

CFBC Hymns Class 50

Hymns for Advent...Celebrating Fulfilled Prophecy

"...all flesh shall see the token, that his word is never broken"

Comfort, comfort all my people

Words: Johann Olearius, 1671; translated, Catherine Winkworth, 1863

1 "Comfort, comfort all my people;
speak of peace," so says our God.
"Comfort those who sit in darkness,
groaning from their sorrows' load.
Speak to all Jerusalem
of the peace that waits for them;
tell them that their sins I cover,
that their warfare now is over."

2 All their sins our God will pardon,
blotting out each dark misdeed;
all that well deserved his anger
he no more will see or heed.
They have suffered many a day;
now their griefs have passed away.
God will change their aching sadness
into ever-springing gladness.

3 John the Baptist's voice is crying
in the desert far and near,
calling people to repentance
for the kingdom now is here.
O that warning cry obey!
Now prepare for God a way;
let the Valleys rise to meet him
and the hills bow down to greet him.

4 Then make straight the crooked highway;
make the rougher places plain.
Let your hearts be true and humble,
ready for his holy reign.
For the glory of the Lord
now o'er earth is spread abroad,
and all flesh shall see the token
that his word is never broken.

Comfort...a recurring theme in Isaiah

Isaiah 40:1...“Comfort, O comfort My people,” says your God.
“Speak kindly to Jerusalem;
And call out to her, that her warfare has ended,
That her iniquity has been removed,
That she has received of the Lord’s hand
Double for all her sins.”

See also the theme of “comfort” in Isaiah...

49:13

51:3

57:18

Simeon...looking for the “consolation” (comfort) of Israel Luke 2:25...And there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; and this man was righteous and devout, looking for the consolation of Israel

Isaiah 9:2...*The people who walk in darkness
Will see a great light;
Those who live in a dark land,
The light will shine on them.*

Matthew 4:12-17...Now when Jesus heard that John had been taken into custody, He withdrew into Galilee; and leaving Nazareth, He came and settled in Capernaum, which is by the sea, in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali.

This was to fulfill what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet:

*“The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali,
By the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—
“The people who were sitting in darkness saw a great Light,
And those who were sitting in the land and shadow of death,
Upon them a Light dawned.”*

From that time Jesus began to preach and say, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

A voice calling...Isaiah 40:3...*A voice is calling,
“Clear the way for the Lord in the wilderness;
Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God.*

Malachi 3:1 (answers 2:17...“Where is the God of justice?”)...“Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, He is coming,” says the Lord of hosts.

Matthew 3:1-3...Now in those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

For this is the one referred to by Isaiah the prophet when he said,

*“The voice of one crying in the wilderness,
‘Make ready the way of the Lord,
Make His paths straight!’”*

Mark 1:2-4...As it is written in Isaiah the prophet:

*“Behold, I send My messenger ahead of You,
Who will prepare Your way;
The voice of one crying in the wilderness,
‘Make ready the way of the Lord,
Make His paths straight.’”*

John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Luke 3:4-6...the word of God came to John, the son of Zacharias, in the wilderness. And he came into all the district around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins;

as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet,

*“The voice of one crying in the wilderness,
‘Make ready the way of the Lord,
Make His paths straight.
‘Every ravine will be filled,
And every mountain and hill will be brought low;
The crooked will become straight,
And the rough roads smooth;
And all flesh will see the salvation of God.’”*

John 1:19-23...This is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent to him priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?” And he confessed and did not deny, but confessed, “I am not the Christ.” They asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” And he *said, “I am not.” “Are you the Prophet?” And he answered, “No.” Then they said to him, “Who are you, so that we may give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?”

He said, “I am a voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ as Isaiah the prophet said.”

Isaiah 53:4-6...the Suffering Servant... Surely our griefs He Himself bore,
And our sorrows He carried;
Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken,
Smitten of God, and afflicted.
But He was pierced through for our transgressions,
He was crushed for our iniquities;
The chastening for our well-being *fell* upon Him,
And by His scourging we are healed.
All of us like sheep have gone astray,
Each of us has turned to his own way;
But the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all
To fall on Him.

Isaiah 60:1-3...the glory of the Lord... “Arise, shine; for your light has come,
And the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.
“For behold, darkness will cover the earth
And deep darkness the peoples;
But the Lord will rise upon you
And His glory will appear upon you.
“Nations will come to your light,
And kings to the brightness of your rising.

