

Christmas Cantata 2007

Christmas comes again. It is the season of Advent, the season of waiting, the season of preparing to receive the Christ child into our lives again. All around us are the signs of the season, in the red and green of festive decorations, and the purple of the Church's anticipation; in the smell of hot chocolate and the taste of cinnamon; in the sounds of ringing bells and carolers' voices; in the glitter and sparkle of holiday lights; in the tingling touch of wintry air. We join in the bustle ourselves, wrapped up in the season's chores like packages in brown paper. We are in a hurry, for Christmas is very near and there is much to be done.

But now, this morning, just for a little while, slow down a bit. Slow down and listen to the season. We are not the first to be looking forward to the birth of a Savior. Generations of faithful people waited in hope for the coming of the Messiah. They looked ahead to the promise of God, a promise they knew would be fulfilled. And when it was fulfilled at last, what wonder it brought with it! In a small village, in an out-of-the-way Roman province, the promise came at last, and when it came, it came shining.

Music: *Where the Promise Shines*

No one thought God's promise would be fulfilled in such a way. The Messiah everyone expected was going to be a king, a great leader and ruler whose birth would be recognized and hailed by all. And this ruler would sit on a throne and other nations would immediately bow down to him and God's people would share immediately in his glory and power.

How wrong they were! The promise was fulfilled, and the Messiah came. But he was born not in a palace, but in a stable. He grew to manhood in a small village, not a great city. And he did not live as a mighty king, but as a humble wandering teacher. Worst of all, he died a cruel death on a cross. How could this be the Messiah? What a wonder, that the great King of all creation should come to die for sinners.

Music: *I Wonder As I Wander*

This wonderful birth brought with it a night of wonders. Not great kings or learned scholars, but humble shepherds first received the news of his coming. Alone on a hillside, drowsy with the late night, they were startled awake by amazing voices and glorious light. They scrambled to their feet, preparing to flee with their flocks, and were stopped in their tracks by the angel's declaration: Don't be afraid!

Hardly an easy command to follow, but the shepherds listened, and heard amazing news: a Savior had been born and lay in a manger nearby. They ran to see, and were astonished at what they found. There in the stable lay a baby, the one who had been promised ages ago, and they knelt in wonder at what they beheld. It was too much for them to take in: too much light, too much sound, too much good news. It was all that had been promised, and so much more.

Music: *Too Much Light for Midnight*

The trembling shepherds gathered around the manger in awe. Here among the familiar warmth of quiet beasts they began to feel the serene wonder of the night. The baby's mother held him in her calm, loving embrace. The shouts of angel voices faded into the night, and the bright lights of their presence dimmed until only the stars shone in the sky.

The silence grew around them and became holy. Now, instead of great heavenly voices, the stillness of the night took hold of them. The night itself paused to adore the birth of her King, this infant who was Son of God. The night wrapped them all in peace and holy silence.

Music: *Silent Night*

Then, in the silence, the baby stirred. He cried a little, as babies will, and sank back into sleep, soothed by his mother's soft voice. The shepherds and beasts held their breath, fearful of waking him, but in the calm of the night the baby who was Savior of the world was sleeping soundly again.

Some say that in the night a sweet smell of roses filled the air, as the wind whispered in the trees and the night birds sang their lullabies to the Son of God. Another wonder in a night of wonders? Perhaps it was simply the overwhelming experience of being in the presence of God's holy Son. Or perhaps, in its own joy at the Savior's birth, creation offered all its own praises, wind and bird song and sweet flowers' fragrance, to join in the Virgin's lullaby.

Music: *The Virgin's Slumber Song*

The night drew on, and all too soon the shepherds knew it was time to leave. They made their final bows to the baby and walked back to their fields, rejoicing at all they had seen and heard. Surely God's promise had been fulfilled in their very presence! How amazing a night it had been for them!

As they walked back under the starry sky they asked themselves: what would they call this baby, this Son of God born into their midst in such an unlikely place? They knew the old names the prophets had offered. What could they call the Son of God, the pretty baby lying in the manger? Would it be Emmanuel, God With Us? Would it be the ancient title of King of Kings? Or perhaps simply Jesus, the very name of Savior? What would they call this beautiful baby born in Bethlehem?

Music: *What 'Cha Gonna Call The Pretty Little Baby?*

The shepherds returned to their flocks, but the infant in the manger slumbered on. The angel voices echoed in their minds, as they lay down again under the brightly shining stars of that long-ago holy night. Did they know that the world's long night of sin was coming to an end? Did they realize that the baby whose manger they had knelt before would end the cruel reign of evil in their lives? Did they understand at all what they had seen?

Perhaps not, but they knew they had seen a great and holy wonder. Their lives would change in ways they could not then imagine, but they lay back down under the stars with a peace

in their hearts that had never been there before. Under the stars, in that holy night, they knew they had witnessed the coming of the long-promised Savior of all the world.

Music: *O Holy Night*

The shepherds went back to their flocks, and on a later night the strange wise men from the east also came and went. The holy night drew to its close, and the promise of the Savior was fulfilled in his life. We look back on that night and we know how the story ends. Perhaps that knowledge tempts us to rush ahead, to get on with our lives.

But in this holy season, we are called to stop for a while and kneel at the manger in the shepherds' place. The holiness of that night, the glory of the angels, the peace of Mary's lullaby: all are still waiting for us to stop for a time and experience them again.

In this holy and joyful season, let the peace that came to the shepherds come to you, too. Listen and hear the angel's voices. Behold the glory of the star and the shining face of the infant Son of God. Feel in your heart the holy presence of the newborn Savior. And join with the host of angels to proclaim the glorious good news: Christ is born in Bethlehem!

Music: *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*

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