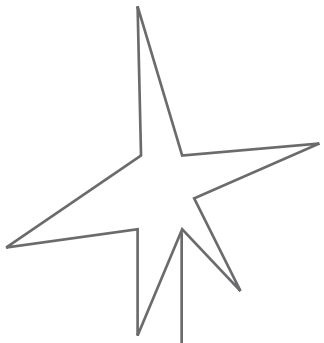


For yonder breaks *a* new *and* glorious morn!

— Placide Cappeau, "O Holy Night"

Advent devotional

Christ the King Presbyterian Church

The shepherds had an angel,
The wise men had a star,
But what have I, a little child,
To guide me home from far,
Where glad stars sing together,
And singing angels are?—

Those Shepherds through the lonely night
Sat watching by their sheep,
Until they saw the heavenly host
Who neither tire nor sleep,
All singing 'Glory, glory'
In festival they keep.

Christ watches me, His little lamb,
Cares for me day and night,
That I may be His own in heaven:
So angels clad in white
Shall sing their 'Glory, glory,'
For my sake in the height.

— Christina Rosetti, from "A Christmas Carol: For My Godchildren"

A BRIEF *on the* CHURCH SEASON *of* ADVENT

The celebration of the season of Advent (which begins on the fourth Sunday before Christmas day) dates back to the fourth century. It is a time that focuses our attention on Jesus Christ's birth and ministry as well as his Second Coming when he will return to redeem all of creation and rule with all power and authority. Since we can't anticipate the day or the hour of Christ's return, we are filled with both a sense of joyful expectation and humble reverence, with our spiritual focus being on lives of prayer and preparation. The church has used the season of Advent (which means "coming" or "arrival") to focus and reflect on the particular themes of John the Baptist's preparation for the ministry of Christ, the annunciation to Mary that she would be the mother of Jesus, Christ's entry into Jerusalem, and the final judgment. Throughout the season we are constantly reminded that Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world.

Historically, the primary sanctuary color of Advent is purple, the color of royalty, to welcome the coming of the King. This points to the important connection between Jesus' birth and death. The nativity and the Incarnation cannot be separated from the crucifixion and the Atonement.

One way that many mark the time of this season is with the Advent wreath. The evergreens help to symbolize the new and everlasting life brought through Jesus Christ. The wreath consists of five candles; four candles around the wreath and one white candle in the center. One candle is lit the first Sunday of Advent, two are lit the second Sunday, and so on. The light progressively reminds us that Jesus is the light of the world that comes into the darkness of our lives to bring newness, life, and hope (Isa 42:6). Each of the candles usually has a special theme and color. For us the first candle is the Prophecy candle; the second is the Bethlehem candle; the third is the Angels candle, the fourth is the Shepherd candle; and the center white candle is the Christ candle, lit on Christmas. As we move through the weeks of advent we will examine more fully the stories connected to each candle basking in the light of his face shining upon us.

PRELUDE *to this* DEVOTIONAL

When the Heavens start singing, we'd better pay attention…

Christ's birth was a slow burn across the ancient horizons. For 400 years, since the prophet Malachi anticipated the rise of his healing wings across the sky (Mal 4:2), the deep silence of space had been empty of all signs of a redemptive melody. The Magi (Matthew 2), seeing the first stirrings of creation's new birth, began making preparations for their historic journey… to attend this, the opening overture of the New Covenant.

The Birth of Jesus, God's Son, is truly the greatest feat and noblest symphony the heavens or earth have ever witnessed. Never have the heavens or earth displayed such a skillful harmony as in the time of Jesus' birth. In the coming weeks we will explore the riches of this narrative through a few key themes which in chorus help to illuminate the manager scene.

First, we will examine the background story. We will do some research into the family of Jesus, and see what the many quotes from the Old Testament reveal to us. Second, we will get to know some of the major players who traveled long distances to be present for the big event. Who were they? And what were they doing? Third, we will explore the songs about Christ's birth. Why were there so many of them? What do they have to tell us about singing praises to our Lord during this time of year? Fourth, we will explore the darker underbelly of the Christmas story. Long before Jesus' pilgrimage to the sufferings of the cruel cross, his story was fraught with sorrow and struggle. This reminds us that in the yearly glamour of tinsel, Hollywood blockbusters, and freshly wrapped presents we still long for the greater glory of Jesus' return.

HOW TO USE *this* DEVOTIONAL

We designed this devotional as a way to help you, Christ's worshiping community, think about Advent themes during the entire month—not just on the four Sundays leading up to Christmas.

Each individual devotion contains a passage of Scripture, a brief reflection on that passage, sample prayers to guide the prayers of children and adults, and hymns to sing together to give voice to your praises and longings.

The devotional was designed to be read in community. So, whether you have a large family or live alone, we encourage you to find one or two (or more) others and go through these devotions together during a time of family devotions, after a meal, or over the phone. Read the Scriptures and pray together. And sing the songs together as well. (If you can't read music, you can find many of the tunes either on iTunes or by doing an online search of the hymn's title.)

WEEK ONE *of* ADVENT

Background #1 – The Story of Jesus' Coming Starts in the Old Testament

The story of Jesus' birth began centuries before his father and mother (Mary and Joseph) knew him. The Hebrew people had long been expecting a Messiah—the anointed one who would come and rescue them from the sin and misery of the world. Their prophets, the prophets of our own Old Testament, had long foretold of one to come who would break the hardness of God's people's hearts and bring everlasting peace. During this first week of Advent we will look at a few of these verses as a way to give us context—to help us to see ourselves in the midst of this story—as we ourselves journey with the Magi to the humble manger scene.

Matthew 1:18-35
18Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. 19And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. 20But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." 22All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:

23"Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall call his name Immanuel"

(which means, God with us). 24When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, 25but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.

Shedding some light...

The story of Jesus' birth is about God showing that he keeps his promises and is trustworthy. How can we honor the story of Jesus' birth this week by keeping our promises and our word?

Children's Prayer

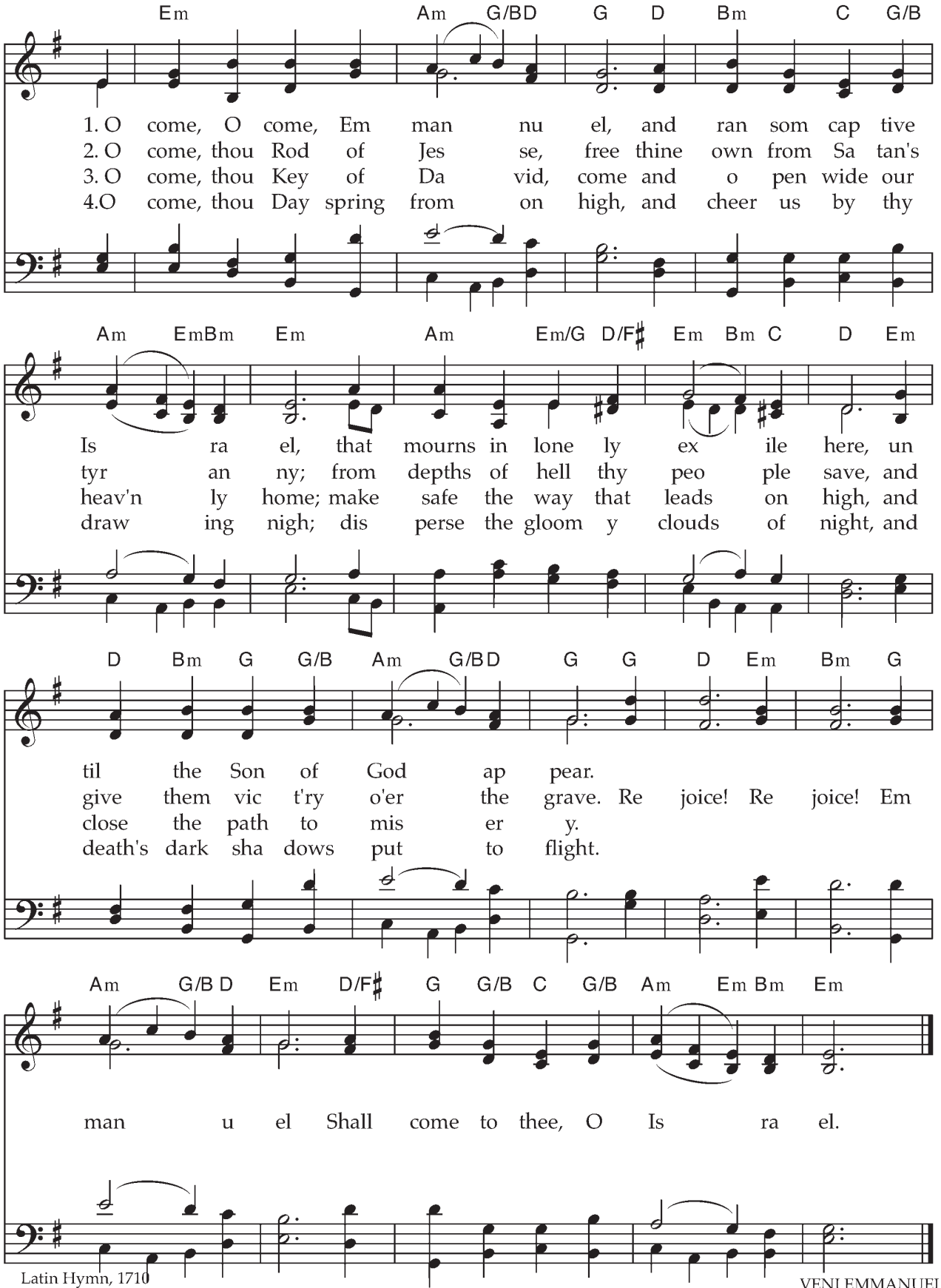
Jesus, help us each day to keep our word to others and to be trustworthy, like our Father in heaven is trustworthy.

Adults' Prayer

God, you are truthful. Unlike us, you do not lie. Forgive us for the ways we have been untrue. Help us trust you and your promises. Help us believe they are true. Make us more like you, being truthful in all we say and do.

Advent Singing: O Come, O Come Emmanuel

O Come, O Come Emmanuel



Latin Hymn, 1710
tr by John M. Neale

VENI EMMANUEL

Background #2 — Jesus , a Branch from the Root of Jesse

Like us, Jesus was born with parents, grandparents, and great grandparents. In fact, Jesus' family line stretched all the way back to King David and even as far back as Abraham and Adam. Matthew (in Matt 1:1-17) makes a point of showing us who Jesus' family is because of the words of God in the book of Isaiah that spoke of Jesus as a "shoot from the stump of Jesse."

Isaiah 11:1-2
1There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.
2And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him,
the Spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and might,
the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.

Shedding some light...

Have you ever watched a gardener working with her plants? Or have you ever picked up a piece of grass or a plant and seen the roots? Usually they are hidden but they are very important to the life of a plant or tree. Often we speak of our ancestors as our "family roots." Jesus had family roots as well, that were hidden in the soil of the Old Testament, which Matthew uproots to shows us. Why are Jesus' family roots important? Why does it matter that his line stretched back to King David, Abraham, and even Adam?

Children's Prayer

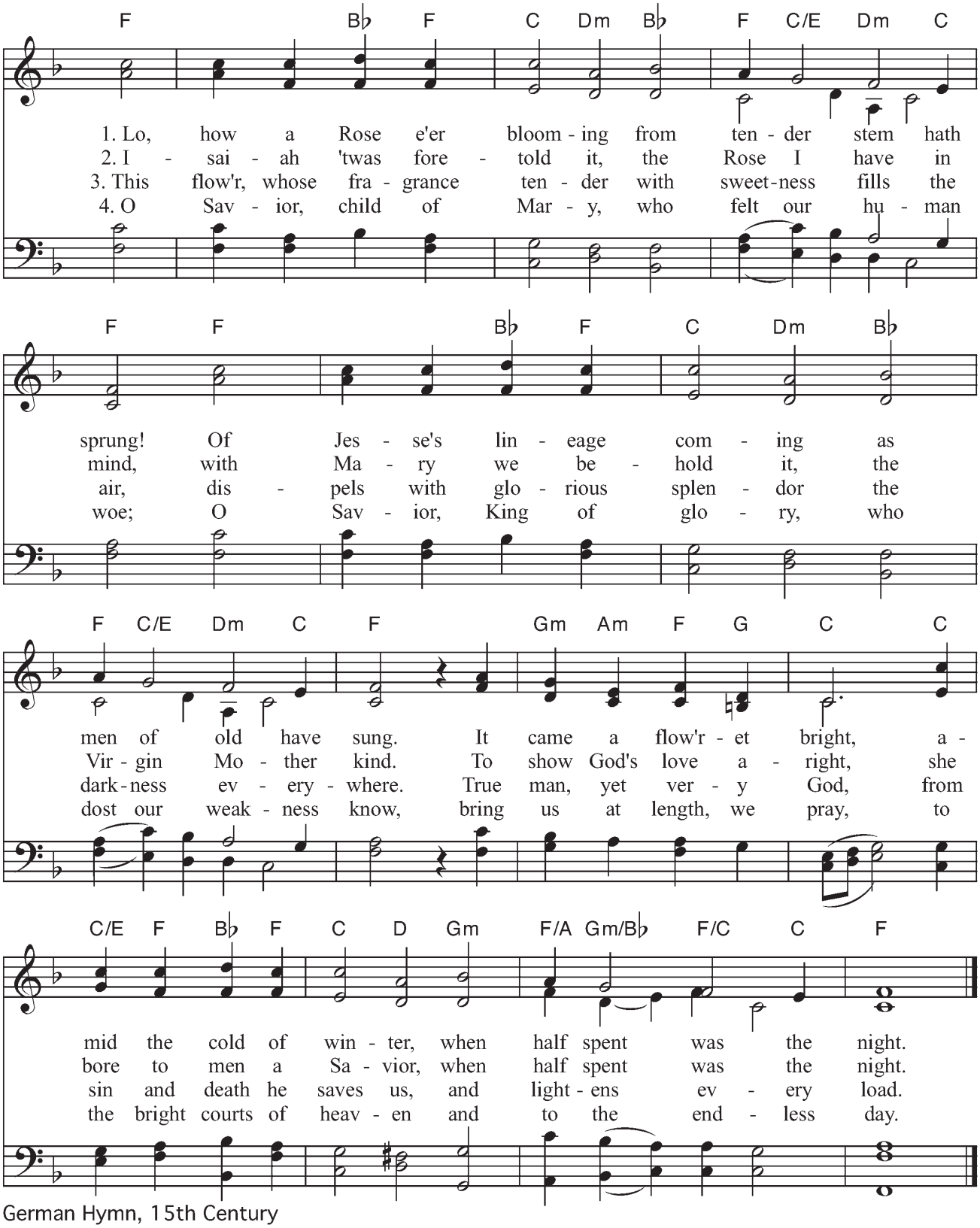
Dear God, You give plants roots so that they can be fed and stand tall. Help us to have roots that are planted in our families and in your word that we can be fed, grow healthy, and stand spiritually tall.