Isaiah 9:6,7... *For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us;
And the government will rest on His shoulders;
And His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.
There will be no end to the increase of His government or of peace,
On the throne of David and over his kingdom,
To establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness
From then on and forevermore.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will accomplish this.*

2 Samuel 7...the Davidic Covenant... The Lord also declares to you
that the Lord will make a house for you. When your days are complete and you lie down
with your fathers, I will raise up your descendant after you, who will come forth
from you, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for My name, and I
will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him and he will be a
son to Me; when he commits iniquity, I will correct him with the rod of men and the
strokes of the sons of men, but My lovingkindness shall not depart from him, as I
took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you. Your house and your kingdom
shall endure before Me forever; your throne shall be established forever.”” In
accordance with all these words and all this vision, so Nathan spoke to David.

Matthew 1:18-20...Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: when His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit. And Joseph her husband, being a righteous man and not wanting to disgrace her, planned to send her away secretly. But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying,

*“Joseph, **son of David**, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit...”*

Notes on the hymn by Dr. David Mamrick (edited)...

The text of this hymn is obviously drawn from Isaiah 40:1-5, and Olearius stays close to the actual wording of this passage in the 1545 Luther translation. He adds a few lines in the process of rendering this in poetic form, *possibly drawing on Jeremiah 31 as well*, as noted below.

Isaiah 40:1-5...

“Comfort, O comfort My people,” says your God.

²“Speak kindly to Jerusalem;
And call out to her, that her warfare has ended,
That her iniquity has been removed,
That she has received of the Lord’s hand
Double for all her sins.”

³A voice is calling,
“Clear the way for the Lord in the wilderness;
Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God.

⁴“Let every valley be lifted up,
And every mountain and hill be made low;
And let the rough ground become a plain,
And the rugged terrain a broad valley;

⁵Then the glory of the Lord will be revealed,
And all flesh will see *it* together;
For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

If you love the old Lutheran chorales such as "O Sacred Head" and "A Mighty Fortress," thank Catherine Winkworth (1827-1878), the translator of this hymn. She is one of the primary reasons that English-speaking Christians outside of the Lutheran denomination have come to know the treasures of that musical tradition. Her other translations include "If thou but suffer God to guide Thee", "Jesus, priceless treasure", "Now thank we all our God", and "Praise to the Lord, the Almighty".

How does the modern Christian, living in such a different position from the original writer, and from those in the days when these words were fulfilled, engage with this text and sing it in worship?

Olearius wrote this hymn for a specific church festival, the birth of John the Baptizer... This hymn causes us to reflect upon our own mission, not unlike John's, to spread the news of the kingdom...and to point people to Christ. Finally, in this hymn calling for preparation for Christ's First Advent, we might pick up a pre-echo of our current situation as we await the Second Advent.

Stanza 1:

*Comfort, comfort ye my people,
Speak ye peace, thus saith our God;
Comfort those who sit in darkness,
Mourning 'neath their sorrows' load.
Speak ye to Jerusalem
Of the peace that waits for them;
Tell her that her sins I cover,
And her warfare now is over.*

Miss Winkworth followed the grand language of the King James Version in several lines of her translation: "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned."(Isaiah 40:1-2a)

...Following the dramatic turn of events in chapter 40, "comforting" is spoken of frequently:

For the LORD comforts Zion; He comforts all her waste places and makes her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of the LORD; joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the voice of song.(Isaiah 51:3)

Break forth together into singing, you waste places of Jerusalem, for the LORD has comforted His people; He has redeemed Jerusalem.(Isaiah 52:9)

It was John the Baptizer's role to speak this comfort to Jerusalem, but it was a spiritual comforting, not a literal deliverance. The wilderness did not turn into a literal Eden, as in the the verse quoted above; but when John was privileged to publicly announce, "Behold! The Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world!,"(John 1:29) that desert turned into a paradise for those who were seeking the Lord.

Jesus came as a light to those who sat in darkness (Matthew 4:12-17) as a reliever of burdens of sin (Matthew 11:30) and a bringer of peace. The peace Jesus brought, however, was much more profound than expected. It was not a rapprochement between Judea and Rome, or a revolution against the same; it was an inward peace, and yet would bring about external effects just as surely as an armed revolt. After all, He said himself, "Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword."(Matthew 10:34) Following Christ's path brings about division from this world, sometimes to the point of physical persecution.

