sing this carol, keep this fact in mind. It traces the symbolism of the holly plant having prickles, makes a prickly crown, has a blossom, a berry, bitter bark – all referring to the crucifixion of Jesus at Easter. But interwoven into the carol are the words '*And Mary bore sweet Jesus Christ*' bringing us back to Christmas. I think it is a very cleverly written carol from the early 19th Century, but the relationship of holly and Christmas go back to medieval times where holly and ivy were used in decorating many households.

The Advent and Lenten seasons are totally opposite in the emotions and responses to all that is happening. The Christmas story is a lovely one filled with angels, shepherds, a shining star, gifts, and above all the birth of a baby, born to be Saviour of the world. But this little baby was born for greater things than to fill us with warm fuzzy feelings, this baby was born to be the Saviour of the World – our Saviour who died a horrible death for us. This Christmas, as you gaze and reflect on God's love in sending His Son as a baby, remember God's greater gift in sending His Son for our redemption.

## Reflect

Using the words of the carol, spend time in prayer giving thanks and connecting both the images of Easter and Christmas and God's provision of a Saviour.



# Dec 12

# Silent Night, Holy Night

## Read

*'This is how God showed his love among us: he sent His one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.'*

*(1 John 4:9-10)*

## Reflect

'Silent Night' always brings me back to one of two places that I called home. The first is the carols by candlelight that was a must every Christmas eve. Of course, it was the same order and readings each year and we would always conclude with lighting candles and hearing the history behind the carol. In 1818, Joseph Mohr wrote the lyrics and gave them to Franz Gruber, who wrote the transcendent melody. The church organ was broken, so the first performance was simply two vocalists and an acoustic guitar. It's always been beautiful in its simplicity.

The second place was in my first leadership appointment. Again, the service plan would be pretty much set, the usual singing, prayer focus and a mixture of items from solos to readings before we'd dim the lights and head into the driveway of the hall and sing Silent Night by candlelight. As the leader I would often light the first candle and pass it on to the next person and as the light travelled from person to person around the circle the warm glow grew brighter and brighter.

Reflecting on it now reminds me of this verse in John 1:5 – 'The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.'

Yes, the silent night carries love's pure light into a dark and dreary world. And that love, that burning, illuminating love, chases fear back into the shadows. This radiant love is all-consuming. It's not the cheap fluorescence of transactional affection. It's the fire of self-sacrificing, others-elevating, unconditional passion. The light that bursts forth in Christ's incarnation is the dawn of redeeming grace.

## Reflect

Father God, as I take time to sit in the silence, perhaps I am fortunate not to be dealing with my own personal darkness. As I pray for the world situations today, I ask for your light shine removing the darkness.



# Dec 13

# Away in a Manger

## Read

*‘While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.’ (Luke 2:6-7)*

## Reflect

If you have been in The Salvation Army for any length of time, I am sure you will have your nativity story to tell. The nativity play was going as planned and Joseph and Mary were going from house to house knocking on the doors and asking if there was any room for them. As they continued to get ‘no room’ answers a little voice called from the back ‘YOU SHOULD HAVE BOOKED!’

‘Away in a Manger’ is sung at every carol’s evening or nativity play that I have ever been to. Have you sung it already this Advent season? Or do you anticipate singing it over the next 12 days? This carol points to the manger as the source of our adoration and joy. God’s Son being born in a manger – an animal’s feeding trough – highlights the way that God uses our deepest pain, our humiliation, the things that we wish were different, the despised and the forgotten, to bring Him the greatest glory.

Jesus was not laid in a manger by accident. Animals go to the manger for physical food, but with Jesus lying on the hay, we can go to the manger for spiritual food. Jesus has peace and love, patience and hope available for all. We can come to Him at any time and never go hungry with His infinite storehouse of nourishment available to any who ask.

The beauty of this carol is the beauty of Christmas as it speaks of the miracle of Jesus’ birth. It is a beautiful petition to grow closer to the Lord Jesus and for blessings upon all our little ones.

## Reflect

Jesus, I simply come today as I am. As I sit in your presence and imagine the scene of the manger, the animals, the smells, the noise – I come with expectation that you will provide for my every need.