Adults' Prayer

Father of All Creation, when we think about your plan, the way you revealed it to your people generation after generation, the way you made promises that only you could keep and then kept them in ways that are far beyond our understanding, we are amazed. What a wonderful God you are! What an amazing God you are! What a loving God you are! What a promise-keeping God you are! Thank you that you cared for us when we didn't care about you. Thank you that you continue to care about us, continue to keep your promises to us, and continue to accomplish your great plan in and through us. Thank you for continuing to do what you said you will do. Help us to trust you more and more.

Advent Singing: Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming

Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming



German Hymn, 15th Century

Background #3 — Mary and the Virgin Birth of a Boy Named Jesus.

When the angel Gabriel appeared in Nazareth, to the home of the woman who promised to marry Joseph (who was a descendant of David and Jesse), Mary was not expecting the visitor. The house was not cleaned nor a meal prepared. And she certainly didn't know how she was to bear a child who would take the throne of David! She was confused and troubled. Despite the unbelievable words of the angel, Mary submitted to God's wondrous plan for her life.

Isaiah 7:14
Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel.

Luke 1:26-38
26In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, 27to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. 28And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" 29But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. 30And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. 32He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, 33and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

34And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?"

35And the angel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. 36And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. 37For nothing will be impossible with God." 38And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.

Shedding some light...

Have your parents ever asked you to do something that didn't make sense? Have you ever been asked to believe something unbelievable? This takes a great amount of truth and faith. In this passage we see that God tells Mary she will do something that won't make sense and will have to believe something unbelievable. Because Mary loves God and trusts in his Word to her, she allows God to shape her life according to his plan. What do you think is the most unbelievable thing the angel told Mary? What part of the passage gives you hope?

Children's Prayer

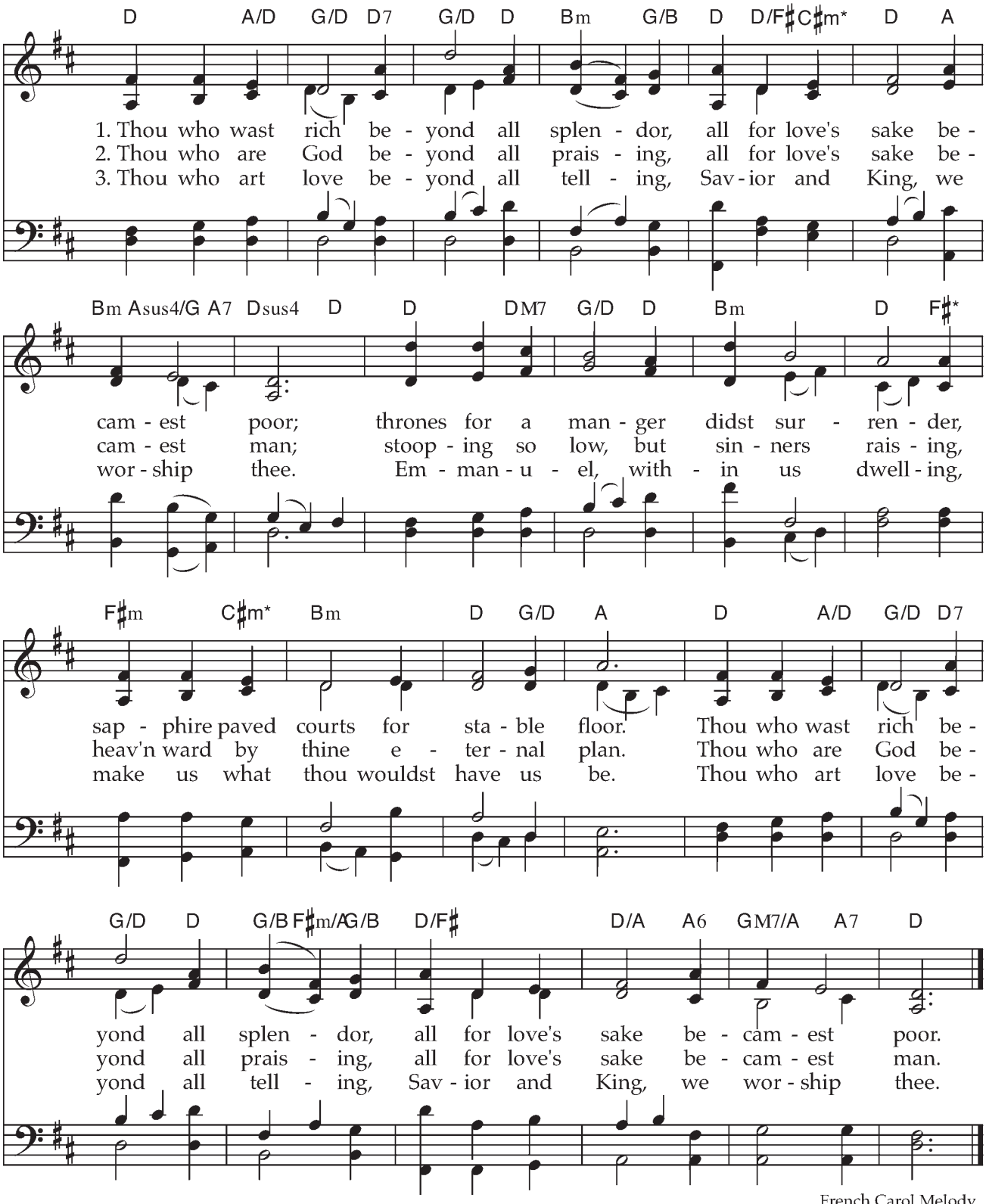
Dear God, the story of Jesus and his family is amazing! Angels visited them. Angels told them some pretty amazing things. Yet they believed the unbelievable because they believed you. Thank you that Jesus' mother and father were so faithful in their love for you. Help us to love you and obey you by obeying our mother and father when they ask us to do things that honor you—even though we don't always understand the reasons they ask us to obey.

Adults' Prayer

Father, help us believe that nothing is impossible with you. Help us submit to you. Help us obey you. Let the way you fulfilled your promises in the past bolster our faith. Let us long for you to fulfill your promises in the future. And let us rest in the present, trusting in you and you alone.

Advent Singing: Thou Who Wast Rich Beyond All Splendor

Thou Who Wast Rich Beyond All Splendor



Frank Houghton

French Carol Melody
Arr. by Charles Kitson, 1930

Background #4 — Jesus' Birth in the Small Town of Bethlehem

When the wise men showed up in Jerusalem inquiring where the Messiah was to be born, it got the whole place up in a tizzy. These were foreigners inquiring the whereabouts of the future King! How could foreigners know about the Messiah and the Jewish leaders not know? Everyone from King Herod to the religious leaders (chief priests and scribes) were greatly troubled. Herod quickly gathered the Jewish leadership together and asked them where the Messiah will be born. The Jewish leaders pulled out their scrolls and read from the prophet Micah (quoted in verse six below). They read that the Messiah would be born in the little town of Bethlehem. The king and religious leaders knew the right answers, but were too concerned with the threat to their own power to understand why the fulfillment of God's promises were good news for the whole world!

Matthew 2:1-6
1Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, 2saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." 3When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; 4and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. 5They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:

6" 'And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel.' "

Shedding some light...

Have you ever had the experience of finding yourself on the defensive on your own turf? What about when someone new shows up in your classroom? Or how about when a new employee arrives at work? Or how about when someone moves into your neighborhood that seems to know everything? We can be very protective of what we perceive as our own insider standing and knowledge! Why is that? What causes that? How can we overcome that temptation?

Children's Prayer

Dear God, help us get excited when others get things we don't get. Help us rejoice when other

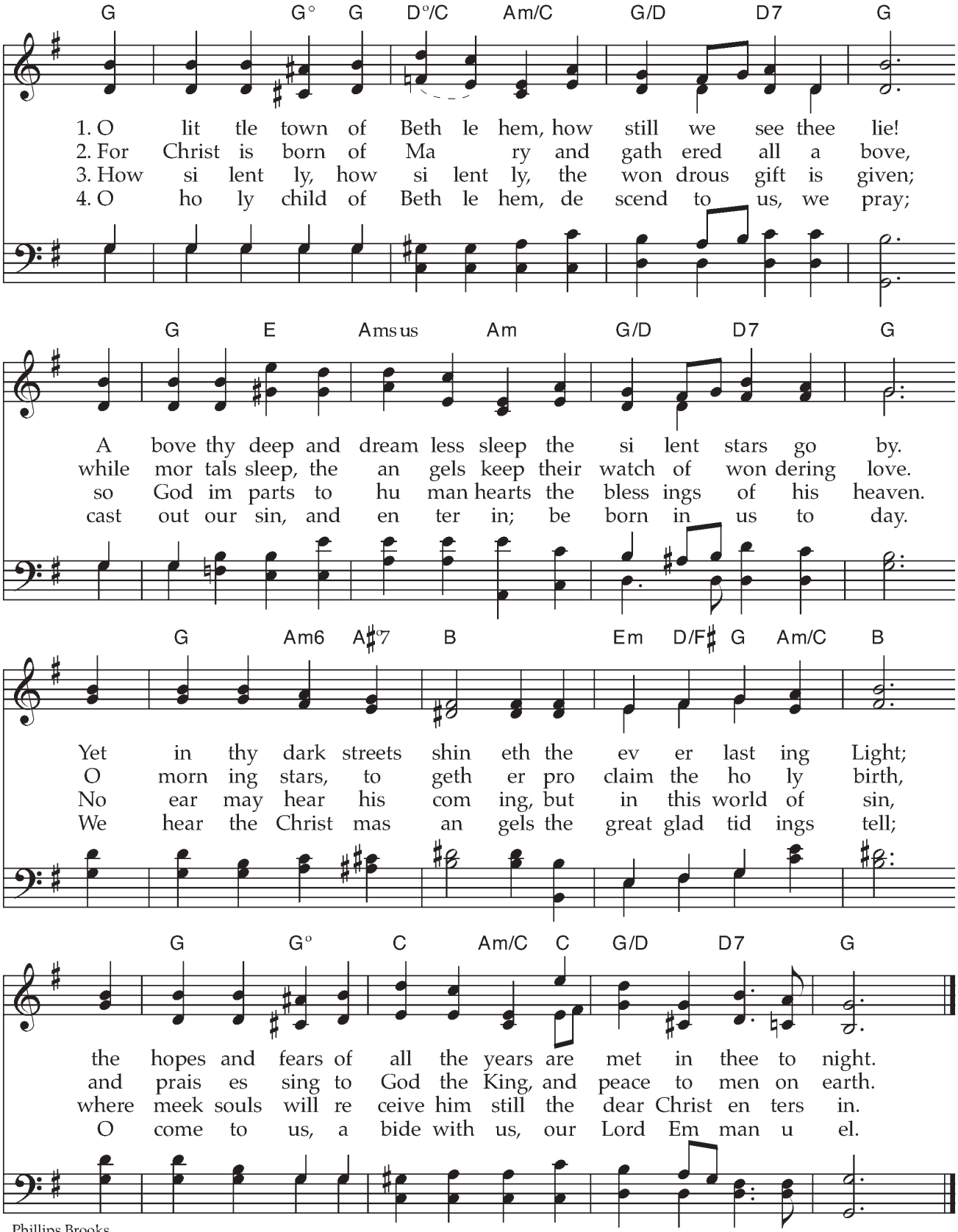
people do well. When we don't get what we want, help us to believe that you give us everything that we need. Help us not get so frustrated by what we don't have that we can't be excited about what you are doing.

Adults' Prayer

Dear God, sometimes you speak to us from people that are strange and of no account. They seem to know more about us than we know of ourselves. Sometimes we also can look down on people who are not from places we value. Help us to love outsiders as we marvel in Jesus' humble beginnings.

Advent Singing: O Little Town of Bethlehem

O Little Town of Bethlehem



Phillips Brooks

Lewis Redner

Background #5 — Out of Egypt I Called My Son.

When King Herod heard about the coming Messiah from the traveling wise men he was very worried because the Messiah could become King and cast him from his throne. He was very jealous to guard his position, power, and reputation. So an angel came to warn Joseph and Mary that they should travel to Egypt for safety. When Joseph and Mary return to Israel it casts our thoughts to the journey of God's people out of slavery in Egypt to the promised land of Israel.

> *Matthew 2:13-15 (the quote in verse fifteen is from Hosea 11:1)*
> *13Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." 14And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt 15and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, "Out of Egypt I called my son."*

Shedding some light...