But there is peace, regardless of circumstances, in knowing peace with God. "Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered." (Psalm 32:1) It was this "peace on earth" that was promised at Christ's birth: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom He is pleased!" (Luke 2:14) That inner peace remains today for those who are reconciled to God: "The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:7) See also Romans 5:1 "Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ".

The spiritual "warfare" of Jerusalem (the capital city standing in for the nation itself in this passage) was brought to an end, at least in an ideal sense, with the coming of Christ. The long period of waiting and watching for the Lord's promise was completed, and despite trials and suffering through centuries of upheaval and oppression, God's will would not be thwarted. He had promised that the line of David would not fail, and that a king would reign on that throne forever. (1 Kings 9:5) With the coming of that final and greatest King, and the establishment of a spiritual kingdom that "will never be destroyed," (Daniel 2:44) those faithful among Israel who had stood at their posts, as watchers on the wall, (Ezekiel 33:7) could see at last the fulfillment of the long years of struggle.

Wonderful as this comfort and peace is, however, we look forward to a day when comfort, release, and peace will be perfected in heaven. In that place, "God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away." (Revelation 21:4) In that place there will be no more sin or temptation, because "there shall by no means enter it anything that defiles, or causes an abomination or a lie." (Revelation 21:27)

The complete hymn has another stanza here, sometimes omitted, based on the second half of Isaiah 40:2, "Tell her that her sins are pardoned; for she hath received of the LORD's hand double for all her sins."

*Yea, her sins our God will pardon,
Blotting out each dark misdeed;
All that well deserved His anger
He will no more see nor heed.
She has suffered many a day,
Now her griefs have passed away,
God will change her pining sadness
Into ever springing gladness.*

Olearius expands on his main text again in the 3rd-4th lines, possibly referencing Jeremiah 31:34b, "For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more," or Isaiah 43:25, "I, even I, am He who blots out your transgressions for My own sake; and I will not remember your sins."

The final two lines seem to echo Jeremiah 31:13b, "I will turn their mourning into joy; I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow."

The spiritual situation before Christ was certainly sorrowful. The people had been taken into exile, and returned only as a remnant; prophecy had fallen silent; and there was the lingering memory of Ezekiel's vision of the Glory of the Lord leaving the temple (Ezekiel 10). Solomon's great dedication prayer acknowledged that the temple meant nothing without the Lord's presence:

But will God indeed dwell with man on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain You, how much less this house that I have built! Yet have regard to the prayer of Your servant and to his plea, O LORD my God, listening to the cry and to the prayer that Your servant prays before you, that Your eyes may be open day and night toward this house, the place where You have promised to set Your name, that You may listen to the prayer that Your servant offers toward this place.(2 Chronicles 6:18-20)

It was to the temple that sacrifices for sins were brought, and to which the people of Israel turned in prayer for forgiveness:

Whatever prayer, whatever plea is made by any man or by all Your people Israel, each knowing his own affliction and his own sorrow and stretching out his hands toward this house, then hear from heaven Your dwelling place and forgive and render to each whose heart You know, according to all his ways, for You, You only, know the hearts of the children of mankind.(2 Chronicles 6:29-30)

But though that presence had been withdrawn before the exile, Malachi had promised that the Lord would return to His temple,(Malachi 3:1) and Jesus Christ very literally brought that to completion. Then, at His formal presentation, John the Baptizer cried out, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world!"(John 1:29) The miracles of Jesus caused some controversy, but the real conflict began when He forgave sins--His enemies objected, in a statement more accurate than they realized, "Who can forgive sins, but God only?"(Mark 2:7) This was the deliverance the nation truly needed, and the deliverance the world needs today.

Stanza 2:

*Hark, the voice of one that crieth
In the desert far and near,
Bidding all men to repentance
Since the kingdom now is here.
O that warning cry obey!
Now prepare for God a way;
Let the valleys rise to meet Him,
And the hills bow down to greet Him.*

The basis of this stanza is one of the most thrilling passages spoken by any prophet. Handel, the master dramatist of the London opera stage, knew this and made it into a powerful and memorable aria in his Messiah:

The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, "Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God! Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low."(Isaiah 40:3-4a)

Olearius in the 3rd-4th lines is possibly referencing the fulfillment of this prophecy in Matthew 3:1-2, "In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.'"