# Dec 14 Do You Hear What I Hear?

## Read

*'The Lord gives strength to his people; the Lord blesses his people with peace.'* (Psalm 29:11)

## Reflect

If you are a band person and specifically listen for the bass line you will hear a very specific rhythm to this carol. What are the sounds of Christmas? Many will respond, it is hearing The Salvation Army band on the high street, or the bells ringing as the town float goes around with Santa waving at children. As we approach Christmas, what sounds do you hear? All the advertisements of things to buy for Christmas? The Christmas carols – 'Jingle bells', 'We Wish You a Merry Christmas'? Is there a chance for you to quiet your heart, mind and soul to hear the little things – the family needing food or a place to live, the corps needing help with the activities or planning, the people in need throughout the world and in our neighbourhood in pain, in war?

This Christmas carol, 'Do You Hear What I Hear?' loosely tells the story of the nativity – we have a lamb, a star, a shepherd and a king all stopping to ask the questions. Though Jesus is never mentioned, the child is implied to be Him. Reading some background to this song, it wasn't written to be Christian carol, but God is incredible how He can work through anyone. The carol was written by Noël Regney and the music by Gloria Shayne in 1962. They were married at the time and had written it as a plea for peace during the Cuban Crisis. It has sold tens of millions of copies and has been performed by hundreds of artists – Bing Crosby, Perry Como, and Whitney Houston.

Peace is a theme of so many songs. Christmas is known as a time of peace and we romanticise the peaceful town of Bethlehem, the peaceful shepherds and the peaceful scene of a family with a new-born baby. It is good to think of peace when everything around us is frantic and busy – peace is what we need. God does send us peace at this time, sometimes you just have to listen for it and find it in the little things – laughter, friends, church and family. May you be blessed to hear all the sounds of Jesus in your life.

## Reflect

O God of peace, I think of those who cannot find peace in their situation or world. As I sit in the silence, bring to my mind those who need to hear your voice as I pray for them.



# Dec 15

# Christians, Awake!

## Read

*'That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep. Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord's glory surrounded them. They were terrified!'*

*(Luke 2:8-9)*

## Reflect

Even though I wasn't raised in a Christian home, when I said I was a Christian and in church my family always made sure I got to the meeting, even when it was Christmas day and I wanted to stay at home and play with the gifts I had received. This is one of the carols we used to sing on Christmas morning. At the time I do remember wondering at the first line, 'Christians, Awake, ...' maybe the officer is telling us to wake up after a late night on Christmas Eve awaiting our presents! This is one of the Christmas carols that some of the older people in our church know well. It is not a carol that I remember having sung overly in my Christmas planning; but it has a rousing tune that would wake up anyone dosing, as the band blasts it out!

John Byrom was the writer, who supposedly wrote it as a Christmas gift to his daughter, Dolly. He has an incredible history as being the inventor of a system of shorthand that was officially taught at both Oxford and Cambridge Universities and used by the clerk of the House of Lords. He was a very learned man who also studied medicine but decided instead to patent this shorthand in 1740. He was both a poet and a literary man who travelled in influential and intellectual circles in London and was also a spiritual man.

The hymn tells the story of the first Christmas focusing more on the shepherds and angels. The poem was put to music by John Wainwright a couple of years after it had been written. Like many of the Christmas carols, they tell the story of the birth of Jesus. If people do not know much else of the Christian faith, they learn of the birth of Jesus, the Son of God. We can thank John Byrom and all our other gifted writers through the ages that faith can be passed on through these wonderful words and stirring music at Christmas.

## Reflect

Jesus, I thank you that you have gifted many to write helpful words that teach us the truth of the incarnation. Today as you prayer write down some words as your personal hymn of praise.



# Dec 16 Angels we have heard on high

## Read

*‘The angel reassured the shepherds. “Don’t be afraid!” he said. “I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. The Saviour—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David! And you will recognise him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger.” (Luke 2:10-12)*

## Reflect

Picture the scene: Sheep are scattered but settling down for the night, the shepherds have lit a fire, having some dinner and swapping tales of the day as they watch over the sheep and guard them from wild animals. Then, in a divine moment, God burst into the night sky with shining angels singing ‘Glory to God’ and speaking of the Saviour’s birth. In that solitary moment, the shepherd’s lives were transformed – becoming part of a story that has been retold for thousands of years.