The Lord cares for his people and his plan. We often struggle to believe in God on both counts. We doubt that he knows our struggles, and pain and we doubt that he has a plan for our life, much less for all of creation. But we see that not only is he aware of the thoughts and intentions of Herod, but he also has a specific plan for Joseph, Mary, and Jesus to go to Egypt until it is safe to return.

Children's Prayer

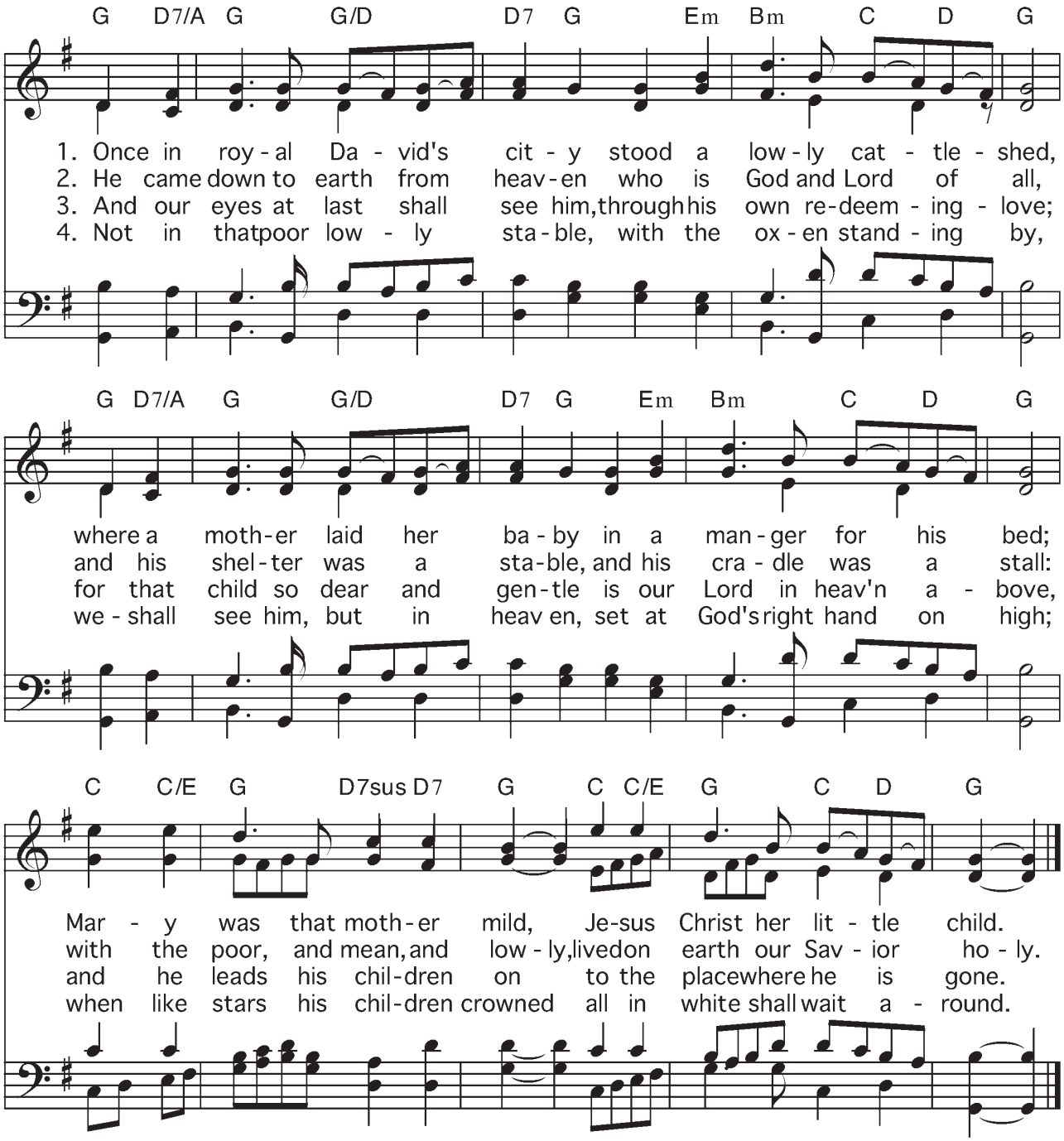
God, help us believe that you can take care of us. Help us believe that you know what is best for us. Help us stop worrying about what will happen today or tomorrow. And help us instead be at peace, trusting in you and your ability to care for us.

Adults' Prayer

Almighty God, we confess that we often doubt your goodness and protection. Instead of relying on you knowing all things and being able to do whatever you want, we fill our lives with anxiety and stress trying to vainly provide our own protection and comfort. In this season help us to grow in our faith and knowledge of you, your story, and your plan.

Advent Singing: Once in Royal David's City

Once in Royal David's City



Cecil F. Alexander, 1848

IRBY
Henry J. Gauntlett, 1849
arr. Bruce Benedict, 2007
(c) 2007 Cardiphonia Music

WEEK TWO *of* ADVENT

Character #1 — The Holy Spirit

The story of Jesus' birth is a wonderfully unique story in the history of humanity, and nothing shows us this more clearly than a brief look at the diverse cast of characters participated in this unrivalled event.

One of the first important characters to appear is the Holy Spirit. The same Spirit who moved over the waters of creation in Genesis 1 is now breathed into Mary to create the holy child. In this passage the "Most High" travels from the highest throne of heaven to visit his presence on the lowly home of Mary.

Luke 1: 34-38
34And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?"

35And the angel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. 36And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. 37For nothing will be impossible with God." 38And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.

Shedding some light...

This story is one of the great miracles of the Bible. It is utterly beyond our comprehension to understand or fathom how Mary could become pregnant from God. Yet God did it. He descended from his heights of his holy home into the midst of our broken and fleshly humanity. Mary never looked for God to do this. She was astonished by the visit. God pursued her in his plan to keep his promise of redemption. Stop for a moment and slowly reread this well-known story. Allow yourself to be captured by this picture of the God who loves you! Be amazed by the work of Holy Spirit—in creation and in Mary. And then consider the work of Holy Spirit in your life and continue in your astonishment.

Children's Prayer:

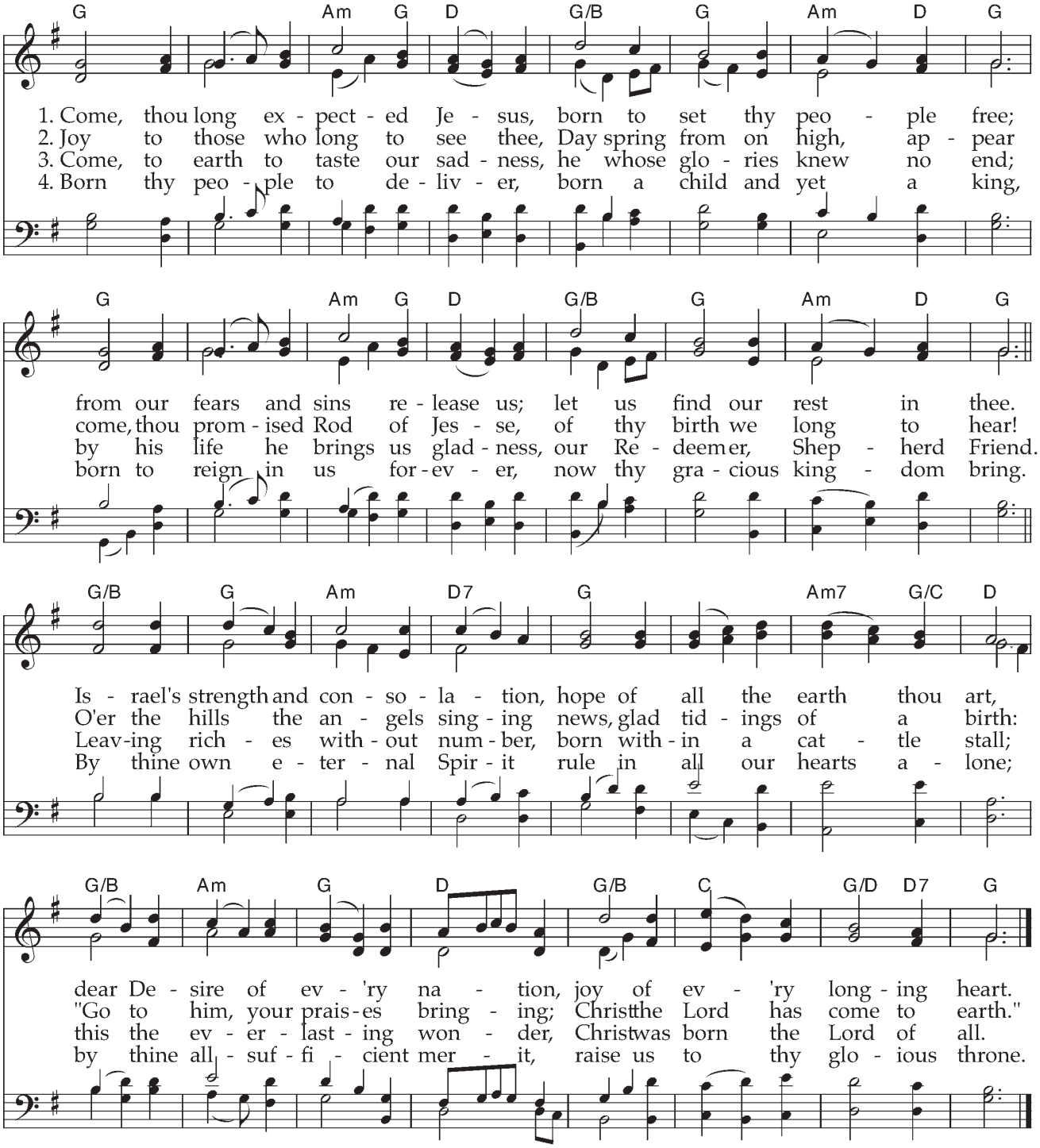
God, help us see the ways you've helped us—even in the ways that we didn't expect it. And help us believe that you will still help us.

Adults' Prayer

Wonderfully Wise God, we admit your ways are higher than ours and we fail in our ability to understand your great miracles on our behalf. Give us ears to hear and eyes to see so that we can marvel with Mary at the wonders of your son Jesus' birth. Don't let the familiarity of the story limit our amazement. Let us pause, consider, and be utterly astonished at what you did! Give us faith to believe what you can do—in us, in others, and in this world!

Advent Singing: Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus

Come, thou Long Expected Jesus



St. 1,4, Charles Wesley, 1744
St. 2-3 Mark Hunt, 1978
Text of stanzas 2&3 (c) 1978 ,
Intervasity Christian Fellowship. Used by Permission

HYFRYDOL 8.7.8.7.D.
Rowland Hugh Pritchad, 1855

WEEK TWO *of* ADVENT

Character # 2 — The Star and the Wise Men

The heavens were deeply attuned to the coming of the Savior. The star signified that creation had a part to play in displaying God's good news to the people of the whole world. God even allowed pagan astrologers from the east to recognize the message of the star: that a king would be born in Judea. Yet even the wise men were surprised to find that the king was not in Jerusalem! God needed to speak his word to them directly for them to find the humble location of Jesus' birth. When they arrived at the house, they presented gifts fit for a king (Isa 60:5-7): gold, frankincense, and myrrh. After paying homage to this newborn king, they traveled back to their homes.

Matthew 2:1-12
1Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, 2saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." 3When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; 4and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. 5They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:

6" 'And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel.' "

7Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. 8And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him." 9After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. 10When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.

11And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. 12And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

Shedding some light...

This story is about outsiders being invited to participate as insiders in the birth of Jesus. God uses the star to communicate the story of Jesus to those who are outside the covenant family of Israel and his written word. He doesn't just bring them as far as Jerusalem and then leave them hanging. He leads them into the very presence of Christ, where they can bring their gifts of tithe and worship. This is an amazing picture of all the nations bringing their gifts before the Lamb of God and a wonderful anticipation of the day when all the nations will worship Jesus as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. It also models and inspires us as we think about bringing our talents, gifts, and worship to Jesus during this season of Advent. Spend some time talking about what God has given you and how you can use those things to worship him.