...Jesus faced a similar reception from most of the religious leaders among His own people. Malachi chapter 3 begins with these thought-provoking words:

"Behold, I send My messenger, and he will prepare the way before Me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to His temple; and the Messenger of the Covenant in whom you delight, behold, He is coming," says the LORD of hosts. But who can endure the day of His coming, and who can stand when He appears? For He is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap.(Malachi 3:1-2)

After hundreds of years, the Lord did indeed return to His temple; would those who claimed to be waiting for Him be ready for what they got? John, the herald, warned them:

Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will clear His threshing floor and gather His wheat into the barn, but the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire. (Matthew 3:10-12)

When the Messiah came, it was a time for rejoicing, but it was also a time for serious decision. Would the people of God believe in their King? If they believed in Him, would they obey? Many of the leadership realized Jesus was at least "a teacher come from God."(John 3:2) But when it came down to it, they decided, "We have no king but Caesar."(John 19:15)

The same question is before each of us today: Will we believe? Will we obey? If so, we will "prepare the way" to receive the King...we will obey what He commands. John's "warning cry" to receive the King still echoes down through the years, but someday there will be another cry: not to repentance, or announcing a kingdom, but declaring the return of the King to judge His subjects. "For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God."(1 Thessalonians 4:16) Someday "every knee shall bow."(Isaiah 45:23)

*Stanza 3:
Make ye straight what long was crooked,
Make the rougher places plain;
Let your hearts be true and humble,
As befits His holy reign.
For the glory of the Lord
Now o'er earth is shed abroad;
And all flesh shall see the token
That His word is never broken.*

The final stanza of the hymn comes from the 4th and 5th verses of Isaiah 40. Again Winkworth follows the King James Version closely:

"And the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain. And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together; for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it."

The 3rd-4th lines, however, do not appear to come from this passage; I cannot find a specific Scripture to which they relate, though they obviously are in harmony with the text at hand.

One specific choice by Winkworth...the word "token" in the penultimate line...may strike the ear as rather odd. The reason for this peculiar wording likely goes back to her meticulous care to convey the poetic quality of the original text, which in this case includes "double rhyme" (rhyming each syllable in two-syllable words) at the end of each stanza.

The "glory of the Lord" was seen on earth again when Jesus was born, revealed first to humble shepherds.(Luke 2:9) "The true Light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world."(John 1:9) Those who came to know Jesus and heard His words could say, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth."(John 1:14) This light and glory was to spread across the world through the teaching of Jesus' disciples; and as the crowd said in Thessalonica, those disciples "turned the world upside down."(Acts 17:6) Paul proclaimed his mission then, and our mission today, in this picturesque passage:

For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.(2 Corinthians 4:5-7)

The glory of the Lord shone on this earth one night 2,000 years ago; we need to reflect it in our lives, so that people will know that we "have been with Jesus."(Acts 4:13)

But there is a day coming, of course, when the "glory of the Lord" will be seen by every person, and no one will be able to ignore it or turn away. When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. Before Him will be gathered all the nations, and He will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.(Matthew 25:31-32)

At that revelation, there will be no more time to repent and prepare. And though "all flesh shall see Him together" on that day,(Isaiah 40:5) not everyone will see it the same way. "Who can endure the day of His coming?"(Malachi 3:2) Those who understand and respond to the grace expressed in this promise: "The Lord is not slow to fulfill His promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance."(2 Peter 3:9) If we have obeyed His gospel and are walking in His light, then we can spend our time here, "Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ."(Titus 2:13)

<https://drhamrick.blogspot.com/2012/03/comfort-comfort-ye-my-people.html>

Come, thou long expected Jesus

Charles Wesley, 1744

Come, thou long expected Jesus,
Born to set thy people free;
From our fears and sins release us;
Let us find our rest in thee.
Israel's strength and consolation,
Hope of all the earth Thou art;
Dear Desire of ev'ry nation,
Joy of every longing heart.

Joy to those who long to see Thee
Day-spring from on high, appear.
Come, Thou promised Rod of Jesse,
Of Thy birth, we long to hear!
O'er the hills the angels singing
News, glad tidings of a birth;
"Go to Him your praises bringing
Christ the Lord has come to earth!"

Come to earth to taste our sadness,
He whose glories knew no end.
By His life He brings us gladness,
Our redeemer, Shepherd, Friend.
Leaving riches without number,
Born within a cattle stall;
This the everlasting wonder,
Christ was born the Lord of all.