No wonder there are so many carols and hymns about the angels and the shepherds. ‘Angels We Have Heard on High’ reminds us of this amazing night. The refrain ‘Gloria in Excelsis Deo’, literally means ‘Glory to God in the Highest’ and this helps us get a taste of what the angelic chorus sounded like as it sung the Good News – Christ is born! The angels sharing the birth of Jesus to these simple shepherds changed their lives forever. God loves to still speak through ordinary people, like you and me, to transform others’ lives into something extraordinary through His grace and love.

In my research I learned that the earliest known printed version of ‘Angels We Have Heard On High’ was in an 1842 French song book. Though the source of the song is unknown, it is believed to have originated in 18th century France. The song was first translated into English in 1860 by James Chadwick, a Roman Catholic bishop. As we also sing of the angel’s great announcement this Christmas, don’t forget to also announce to others around you: friends, family, neighbours and work colleagues that yours and my Saviour is born at Christmas to bring life and love into lives filled with emptiness.

## Reflect

Come to Bethlehem and see  
Him whose birth the angels sing;  
Come, adore on bended knee,  
Christ the Lord, the newborn King. Gloria in excelsis Deo!



# Dec 17 Once in royal David's City

## Read

*'So Joseph had to leave Nazareth in Galilee and go to Bethlehem in Judea. Long ago Bethlehem had been King David's hometown, and Joseph went there because he was from David's family.'* (Luke 2:4)

## Reflect

In ministry we work hard at trying to make our message understandable. We often ask ourselves in preparation am I speaking and teaching in words and terms that even a child would understand. We also ask ourselves if concepts are not too theologically advanced that we sound condescending.

Once in Royal David's City was written by Cecil Frances Alexander who wrote hymns for children as she thought it was the best way to teach the fundamentals of the Christian faith. The hymn tells the story of Jesus' birth in storybook form and often refers to children who are to live their lives faithfully to please Jesus. I remember singing this in primary school as it expresses the Christmas story in simple terms that I could understand. She also wrote the hymn, 'All things bright and beautiful.'

The Jesus described in this Christmas carol, is relatable – he was little, weak, dear and gentle, developing as all children do. This is a huge connection with the life of Jesus in knowing that He experienced life just as we do! The beginnings of His life were not one of palace and splendour, born to a wealthy aristocrat or the son and heir of an earthly King, but lowly, humble and laid 'in a manger for His bed.' God sent His Son into a world in need. The world would not recognise Him immediately, though the wise men obviously had been informed somehow, but the happenings around His birth were obvious from the angels that this was a special baby.

This simple carol reminds us that God came into the world as our Saviour, in a humble, meek and mild way. God became one of us and turned the world upside down when sending the Son of God to the world as King. He is present, He is near, and He is constantly concerned about all His children.

## Reflect

Lord Jesus, Often I tangle myself up in questions that cause me to lose focus on your love for me. Help me to come as a child with simple faith to receive the forgiveness and grace of an Almighty God.



# Dec 18

# ○ Holy Night!

## Read

*'While they were there, in the evening it came for her to give birth. She gave birth to a son, her firstborn.'* (Luke 2:6)

## Reflect

'O Holy Night!' is one of my favourite Christmas songs. I remember Frances (*she went to university to study music and became an opera singer*) singing it as a solo at our first secondary school concert, or when The Church of Scotland organist ended the carols by candlelight by playing it. It had deep meaning because even as a child I recognised that the night of Christ's birth wasn't just another night, but it was a holy night that changed everything!

Over the years I have been reminded as part of my faith journey of the importance of place. As Jesus was born in Bethlehem, prophesied many years before, we recognise that in the insignificant place something miraculous can happen, God can intervene and where God is becomes holy.

Alongside the importance of place, we can think of the different roles that Christ plays in our lives. The list could include Saviour, Helper, Comforter, Redeemer, Healer and on and on it goes. This song claims Christ is born to be our friend. Christ doesn't arrive as a transcendent cosmic hero at Christmas. Maybe God could have orchestrated other means to rescue humanity; one that didn't require the incarnation. But God walks among us for the purpose of inviting us to connect. God interacted personally with Adam, Eve, Enoch and Moses. Christ's objective is to do the same with us. He enters our world with the aim of friendship.