Children's Prayer

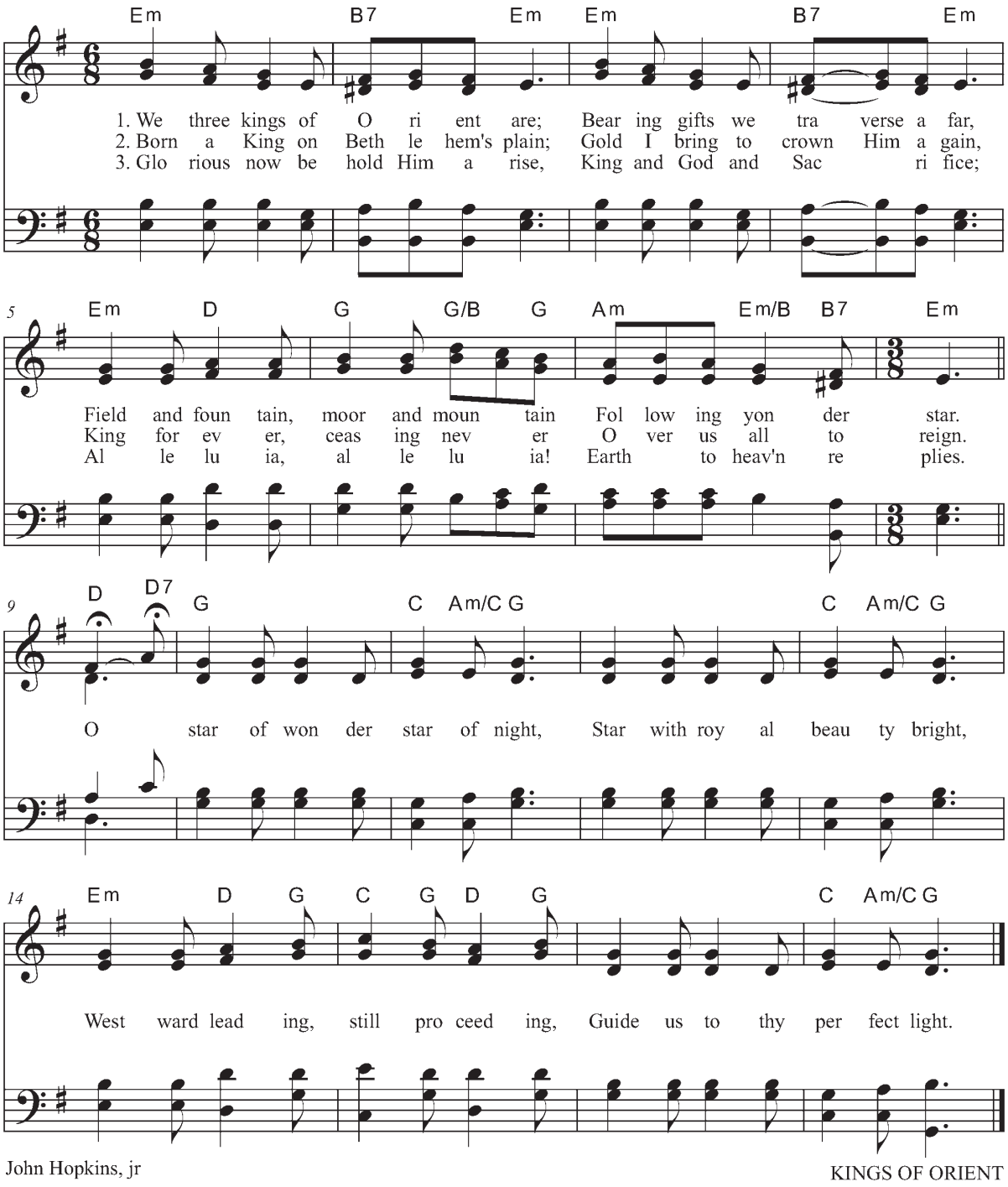
God, everything we have has comes from you. You have given us more than we deserve to get. Help us be thankful for what we have and help us be generous with what you have given us.

Adults' Prayer

Eternal King, when we look out upon your creation we marvel at your wondrous works and rejoice at their beauty. We are amazed at the ways your creation points us to you. We realize though, Lord, that we marvel in light of how you have revealed yourself in the Bible. May we seek in this season to know the depths and wonders of your "good news" ever more deeply so that we can share in the praises of all the nations.

Advent Singing: We Three Kings

We Three Kings



John Hopkins, jr

KINGS OF ORIENT

WEEK TWO *of* ADVENT

Character #3 — The Angel and the Heavenly Host

To show how significant the birth of Jesus is, we are given a glimpse of the angelic host only rivaled by the visions of John in the book of Revelation. Jesus' birth is a cataclysmic in-breaking of God's kingdom into the earthly realm. This is a visual picture of the Lord's prayer, "Thy Kingdom come." We can almost imagine how shocked the shepherds must have been as the glory of the Lord shone around them!

Luke 2:8-20

8And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. 10And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. 11For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. 12And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." 13And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

14"Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

15When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." 16And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. 17And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. 18And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. 19But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. 20And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Shedding some light...

God spares no expense at the announcement of Jesus' birth. He enlists not just a heavenly quartet, or a single shimmering soloist, but the whole heavenly throng, singing together as a big, heavenly gospel choir, rocking the foundations of humanity. The angels' message is simple and straightforward and not in the least bit clouded in celestial language or heavenly rhetoric. "Good News! The Savior is born!" with a chorus of "Glory to God" and "Peace on Earth." Talk about what the angels said and why those were the words they used to announce Jesus' birth.

Children's Prayer

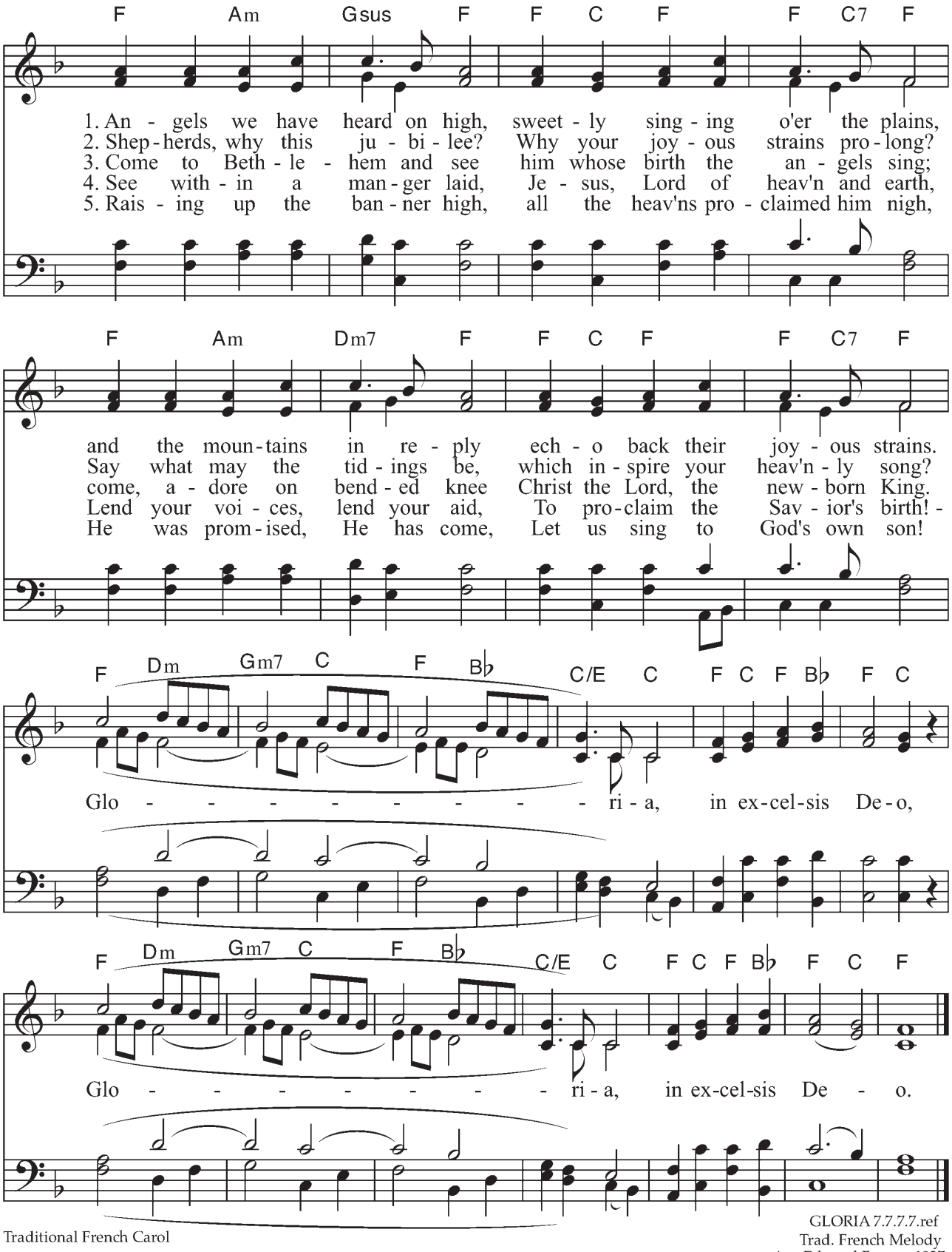
Dear Heavenly God, give us the same sense of joy and excitement as the angels who proclaimed Jesus' birth.

Adults' Prayer

Almighty God, when we find our hearts distracted in the busy-ness of this Christmas season, enamor us with the glory and joy of your presence. Let us understand why the birth of Jesus was "good news of great joy."

Advent Singing: Angels We Have Heard on High

Angels We Have Heard on High



Traditional French Carol

GLORIA 7.7.7.7.ref
Trad. French Melody
Arr. Edward Barner, 1937

Character # 4 — The Shepherds

Like the three wise men from far-off lands, the shepherds in their fields were unlikely candidates in the hierarchy of Jewish leadership to be the first to hear of this great king's birth. Yet God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise. It is not unlikely that in this scene with the angelic host we are reminded of who Jesus is: our great shepherd.

Luke 2:8-20
8And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. 10And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. 11For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. 12And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." 13And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

14"Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

15When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." 16And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. 17And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. 18And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. 19But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. 20And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Shedding some light...

The shepherds were not a highly regarded group of people, and their field was certainly a peculiar spot to unveil this grand message delivered by an angel host in all of its rehearsed splendor! The Christmas story continues to impress upon us that every bit of Jesus' story shatters the pomp and circumstance of the world. Humble scenes, cultural outcasts, and foreign visitors all receive front row tickets to the birth. In the bright lights and over-the-top window displays of Christmas, we need to rethink where to look to find Jesus. He was first found with the broken, the destitute, and the humble.

Children's Prayer

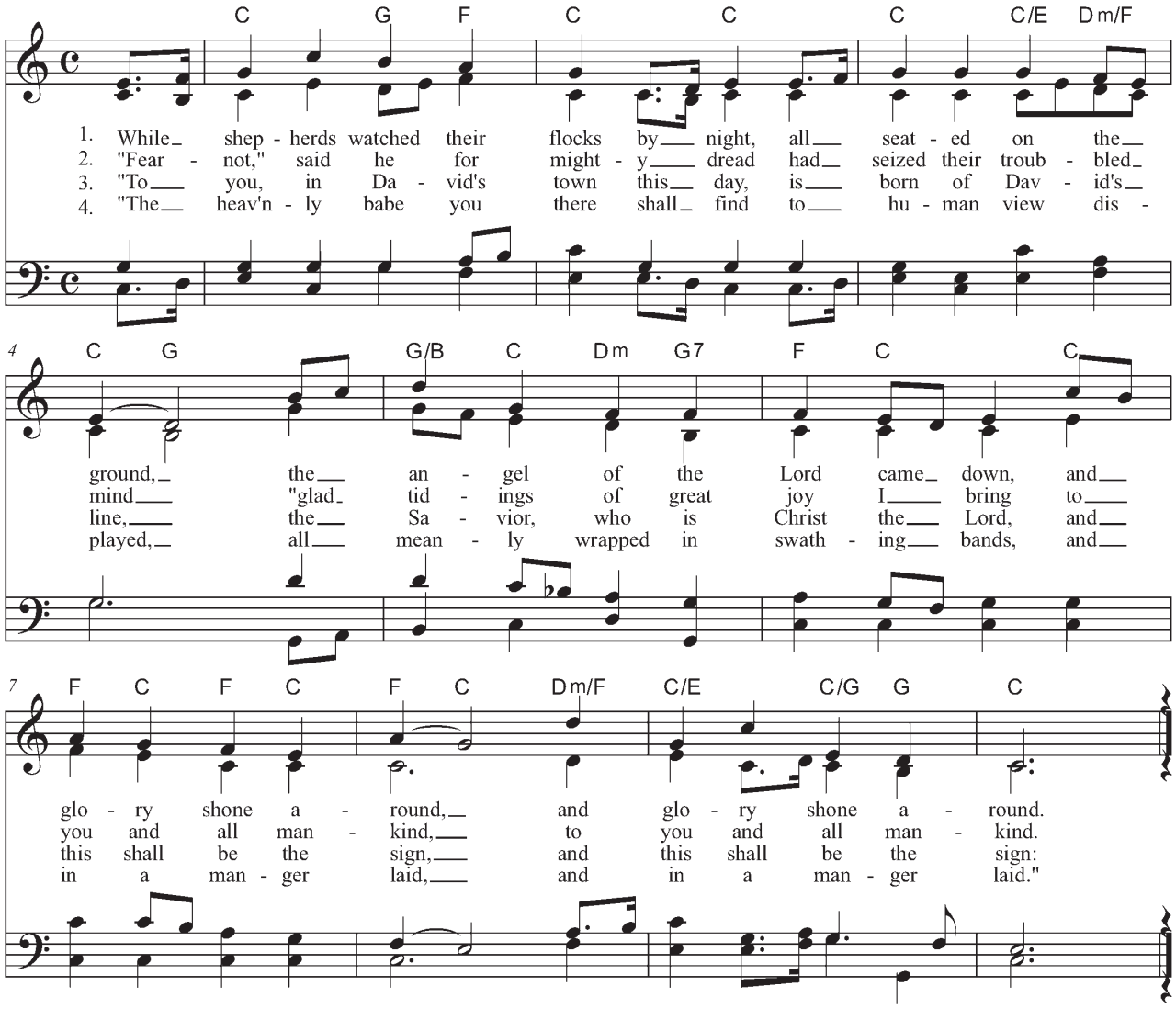
Jesus, as we celebrate your birth, help us not only think about ourselves, but help us also think about others. Help us think about our friends, our family, and those in need. And help us love them and serve them in a way that is pleasing to you.

Adults' Prayer

Dear Father, we so often forget the true beginnings of Jesus. We get so easily distracted by the desires and flash of the world. Help us to take time to practice humility and care, both for our own struggles and brokenness, as well as those around us in need.

Advent Singing: While Shepherds Kept Their Watch!

While Shepherds Kept Their Watch!