Born thy people to deliver,
Born a child, and yet a King,
Born to reign in us for ever,
Now Thy gracious kingdom bring.
By thine own eternal Spirit
Rule in all our hearts alone;
By thine all-sufficient merit
Raise us to thy glorious throne.

Notes on the hymn by Dr. David Mamrick (edited)...

Charles Wesley's best-known Christmas hymn was his first; "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing" (originally, "Hark! How all the welkin rings") appeared in the 1739 Hymns and Sacred Poems, the collection that introduced Wesley's hymns to the world. But he returned to the theme of the Incarnation often, reprinting the 1739 hymn as a broadside in 1743 (presumably; no copies survive), and issuing two more Christmas collections in 1744 and 1745. Julian's Dictionary of Hymnology dates "Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus" to 1744.

"Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus" is relatively straightforward in structure...Wesley wrote a sweet, uplifting hymn from the perspective of the faithful Jews who were looking for the promised Messiah, and borrows heavily from the language of the Hebrew prophets. Perhaps it was this familiar sound of Scripture that boosted the popularity of this hymn...

Stanza 1:

*Come, Thou long-expected Jesus,
Born to set Thy people free.
From our fears and sins release us,
Let us find our rest in Thee.
Israel's Strength and Consolation,
Hope of all the earth Thou art;
Dear Desire of every nation,
Joy of every longing heart!*

The expectation of the Messiah among the ancient Jews probably began in earnest with the writings of Isaiah, who gave the most extensive treatment of an ideal future King descended from David. The spiritual nature of Messiah's mission was predominant in Isaiah, bringing peace and justice, redeeming Israel and showing Gentiles the way of salvation as well.(e.g. Isaiah 11) Even the fairly liberal treatment of the subject in the 1906 Jewish Encyclopedia admits that the concept of the Messiah as a primarily political/military deliverer was "not a characteristic of the Messianic hope until a later stage of its development."("Messiah")

But over time, with the frequent political upsets and disadvantages suffered by the Jews during the period following the close of Hebrew prophecy, the aspect of Messiah as an avenging conqueror eventually overshadowed the revelation of Messiah as the saving, suffering Servant and ultimately reigning King given by the totality of Scripture.

These different expectations of the Messiah are seen throughout the New Testament accounts of Jesus' life. Even His cousin John, His own herald, seems to have had doubts based on this: "Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to Him, "Are You the One who is to come, or shall we look for another?"(Matthew 11:2-3) At Jesus' birth, the people's belief in a political Messiah was very much on the mind of the paranoid tyrant, Herod the Great:

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, "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." When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: '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.'"(Matthew 2:1-6)

And at the end of Jesus' life, it was this concept of a political Messiah that condemned Him to death: in His trial (whether before Annas or Caiaphas Mark does not specify), "Again the high priest asked Him, 'Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?'"(Mark 14:61)

The common people looked for the Messiah as well, with a variety of expectations. Andrew informed his brother Peter of Jesus with the words, "We have found the Messiah!"(John 1:41) The description of the people who came to hear John the Baptizer gives us a similar picture: "The people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ."(Luke 3:15) After Jesus began His ministry, the crowds that heard Him in Jerusalem debated His Messianic identity with at least as much logic as had their spiritual leaders:

When they heard these words, some of the people said, "This really is the Prophet." Others said, "This is the Christ." But some said, "Is the Christ to come from Galilee? Has not the Scripture said that the Christ comes from the offspring of David, and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David was?"(John 7:40-42)

On at least one occasion, the people were persuaded to the extent of trying to make Jesus their earthly King,(John 6:15) and Jesus' entry into Jerusalem before His death (John 12:12-16) was accompanied by palm branches, a symbol of royalty.

Even the fact that He rode on a donkey was in fulfillment of the description of the future King given in Zechariah 9:9.