Not only that, but this King-friend also knows our needs. Have you ever had a friend who was kind, gracious and maybe a little oblivious? He or she was loyal to the end, but had a hard time anticipating your needs? Jesus isn't a cold clinician; he doesn't just diagnose our hurts. He identifies with them. Weakness is no stranger to him. Loneliness? Rejection? Anger? Temptation? Disappointment? Grief? Jesus knows them all. He's a friend who knows everything about us.

## Reflect

Jesus, I thank you that you are my Saviour, but I take time to thank you that you are also my friend. Think about friendship and ask Christ to show His friendship.



# Dec 19

# What child is this?

## Read

*'They hurried to the village and found Mary and Joseph. And there was the baby, lying in the manger. After seeing him, the shepherds told everyone what had happened and what the angel had said to them about this child.'*

*(Luke 2:16-17)*

## Reflect

'Mean estate.' It's not a phrase I've heard outside the context of this song. In this instance, it can signify something 'poor in appearance' or 'of low birth or social class.'

I was appointed for four years to Northern Ireland and on Christmas Eve at 4pm one final call came in for help. Thinking it was someone who was just trying to get a freebie, I packed the boot of the car with a few bits left from the Christmas appeal and arrived at a house to discover that the mum and infant had nothing. After feeling rebuked by God and realising I could get a cot and lots of other bits together, I realised that we could make Christmas for that little family mean more than struggle.

Jesus' family wasn't comfortably middle-class. They were poor. When Mary came to the temple in Jerusalem to dedicate the baby Jesus, she brought two birds with her as a ceremonial offering. Why birds? Leviticus 12:8 says *'If a woman cannot afford to bring a lamb, she must bring two turtledoves or two young pigeons.'* The Christ child lies in mean estate to remind everyone, regardless of class, that He belongs to all of us.

Pixar Animation Studios often tells stories of children in single-parent homes (see Finding Nemo, Up, Toy Story, Ratatouille). The theory is these stories relate to a broader audience. When the story of Jesus is written, it begins with a humble family in a small town.

Billions of people throughout history can describe humble origin stories. To the majority, Jesus's sleeping among the animals is normal; it makes him unassuming, accessible. Jesus is the King who lifts the poor to their feet and brings kings to their knees. At both the manger and the cross, Jesus is the great equaliser. When he brings salvation, he disregards our bloodlines, our bank accounts and our backstories. He only seeks loving hearts longing to enthrone him.

## Reflect

Take time to pray about those struggling this Christmas.



# Dec 20 While Shepherds watched

## Read

*'And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night.'* (Luke 2:8)

## Reflect

In the six verses of this carol the whole of the story of the shepherds and the angels is told from Luke 2:8-14. Read it from the Bible again and even choose to listen to the carol. This carol is attributed to the Irish poet Nahum Tate, and it was the only Christmas hymn authorised to be sung in the Anglican Church before the 1700's (Before that only the Psalms were allowed to be sung) maybe due to its retelling of the shepherds meeting with the angels from the Bible.

Shepherding is actually the first profession that the Bible mentions – 'Abel was a keeper of sheep...' (Gen 4:2). It was dangerous work where they had to protect the sheep from predators, finding grass and water and making sure that all the sheep were safe and none strayed. Shepherds were also considered society's outsiders. Ceremonially unclean, they were not permitted to worship in the Temple, and their character was questionable and so any testimony was inadmissible in court. Yet this carol reminds us that God has a way of turning the social order upside-down. Sometimes the world's outsiders are considered God's insiders.

Those that were unclean and not allowed to give testimony were the first that God told the news of Jesus' birth, and they were charged with telling the world of this history altering news. Their testimony was listened to throughout the town of Bethlehem.

All through Jesus' ministry he reached out and touched those whom society had rejected. This carol tells of the birth of God's Son. This is life-altering news. Let's not keep it to ourselves but use Jesus' example and step out of society's norms and share the Gospel like the shepherds so long ago, with all who will listen. Turn this world upside-down and inside-out with the incredible love of a loving God.