Nahum Tate, 1700

Christmas C.M
From Handel, Siroe, 1728
Arr. by Lowell Mason, 1821

WEEK THREE *of* ADVENT

Singing the Story #1 — The Song of Zechariah (The Benedictus)

You can imagine Zechariah, after nine months of being unable to speak, opening his mouth to prophecy after the birth of his son. In this piece of prophetic poetry, he uses Old Testament language to express how God is worthy of praise because he has acted according to his promises (Gen 22:16-18) to deliver his people through a descendant of David. In the second part of the song (verses 76-79) Zechariah addresses his newly born child, with literary allusions to Isa 40:3 and Mal 3:1.

Luke 1: 68-79
68Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has visited and redeemed his people
69and has raised up a horn of salvation for us
in the house of his servant David,
70as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,
71that we should be saved from our enemies
and from the hand of all who hate us;
72to show the mercy promised to our fathers
and to remember his holy covenant,
73the oath that he swore to our father Abraham,
to grant us 74that we,
being delivered from the hand of our enemies,
might serve him without fear,
75in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.
76And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord
to prepare his ways,
77to give knowledge of salvation to his people
in the forgiveness of their sins,
78because of the tender mercy of our God,
whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high
79to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.

Shedding some light...

When we sing the songs of Advent, in many ways we are singing the song of Zechariah. We are singing songs founded on the images and promises of hope and expectation. By the time of Zechariah the Jewish people hadn't heard from a true prophet of God in four hundred years. (Knowing this, you can start to understand Zechariah's hard heart in the face of Gabriel's message of good news.) For us, it has been over two thousand years since we have heard from the living Jesus. Every year we remember his birth, and the advent of the good news of his work. As we remember, we also hunger and long for him to return to complete the work of redemption in our lives and in the created world.

Children's Prayer

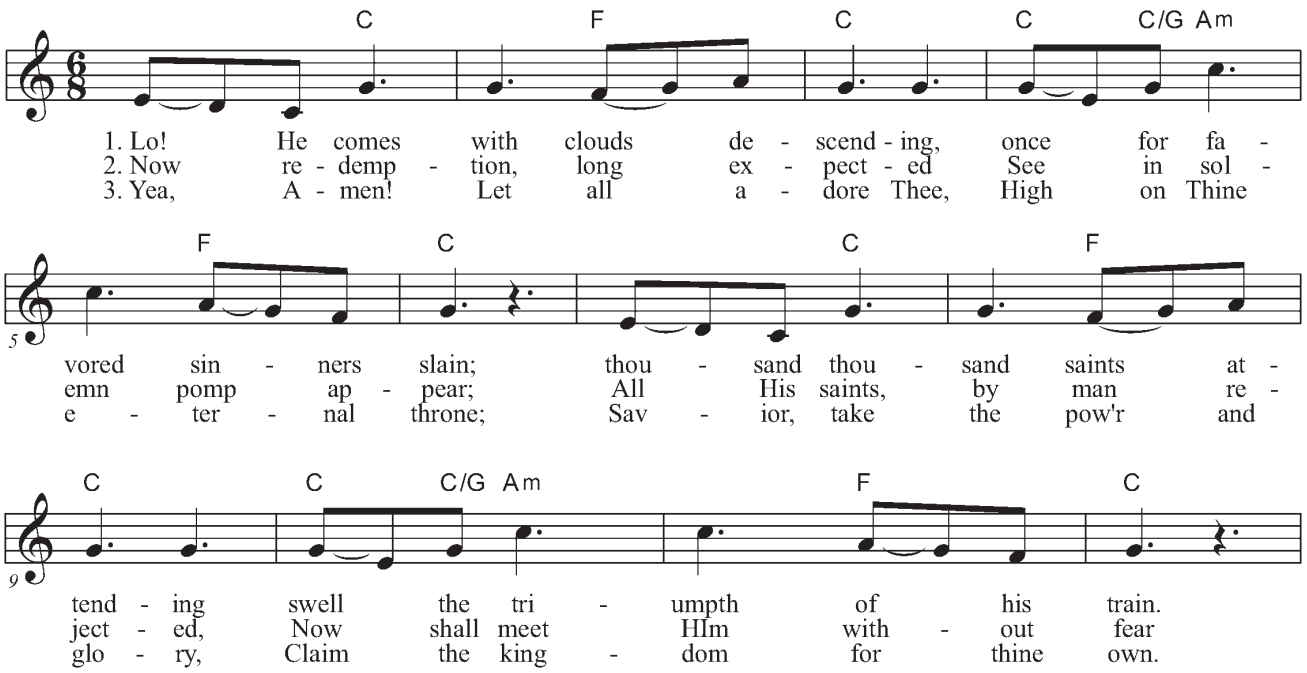
God, don't let the celebration of Christmas and all that it brings cause us to stop longing for your return to earth to make everything right—forever.

Adults' Prayer

Dear Father, help us to be rooted in the salvation history of your people. Help us to find hope and rest in your mighty works in history. During this season especially, quicken our spirits to meditate on the birth of Jesus Christ in history, the continued gift and work of the Holy Spirit, and Jesus' promised return. Amen. Come, Lord Jesus. Speed the day of your return.

Advent Singing: Lo! He Comes with Clouds Descending

Lo! He Comes with Clouds Descending



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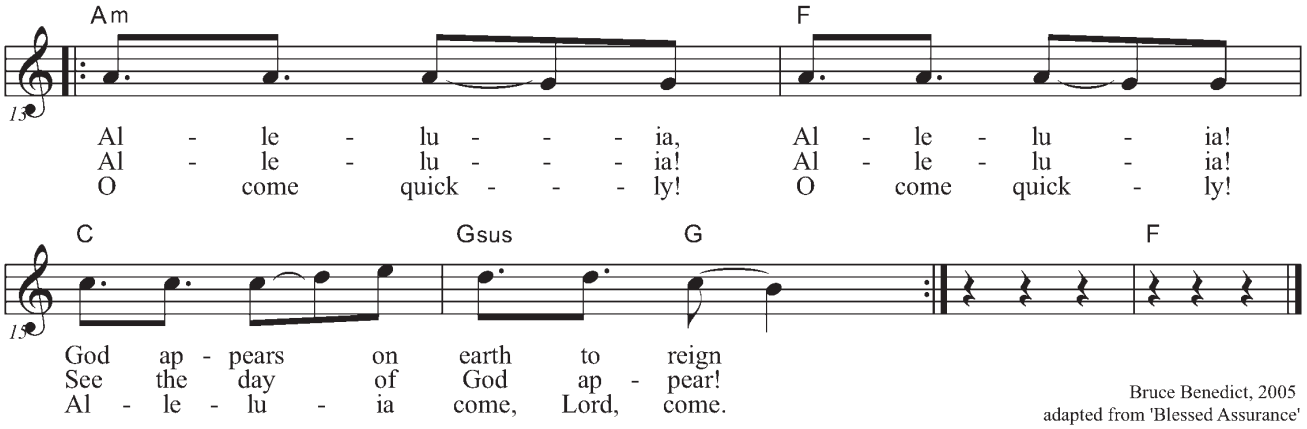


Bruce Benedict, 2005
adapted from 'Blessed Assurance'

WEEK THREE *of* ADVENT

Singing the Story #2 — The Song of Mary (The Magnificat)

Mary stands in an illustrious line of biblical women who have praised the Lord in song. Miriam was the first, who after the destruction of Pharaoh's army and the crossing of the Red Sea recounted in song the heroic event (Exodus 15). Deborah rejoiced in the Lord's power to free his people from oppression (Judges 5). Hannah praised the Lord in song when the Lord bestowed his gift of a child upon her (1 Sam 2:1-10). These images of victory and blessing are intertwined beautifully in Mary's song, which is known as the "The Magnificat."

Luke 1:46-55
46And Mary said,
"My soul magnifies the Lord,
47and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
48for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.
For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
49for he who is mighty has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
50And his mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
51He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;
52he has brought down the mighty from their thrones
and exalted those of humble estate;
53he has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent away empty.
54He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
55as he spoke to our fathers,
to Abraham and to his offspring forever.

Shedding some light...

Mary's song borrows much in inspiration from the song of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2. In this time of God's bewildering presence, Mary sought refuge and hope in the words of Scripture. Her song mirrors the Psalms in many ways. Read through Psalm 113 together

this week and allow it to shape your words and heart of praise. And then consider again Mary's song. What does her song tell you about God? In what ways can her words find an echo in your praise?

Children's Prayer

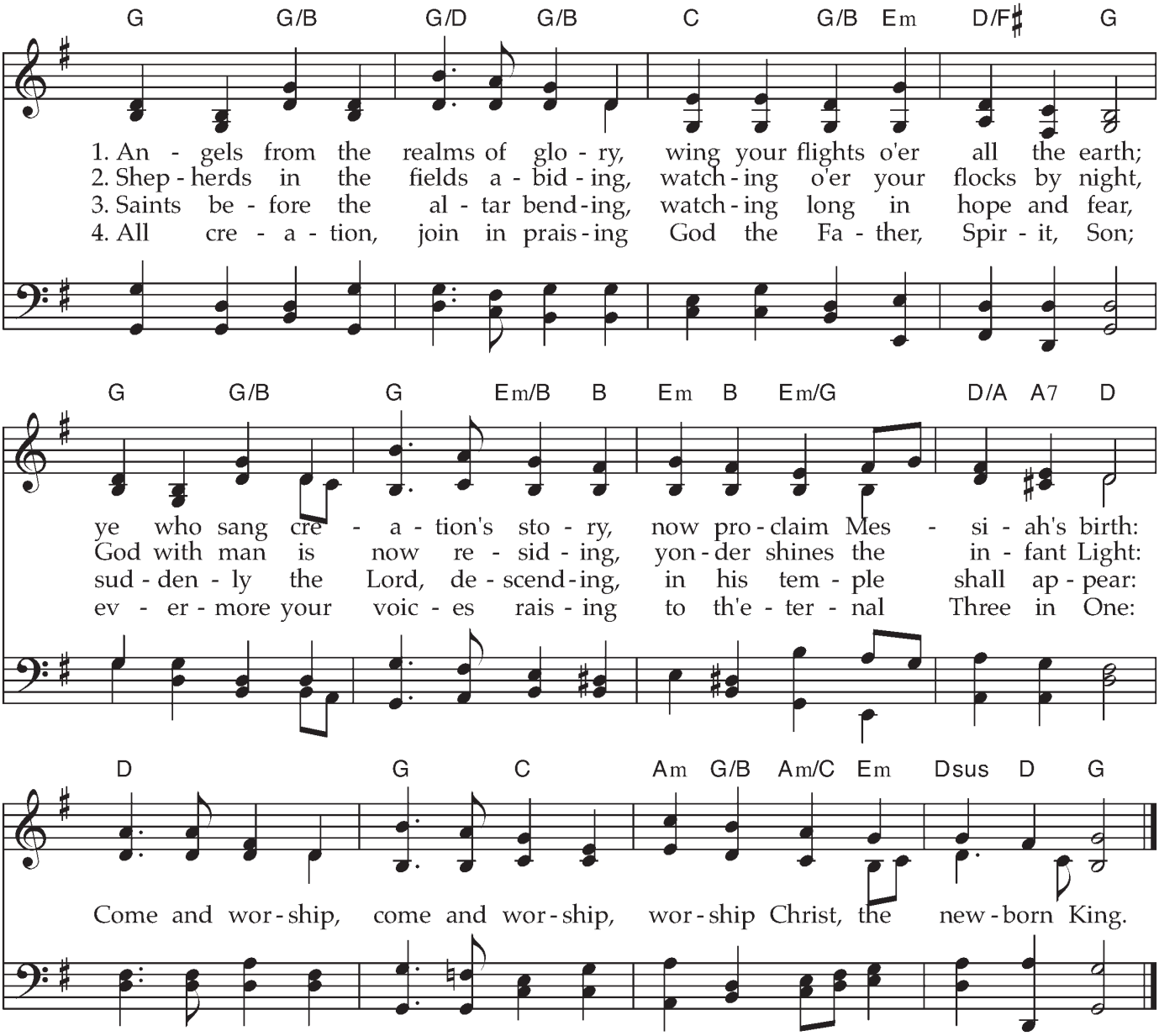
God, thank you for loving us so that we can love you.

Adults' Prayer

Dear Father, when we meditate on these words, we share in the feelings of Mary's own unworthiness for your love and grace in our lives. Father, give us true humility and hunger for your Son's praise.

Advent Singing: Angels from the Realms of Glory

Angels from the Realms of Glory



Text: James Montgomery

Music: Henry Smart

WEEK THREE *of* ADVENT

Singing the Story #3 — The Song of the Heavenly Host

In pictures and descriptions of Jesus' birth, the angels attending are often portrayed as chubby cherubim, lightly plucking at harp and lyre. They hardly seem scary, or the type of characters that would frighten hardened shepherds. Yet this multitude broke through the heavenly curtain and with regal precision proclaimed in swift accord the present situation.

Luke 2:9-14
9And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. 10And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. 11For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. 12And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." 13And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

14"Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

Shedding some light...

The heavenly band of angels was an angelic 'host' or literally an army of angels. They came to announce peace, but also to signify that God's enemies would be destroyed through this coming Savior, Christ the Lord. Give praise to God, who sits on the highest throne of heaven and brings peace on earth for those who bear his favor.