If the people saw Him as their rightful King, they were on the right track but thinking on the wrong plane. Christ told Pontius Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world,"(John 18:36) and it is no surprise that the worldly Roman authority did not know how to respond. But to be fair, even some of His own disciples were not always clear on this point, as they asked before His ascension, "Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?"(Acts 1:6)

On the other hand, there were those who understood more of the spiritual nature of the Messiah's reign. Even the rather flippant Samaritan woman Jesus encountered in John chapter 4 had a vague concept of the Messiah as a spiritual teacher: "When He comes, He will tell us all things."(John 4:25) ***This understanding is most clearly seen in Simeon, a man "waiting for the consolation of Israel,"(Luke 2:25) who spoke these beautiful words over the infant Jesus at the temple:***

Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, according to Your word; for my eyes have seen Your salvation that You have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to Your people Israel.(Luke 2:29-32)

Simeon's words might reflect the language of the Messianic prophecy in the 9th chapter of Isaiah:

But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish. In the former time He brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time He has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined.(Isaiah 9:1-2)

It seems likely that Wesley's words in this first stanza are derived from these passages.

The very next words in Isaiah chapter 9 are...

You have multiplied the nation; You have increased its joy; they rejoice before You as with joy at the harvest, as they are glad when they divide the spoil. For the yoke of his burden, and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, You have broken as on the day of Midian.(Isaiah 9:3-4)

Jesus was "born to set His people free," releasing them from the yoke of oppression. Yet it was not the oppression of Rome He came to break, but the more permanent and deadly oppression of sin. When Jesus spoke of throwing off a yoke, He only said gently,

Come to Me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My burden is light.
(Matthew 11:28-30)

Wesley emphasizes freedom from spiritual tyranny of "sins and fears," perhaps referencing Matthew 11 when he says, "Let us find our rest in Thee."

Jesus was the One "long-expected" by the nation, and by Simeon himself, whom God had promised would live to see the Messiah.(Luke 2:26) Jesus was "Israel's Strength and Consolation" that Simeon had waited for.(Luke 2:25) Wesley also references the prophecy to Zerubbabel from the 2nd chapter of Haggai:

For thus saith the LORD of Hosts: "Yet once, it is a little while, and I will shake the heavens, and the earth, and the sea, and the dry land; and I will shake all nations, and the desire of all nations shall come.

"And I will fill this house with glory," saith the LORD of Hosts. "The silver is Mine, and the gold is Mine," saith the LORD of Hosts. "The glory of this latter house shall be greater than of the former," saith the LORD of Hosts, "and in this place will I give peace," saith the LORD of Hosts.(Haggai 2:6-9)

Wesley of course saw Christ expressed in the words, "Dear desire of every nation," which intersects nicely with Simeon's prophecy of "a light to the Gentiles."

The first stanza is a reflection upon the ancient Jews' earnest expectation for the coming of the Messiah into the world.

The second stanza speaks to our own individual need to submit to His reign in our lives.

*Stanza 2:
Born Thy people to deliver,
Born a Child and yet a King,
Born to reign in us forever,
Now Thy gracious kingdom bring.
By Thine own eternal Spirit
Rule in all our hearts alone;
By Thine all-sufficient merit,
Raise us to Thy glorious throne.*

Wesley turns here, as he so often did in the Nativity Hymns, to the incongruities of the scene at Christ's birth.

The King of Kings was a baby; "God contracted to a span," as Wesley said in another hymn...the Creator of the Universe lying in the span of His mother's arm. As if there could be further shock in this scene, He is laid in a feeding trough for lack of a bed, having been literally "born in a barn."

And for the first royal reception of the King of Kings upon this earth, He was honored with a visit from shepherds who had been watching their sheep in the fields at night...

For it is a kingdom "not of this world,"(John 18:36) not enforced externally by force of law and arms, but embraced by the heart and mind:

Being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, He answered them, "The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed, nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There!' for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you."(Luke 17:20-21)

When Christ's kingdom comes into a person's heart through obedient faith, it is a "gracious kingdom," as Wesley says, both in the sense of beauty and mildness but also in the literal sense of a "kingdom of grace:"

For if, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ. . . . So that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.(Romans 5:17,21)

As subjects of this gentle sovereignty, we must remember to Whom our allegiance lies, and to Whom we in fact belong: "Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body."(1 Corinthians 6:19-20) Our King has "put His seal on us and given us His Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee."(2 Corinthians 1:22)

In one sense, songs about Christ's birth are a reflection back on a fixed event in the past...a historical reality that we did not ourselves witness. But as we sing such songs, we remember the importance of what Jesus' incarnation still means for us today, and will for eternity.

<https://drhamrick.blogspot.com/2012/03/come-thou-long-expected-jesus.html>

WordWise Hymns...

In the Bible, there is a long inter-testamental silence that was suddenly broken. It actually divides our Bible in two.