## Reflect

Take time in reflection and repentance for the times you have rejected those who don't meet your opinion of what a Christian should be.



# Dec 21 When wise men came seeking

## Read

*‘Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the reign of King Herod. About that time some wise men from eastern lands arrived in Jerusalem, asking, “Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star as it rose, and we have come to worship him.”’ (Matt 2:1-2)*

## Reflect

They appear on our Christmas cards, they are the subject of some of our most beloved Christmas carols, and you often see them in Nativity scenes standing next to Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus. No, I am not referring to Santa and the reindeer. I am referring to the wise men.

The wise men are the most mysterious of all the Christmas characters. We do not know much about them, and we have trouble relating to them. It is much easier to relate to Mary and Joseph, and perhaps the shepherds, who were common people. But it is hard to find a connection with the wise men. Yet of all the players in the Christmas story, perhaps it is the wise men who are most like us because they represent the first Gentiles who came to Jesus Christ. And in their search for Jesus Christ and their response when they found Him, the wise men illustrate the essence of true wisdom. In Matt 2, we discover why wise men still seek Him.

The word ‘magi’ refers to a special class of men who were skilled in astronomy and astrology. Interestingly, the magi did believe in one God, but they believed that one way you worshipped Him was through sorcery, through magic. We get our word ‘magic’ from the magi. The wise men were experts in mathematics, agriculture, and many other sciences. In fact, they were so wise that if you were in the east, you could not become a king without having mastered the knowledge of the magi and being crowned as king by the magi. The magi were the kingmakers of their day. That explains why they were searching for the ‘King of the Jews’.

## Reflect

Jesus, teach me to be wise and to seek you, because your Word  
Says those who seek you will find you!



# Dec 22

# We Three Kings

## Read

*'They entered the house and saw the child with his mother, Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasure chests and gave him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.'* (Matt 2:11)

## Reflect

What do you treasure? Recently I reminisced with one of our older corps members about her wedding, on the anniversary of her wedding day in 1948. I saw her wedding picture hanging up with all the family history pictures in her hallway. My dear friend truly treasured her history and could explain her ancestry. I was able to talk with her about her dress, veil, people who attended and what her late husband was wearing. We talked about the ceremony, how her husband had walked her down the aisle, not her father. We talked of the reception, photos, the transport and the games they played at the reception – cutting a block of chocolate with a knife and fork, balancing a balloon on a stick while walking and so on, just your typical Salvation Army wedding reception! The stories were treasures in themselves that the lady enjoyed sharing with me.

Stories are treasures which is why it is so important to record them. God knew that we would need the written history of the world and the plan He had to bring His Son, Jesus, into the world through a virgin birth. The Bible contains history, stories and intrigue, but mostly it contains God's love for all the world.

The carol 'We Three Kings' is a story of the coming of Gentiles to worship baby Jesus – God was opening His Kingdom to the whole world. John Henry Hopkins Jr. wrote both the lyrics and the music for this well-loved carol. He wrote it for a Christmas pageant and uncovered the motivation and the significance of the Wise Men's gifts. It was a treasure that he has left the world which is sung every year at Christmas. Resist the urge to focus only on the manger, rather take time to give your full attention to the treasure that God has in store for us through the sending of His Son Jesus to be our Saviour. He is the perfect Light!

## Reflect

Jesus, may my story be filled with my encounters with your love and grace. Use me to share it with others.



# Dec 23 Hark, the herald angels sing

## Read

*‘Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.”’ (Luke 2:13-14)*

## Reflect

There’s an overlooked line in this classic carol: ‘Risen with healing in His wings.’ It’s taken directly from the last book in the Old Testament. The first verse of Malachi 4: *‘The Lord of Heaven’s Armies says, “The day of judgment is coming, burning like a furnace. On that day the arrogant and the wicked will be burned up like straw. They will be consumed—roots, branches, and all.”’*

The writer pairs arrogance and wickedness, which is interesting. I know arrogant people I wouldn’t call evil, but selfishness drives wrongdoing in all of its forms. People who, over the course of a lifetime, set their agendas against God’s will face serious judgment.