Children's Prayer

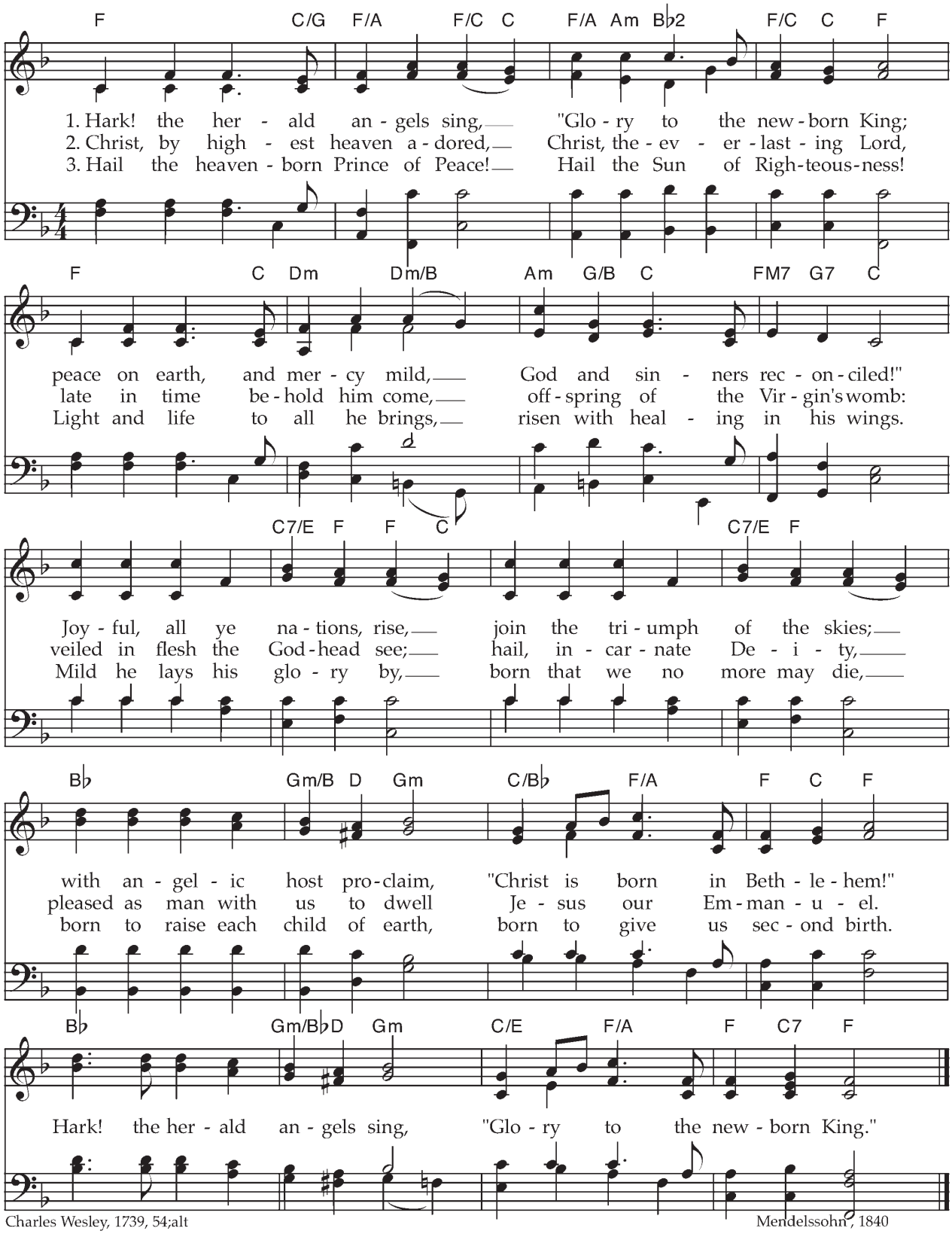
Great and Powerful God, there is nothing you cannot do. No one can stop what you plan to do. Nothing can get in your way. Thank you for using that power to defeat your enemies.

Adults' Prayer

Dear Majestic God, you spared no expense in securing peace for us. You took your son from a swaddling babe to a crucifixion and destroyed sin and death for us. May we carry on about Jesus as the angels did, filling our lives with songs of praise to him, our Savior and Lord.

Advent Singing: Hark the Herald Angels Sing

Hark the Herald Angels Sing



Charles Wesley, 1739, 54;alt

Mendelssohn, 1840

Singing the Story #4 — The Song of Simeon (Nunc Dimittis)

This song captures Simeon's gratitude to God. It also captures Simeon's readiness to die. Yet, it is sung in joy because Simeon has seen the promise fulfilled. It is a wonderful song that captures both God's desire to extend redemption to the whole world, as well as a blessing with a caveat: this child will cause both the rise and fall of many in Israel.

Luke 2: 22-35
22And when the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord 23(as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord") 24and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the Law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons." 25Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. 26And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. 27And he came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law, 28he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said,

29"Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace,
according to your word;
30for my eyes have seen your salvation
31that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
32a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and for glory to your people Israel.

33And his father and his mother marveled at what was said about him. 34And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, "Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed 35(and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed."

Shedding some light...

In the gospel message there is an intertwined narrative of judgment as well as of salvation. Simeon illustrates that Jesus will be both a great light to the Gentiles, as a well as a sword that would pierce our hearts. We can never experience the joy of Jesus without first facing the sinful thoughts and actions of our own hearts. Part of the good news of the gospel is

that it helps us understand the horror of our sin as we find ourselves in the arms of our loving Savior.

Children's Prayer

Dear God, thank you for forgiving our sins and helping us become more like Jesus.

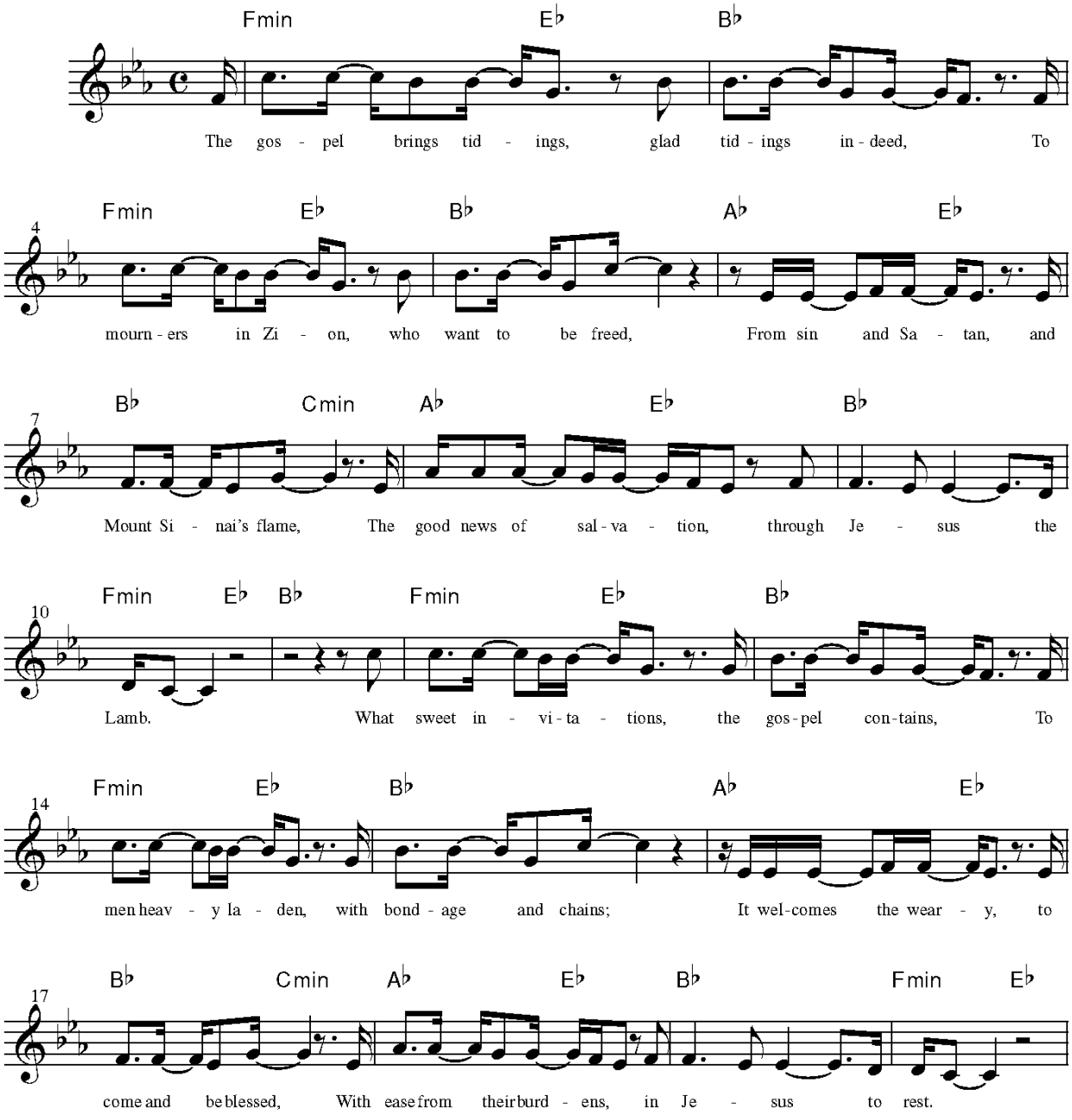
Adults' Prayer

Dear Father, you sent us Jesus, the true light of the world. Yet we have often desired to hide in darkness rather than live in the revealing light of your Spirit. Give us eyes that see our sin and dwell on your salvation.

Advent Singing: The Gospel Brings Tidings

The Gospel Brings Tidings

Words: William Gadsby, 1773-1844.
Music: Brian T. Murphy &
Clint Wells, 2005.



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The Gospel Brings Tidings

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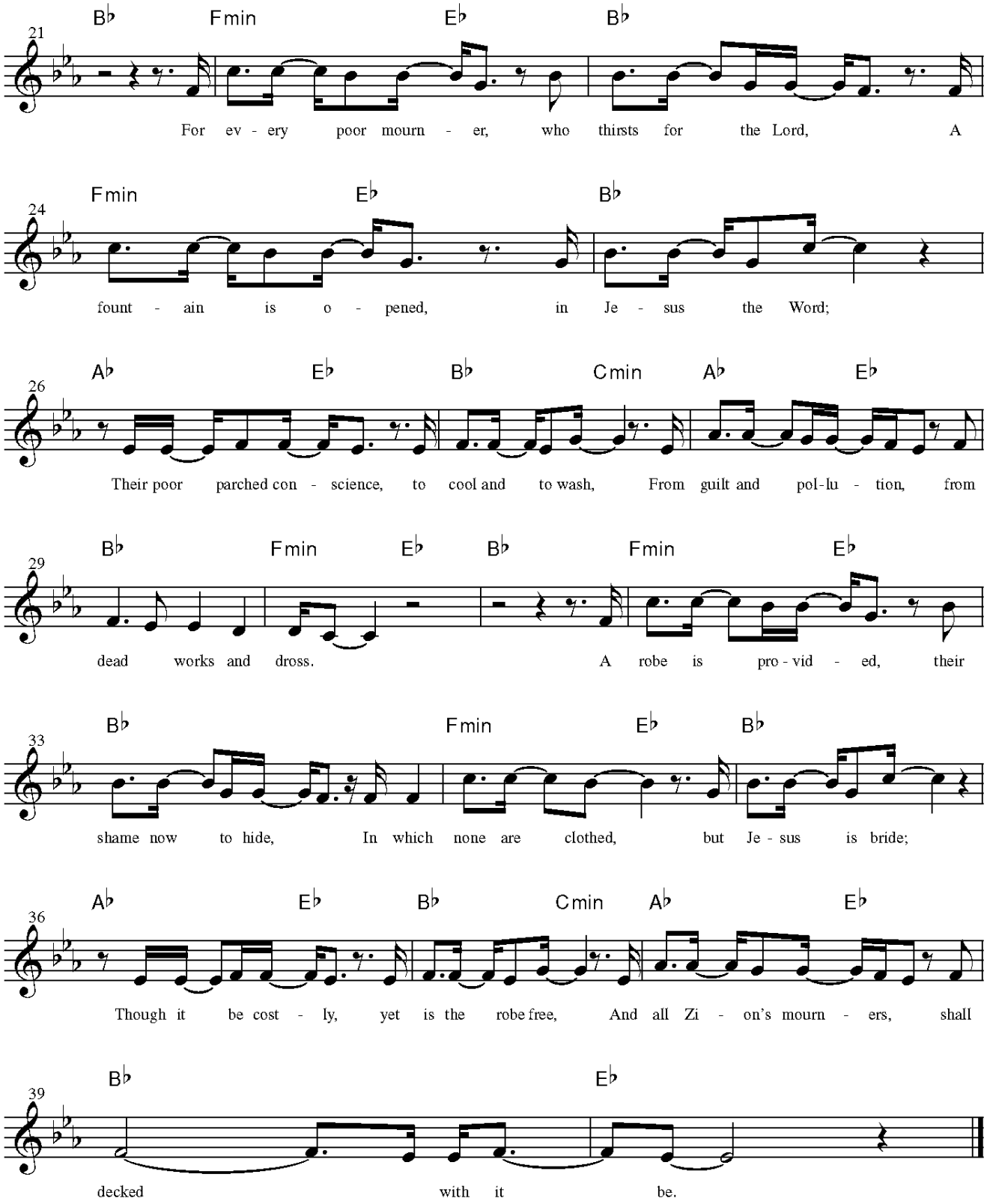

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WEEK FOUR *of* ADVENT

The Darker Side of Christmas #1 — The Scandal of Jesus' Genealogy

If you actually take the time to read through the list of names in Jesus genealogy you find four very unusual names present for a typical genealogy. Matthew lists four women whose own background was either Gentile (non-Jewish), scandalous, or both! You can read the texts yourself to get the full picture: Tamar (Genesis 38), Rahab (Joshua 6), Ruth (Ruth 4), and Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11), who isn't even listed by name.

Matthew 1:1–17
1The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

2Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, 3and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Ram, 4and Ram the father of Amminadab, and Amminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, 5and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, 6and Jesse the father of David the king.