Fortunately, the writer doesn’t stop there. Malachi adds, *‘But for you who fear my name, the Sun of Righteousness will rise with healing in his wings. And you will go free, leaping with joy-like calves let out to pasture.’* Those who submit their hearts and wills to God will experience the fullness of His mercy.

The all-consuming, wrath-dispersing Lord of Heaven’s Armies and the healing, liberating, joy-inspiring Sun of Righteousness are the same Jesus. He’s not a Jekyll/Hyde deity, flip-flopping between light and dark dimensions. He’s the singular Prince of Peace; his presence is experienced differently by different people in different moments. Our posture in relationship to Jesus determines our perspective of Christ.

We call on angels to sing at Christmas because God is bringing light, life and freedom to us. When we taste this joy, we exit the encounter bounding with joy.

## Reflect

What’s got you all tangled up this season? Where are you feeling trapped? What kind of healing do you require? Physical? Emotional? Psychological? Spiritual? If you need healing this season, ask the Christ who came to offer it to us. The Prince is here with the restoring peace you require; the Sun has come to shine restoring righteousness on us.



# Dec 24      The Light has come

## Read

*'For a child is born to us, a son is given to us. The government will rest on his shoulders. And he will be called: Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His government and its peace will never end.'* (Is 9:6-7a)

## Reflect

If we are all honest, the hecticness of the Christmas season can become more of a chore than a celebration. We can become so focused on 'doing' that we do not recognise the real reason for the season because our busyness and ticking the 'to-do' list seems to take up every spare minute beyond our work and church activity.

Alongside our own personal busyness we also look at what is going on in our communities, in our nation, in our world and if we are tired and weary with not having enough hours in the day to do everything we wonder where is God in the season that is supposed to be celebrating His coming in human form to the earth?

A helpful addition to our Salvation Army carols (*although can be sung at other times*) is Chick Yuill's 'The Light has come'. Using the different titles Jesus is given throughout scripture he encourages us to celebrate and recognise that Jesus – the Wonderful Counsellor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace is bringing light into every dark place in our world.

I once was fortunate to spend time with a lady who had an international teaching ministry focusing on intercession and the call to recognise the systems that need to be prayed about. I asked, 'how do we deal with darkness?' Her response wasn't to give me a lesson in the theological response on intercession and prayer warfare, but she simply said, 'Turn the LIGHT on!'

As we finish the preparation for the big celebration tomorrow, and for some of us we are tired, overwhelmed and feel like the darkness has taken control choose to 'switch the LIGHT on' – Allow Jesus, the Light to settle your heart and be who He says He is!

## Reflect

Light a tea candle and stop to reflect on where you need Jesus to shine over this season.



# Dec 25

# Joy to the World!

## Read

*'The Lord has made his salvation known and revealed his righteousness to the nations.'* (Psalm 98:2)

*'I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.'*

(Luke 2:10-11)

## Reflect

I enjoy the Christmas season, even with the busyness and craziness that it often feels like it includes. I like the cheerful decorations, we even make sure our route home allows us to check out people's bright lights! I enjoy spending time with family and friends and eating Christmas food. My favourite part of Christmas, by far, though, is singing carols—and, above all, 'Joy to the World!'

Joy to the World is not only a well-known Christmas song; it's one of the first songs I want to sing on Christmas Day to celebrate Christ's birth.

This song was written by Isaac Watts in 1719, and it is a Christological interpretation of Psalm 98. When we sing "Joy to the World," we are proclaiming that Christ is the fulfilment of what the psalmist writes: *'The Lord has made his salvation known and revealed his righteousness to the nations.'* In the birth of Christ, we see God's salvation plan being made known. In the life and death of Christ, we see the revelation of righteousness for all people.

The psalmist calls for the whole earth to respond with a 'shout for joy' and as 'Joy to the World' puts it, both 'heaven and nature sing,' and 'fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains repeat the sounding joy.' God's salvation is made known with the coming of his Son to bring salvation.

As you share in family time and get busy celebrating, remember that Christ has made his home among us (John 1:14). Don't leave Him at the worship service but allow Him to be the focus of all that happens today!

Choose to sing - **Joy to the world! The Lord is come!**

## Reflect

Jesus, you have come and released us from the power of sin and death. Help us to live in ways that proclaim the wonders of your love.



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