And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah, 7and Solomon the father of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam the father of Abijah, and Abijah the father of Asaph, 8and Asaph the father of Jehoshaphat, and Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, and Joram the father of Uzziah, 9and Uzziah the father of Jotham, and Jotham the father of Ahaz, and Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, 10and Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, and Manasseh the father of Amos, and Amos the father of Josiah, 11and Josiah the father of Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon.

12And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Shealtiel, and Shealtiel the father of Zerubbabel, 13and Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, and Abiud the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor, 14and Azor the father of Zadok, and Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliud, 15and Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, 16and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ.

17So all the generations from Abraham to David were fourteen generations, and from David to the deportation to Babylon fourteen generations, and from the deportation to Babylon to the Christ fourteen generations

Shedding some light...

Matthew creates a historical snapshot of Jesus' family line where each name is carefully chosen. It's hard to say for sure why he includes these women… they were both infamous characters and examples of people outside of the Jewish family on whom God lavished his grace. Overall you should get the impression that Jesus is the fulfillment of both God's promises to the patriarchs of the faith (Abraham and David) as well as fulfilling his promise to declare salvation to all kinds of people from all the nations!

Children's Prayer

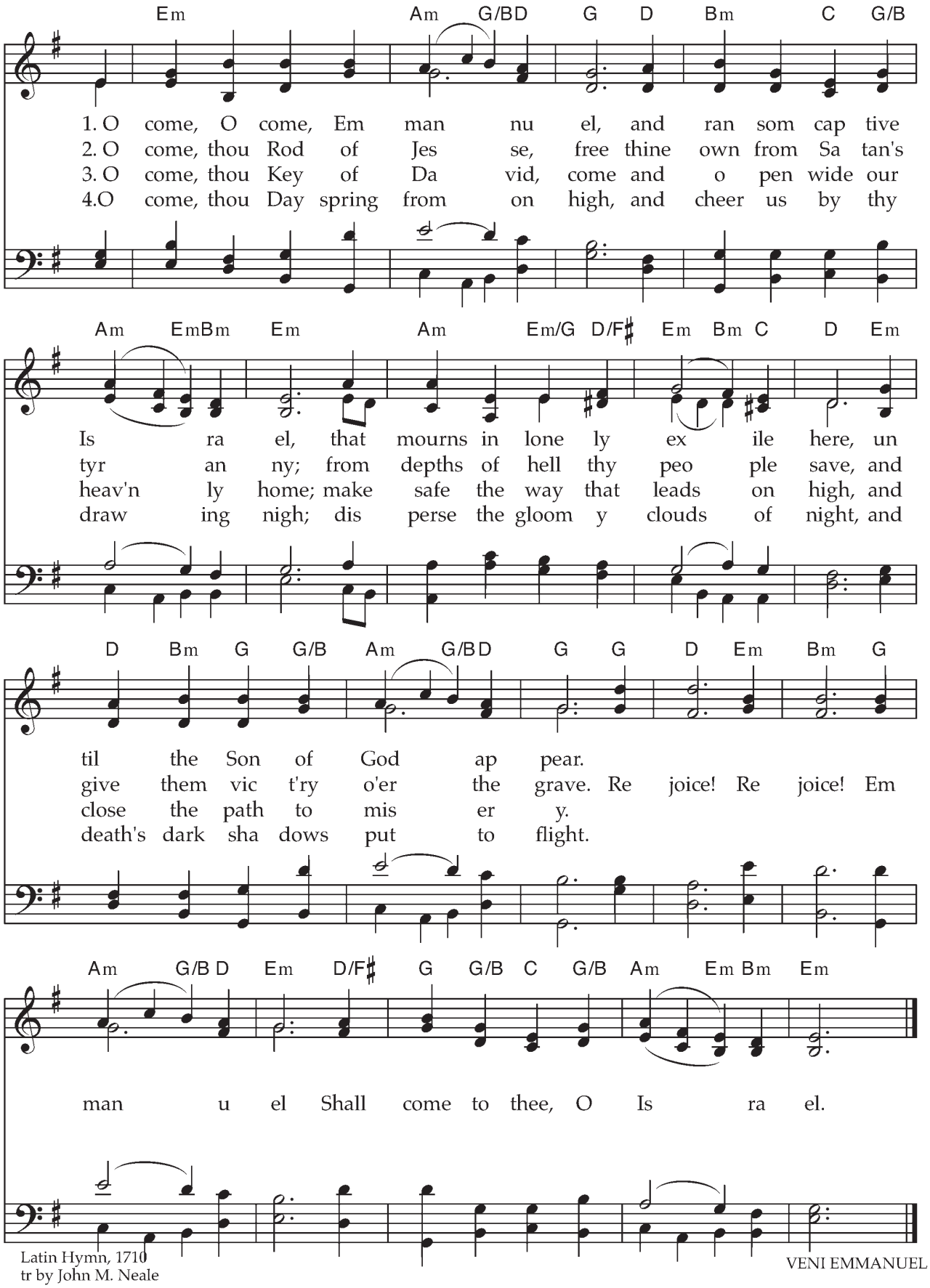
God, we pray that you would make your Church grow all around the world.

Adults' Prayer

Dear God of History, you have known us since our birth, and you have known us since before time began. Help us to praise you as the God who proclaims peace to all kinds of people people. Help us praise you as the God that desires all kinds of people from all the nations to enter into your family and to call on the name of your son Jesus. Make your name great, through your people in your Church, throughout the entire world. And use us to accomplish this great and glorious plan.

Advent Singing: O Come, O Come, Emmanuel

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel



Latin Hymn, 1710
tr by John M. Neale

VENI EMMANUEL

WEEK FOUR *of* ADVENT

The Darker Side of Christmas #2 — The Disbelief of Zechariah

Men have never had much success winning a quarrel with the angels. It got Jacob a dislocated hip and Zechariah struck dumb. In response to Gabriel's incredible speech about a son that will be born to him, a son who will be great before the Lord, and will bring joy and gladness to many souls, Zechariah, a man that served God with his whole life, finds a quick word of disbelief falling easily from his lips.

Zechariah's mind should have been cast back to the faithful women of the Old Testament who gave birth when they were "advanced in years" because of the goodness of the Lord. Instead he is struck dumb and exits the temple waving his arms like a fool. His wife Elizabeth(as we read a few verses later), has a much godlier response to the work of the Lord on her behalf.

Luke 1:8-23
8Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, 9according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. 10And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. 11And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense.

12And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. 13But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. 14And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, 15for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. 16And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, 17and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared."

18And Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years." 19And the angel answered him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. 20And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time." 21And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple. 22And when he came out, he was unable to speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the temple. And he kept making signs to them and remained mute. 23And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

Shedding some light...

God wants us to know that even those in the inner circle of God's miraculous work were confounded by their own sin and lack of faith from hearing the "good news." God is a patient Father and a long-suffering teacher in regard to his message sinking into our hearts and minds. Think about the places and reasons you find it difficult to believe God.

Children's Prayer

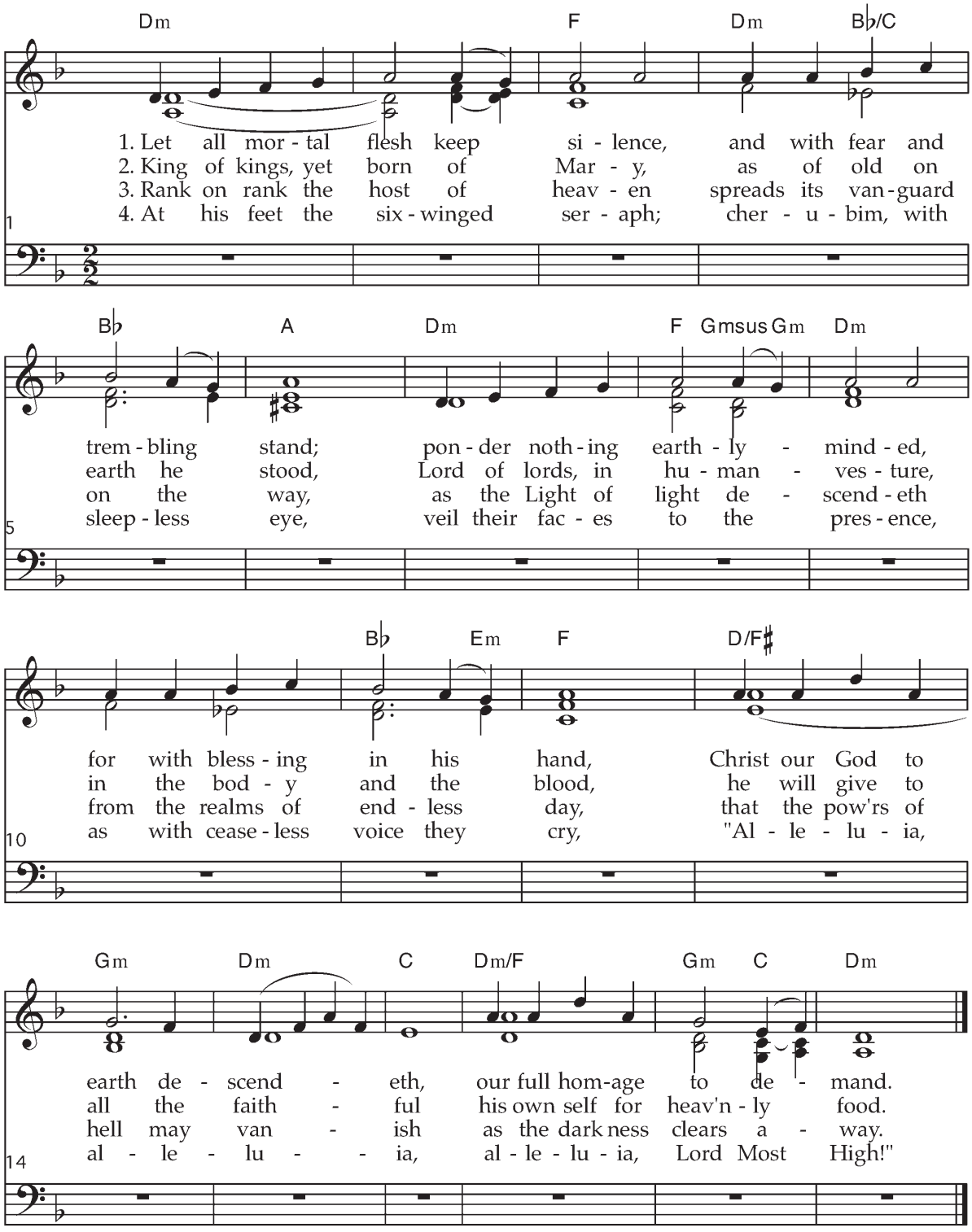
God, help us know you better. And help us believe you better.

Adults' Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father, the news that you bring to us in the story of Jesus is hard to hear; it is beyond our full understanding. Give us faith to grasp the will of heaven and joy to live in the work of the Spirit.

Advent Singing: Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silent

Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silent



Traditional French Melody, 17th Century

Liturgy of St. James, 5th Century

WEEK FOUR *of* ADVENT

The Darker Side of Christmas #3 — To Divorce Her Quietly

Even in the midst of these tremendous stories of God's miraculous power in the birth of Jesus, we find that the humanity of the other characters remains transparent. Both Matthew and Luke want us to know that from the very beginning Jesus' story is fraught with trials and sufferings. Even in the midst of Mary finding out she is pregnant with a child from the Holy Spirit, Matthew tells us that Joseph considered divorcing her silently, assuming that she has committed adultery, a sin punishable by death. Committed adultery—in the midst of their betrothal to be married! This is pretty scandalous stuff to be published in what we often see portrayed as the pristine birth of shiny baby Jesus.

> *Matthew 1:18-20*
> *18Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. 19And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. 20But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit."*

Shedding some light...

This scene reminds us of the stress, humanity, and conflict of our own lives. The holiday season is a time that emerges to us in both the blessings of family life and the pain of family dysfunction. Even as the Lord speaks to Joseph, we need the Lord to speak into our relationships so that they too can reflect his hope and power.

Children's Prayer

Father God, help us to love our family well.

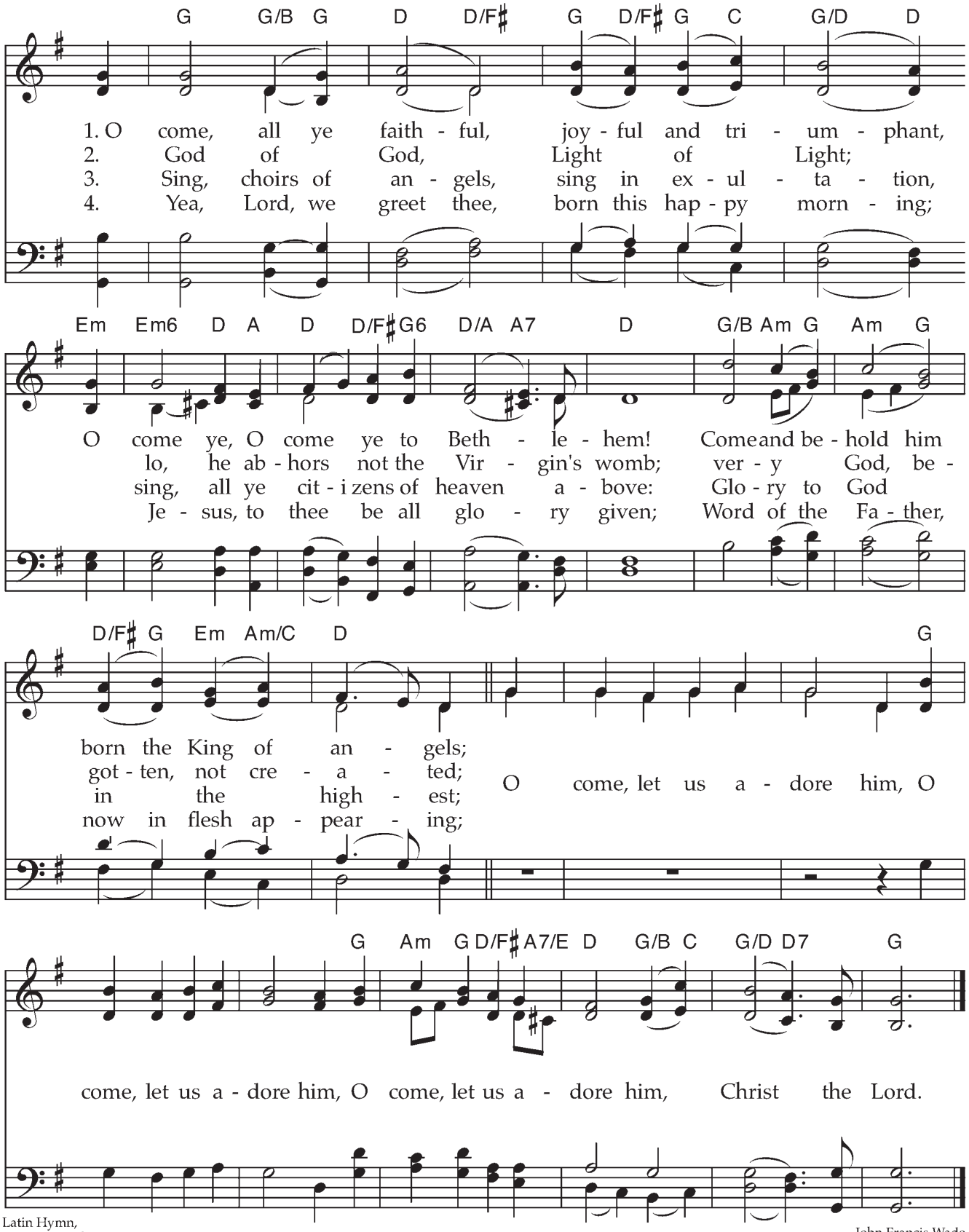
Adults' Prayer

Dear Father, we are so thankful that you speak into not only our own lives, but into our families and spiritual communities. Forgive us for the ways we seek to arrogantly stay independent. Forgive us for the pride in our hearts that often shows itself through the ways we refuse to allow others to help and serve us. Forgive us for the anger we feel and conflicts that arise when people don't give us what we want. Continue to speak into our relationships—bringing honesty, hope, humility, and healing. And continue to speak

through our relationships, that as we see the ways your Spirit is working in others, we can understand you better and praise you for the ways you continue to make your children more and more like your son.

Advent Singing: O Come All Ye Faithful

O Come All Ye Faithful



Latin Hymn,
ascirbed to John F Wade
tr by Frederick Oakley

John Francis Wade
ADESTE FIDELES
Irreg meter

WEEK FOUR *of* ADVENT

The Darker Side of Christmas #4 — Herod and the Infants of Bethlehem

The story of Herod and the infants of Bethlehem is a horrific episode of the birth narrative that is almost universally absent from Sunday school accounts of the story. Yet it is fundamental to understanding the hope that is present in Jesus' birth. Here is one who will finally lead his people from slavery and persecution to the Promised Land. God wants to show that this infant born in a manger is uniting himself to the history of God's struggling people.

The story, in itself, casts shadows of Pharaoh's slaughter of the Israelite children in Egypt (Exodus 1:22), and Matthew helps us remember the children of Rachel who were killed by the Babylonians when they plundered Israel into exile (Jer 31:15-17). Yet even in Rachel's inconsolable grief, God promises future hope and for his child Israel in his son Jesus.

Matthew 2:16-18
16Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men.

17Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah:

18"A voice was heard in Ramah,
weeping and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be comforted, because they are no more.

Shedding some light...

In Herod we see an evil king whose rule and power is threatened by one who is divinely appointed to rule. Jesus is the king who will bring a new relationship between God and man and will lead his people to true salvation and victory. In the face of insurmountable evil and sorrow, we see God working his purposes to heal, restore, and renew hope… a hope that will be ultimately secured and anchored in the cross and resurrection. As you feel the sorrow present in evil and suffering, grieve. But grieve with hope, for a new day has

dawned.

Children's Prayer

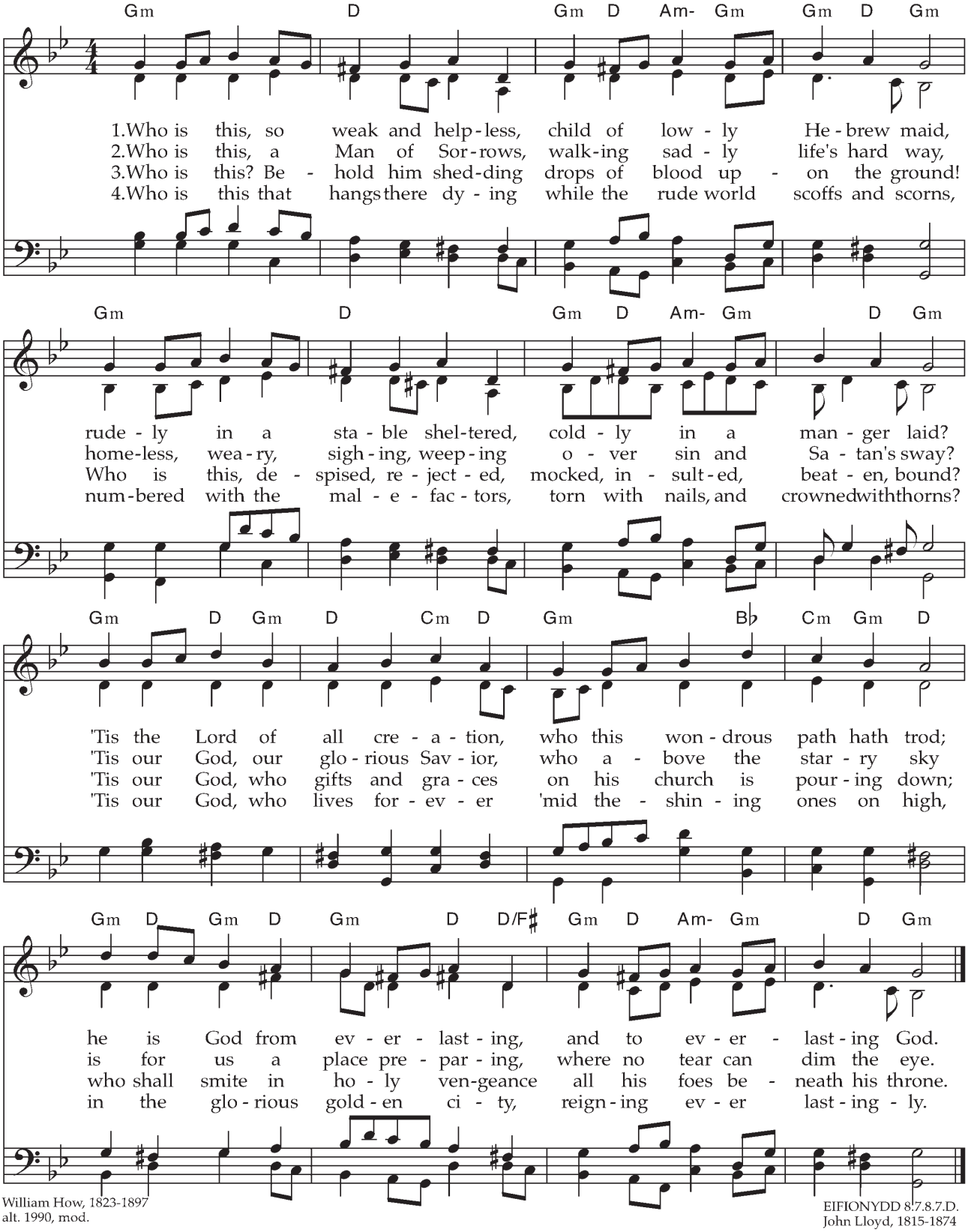
Great God, as we think about things we don't understand, help us remember that one day you will bring an end to sickness, sorrow, pain, death, and evil.

Adults' Prayer

Dear Father, we have all wept in the stark reality of evil and suffering in this world. We open our eyes daily to see a world still so broken from sin. Continue to give us joy and hope rooted in a savior who shared in the world's tragedy and humanity. Soften our hard hearts with the songs of the angels and the outpouring of God's Spirit. And continue to bring the blessings of your kingdom throughout the whole world.

Advent Singing: Who is This?

Who is This?



William How, 1823-1897
alt. 1990, mod.

EIFIONYDD 8.7.8.7.D.
John Lloyd, 1815-1874

Christmas day

The Birth of Jesus Christ

Luke 2:1-7
1In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3And all went to be registered, each to his own town. 4And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, 5to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. 6And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. 7And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

Shedding some light...

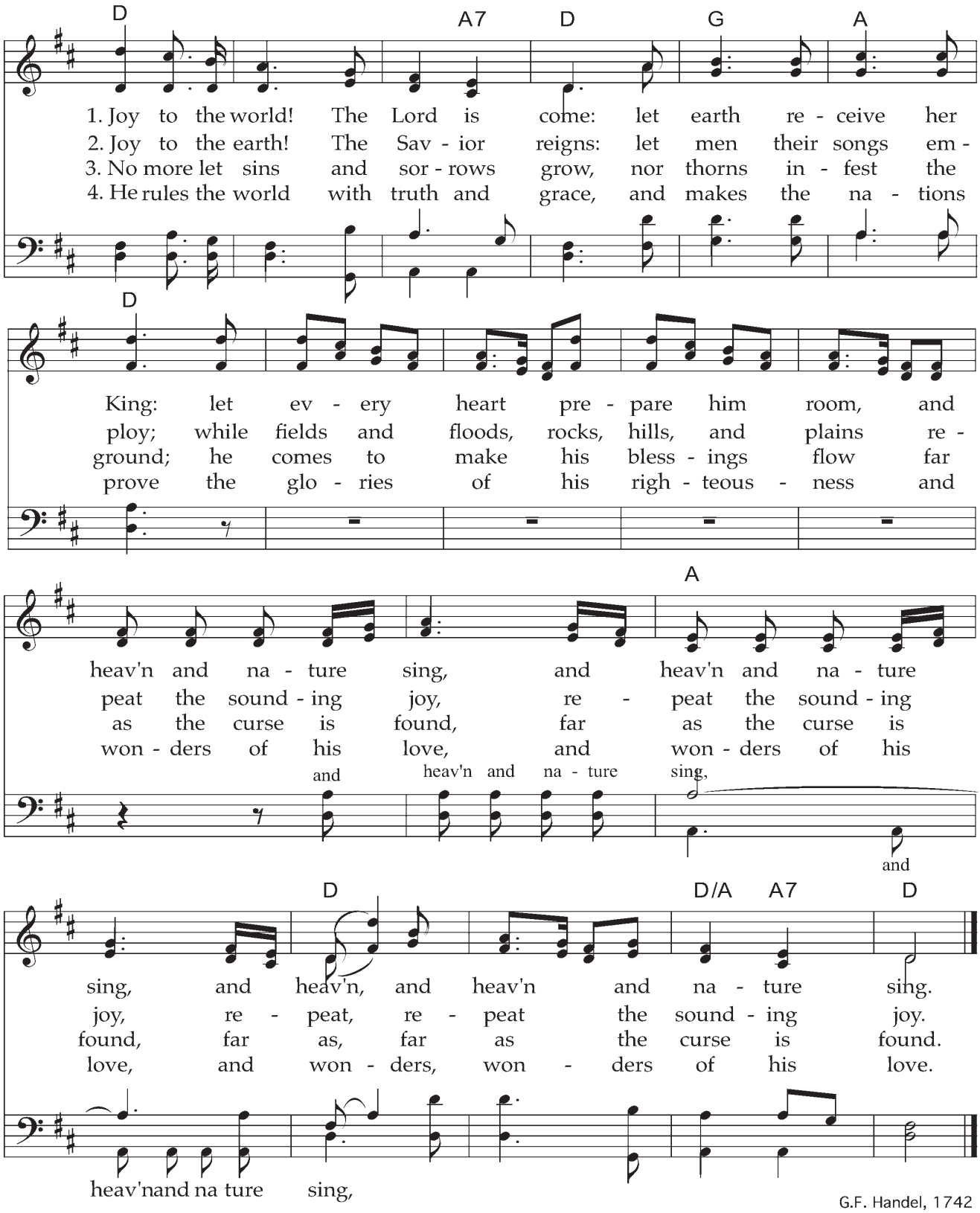
It all seems so simple and ordinary: An imperial edict, a pregnant teenager, a soon-to-be husband, and a town full of people simply following the law of the land. Ordinary events of history, ordained by God as part of the greatest miracle in the history of the world: The Son of God being born as a child in the city of David. And it all happened when "the time came."
In Galatians 4:4-5 Paul writes, *"But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons."* The God who rules history, entered our history, to claim us and all our tomorrows as his own.
This Christmas morning, join the Apostle Paul as he proclaims the gloriousness of the gospel (Gal 3:16):

Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness:
He was manifested in the flesh,
vindicated by the Spirit,
seen by angels,
proclaimed among the nations,
believed on in the world,
taken up in glory.

And join the Apostle John as he prays in response to Jesus' proclamation, *"Surely I am coming soon,"* with the following: *"Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!" (Rev 22:20).*

Christmas Day Prayer and Hymn: Joy to the World!

Joy to the World!



Isaac Watts, 1719
Based on Psalm 98

G.F. Handel, 1742

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