In about 415 BC, the Old Testament prophet Malachi predicted the coming of the Lord, and the ministry of John the Baptist to announce His appearing.

“Behold, I send My messenger, and he will prepare the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple, even the Messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight” (Mal. 3:1).

Malachi is the last book of the Old Testament. When we turn the page, Matthew begins. But four centuries passed in between. Bible scholars sometimes refer to them as the Four Hundred Silent Years.

“The Sun of righteousness shall arise with healing in His wings [or beams]” wrote the prophet (Mal. 4:2). But when? Year after year the people of Israel waited and longed for His coming, only to be disappointed. Generations passed. And there does not seem to have been a single inspired prophecy in all those years. Only divine silence.

The breaking of the silence came around 5 BC, with an angelic visitation to an elderly Levitical priest named Zacharias. His wife Elizabeth was barren, and a senior citizen too. But the angel informed Zacharias that he would have a son, one who’d “go before Him [the Lord Jesus]” and “make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (Lk. 1:17). God’s “messenger” predicted by Malachi was to come at last.

Six months later, the angel Gabriel visited a young virgin in Nazareth named Mary, and told her that, by a miraculous work of the Holy Spirit, she would give birth to the promised One, the Messiah—to be called Jesus (Lk. 1:31-35).

After His birth in Bethlehem, the angelic announcement came, “There is born to you...a Saviour.” And the joyful news of His coming called for the enlistment of a whole choir of angels proclaiming, “Glory to God in the highest! (Lk. 2:11, 14).

In 1745 hymn writer Charles Wesley published a short hymn that brought the longing for His advent down to a personal level. It expresses the needy sinner’s desire that Christ would enter his life to bring eternal salvation and a new hope and new direction in life, through His reign there.

Stanza 1) Come, Thou long expected Jesus
Born to set Thy people free;
From our fears and sins release us,
Let us find our rest in Thee.
Israel’s Strength and Consolation,
Hope of all the earth Thou art;
Dear Desire of every nation,
Joy of every longing heart.

Stanza 2) Born Thy people to deliver,
Born a child and yet a King,
Born to reign in us forever,
Now Thy gracious kingdom bring.
By Thine own eternal Spirit
Rule in all our hearts alone;
By Thine all sufficient merit,
Raise us to Thy glorious throne.

<https://wordwisehymns.com/2017/12/04/come-thou-long-expected-jesus-2/>

Micah 5:2...“But as for you, *Bethlehem Ephrathah*,
Too little to be among the clans of Judah,
From you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel.
His goings forth are from long ago,
From the days of eternity.”

Isaiah 7:14...the sign of the virgin birth of Immanuel...*Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel.*

Matthew 1:18-23...Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: when His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit. And Joseph her husband, being a righteous man and not wanting to disgrace her, planned to send her away secretly. But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.”

Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: “Behold, the virgin shall be with child and shall bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,” which translated means, “God with us.”

Luke 1:30-35...The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end.” Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” The angel answered and said to her,

“The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy Child shall be called the Son of God.

O little town of Bethlehem

Phillips Brooks (1868)

O little town of Bethlehem,
how still we see thee lie!
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
the silent stars go by;
yet in thy dark streets shineth
the everlasting light.
The hopes and fears of all the years
are met in thee tonight.

For Christ is born of Mary,
and, gathered all above
while mortals sleep, the angels keep
their watch of wond'ring love.
O morning stars, together
proclaim the holy birth,
and praises sing to God the King
and peace to all the earth.

How silently, how silently,
the wondrous gift is giv'n!
So God imparts to human hearts
the blessings of his heav'n.
No ear may hear his coming,
but in this world of sin,
where meek souls will receive him, still
the dear Christ enters in.

O holy Child of Bethlehem,
descend to us, we pray,
cast out our sin and enter in,
be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels
the great glad tidings tell;
O come to us, abide with us,
our Lord Immanuel!

WordWise Hymns

In the ancient world, there were many important cities. In addition to Jerusalem, the city God chose as central for His people Israel, there was Babylon, Rome, Alexandria, Nineveh, Damascus, and more. Going back further, the city of Ur, in Chaldea, was one of the most technically advanced in the ancient world.

And yet, the most momentous event in human history took place not in any of these centres, but in a small town.

In predicting the birth of Israel's Messiah, the prophet Micah said, "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to Me the One to be Ruler in Israel, whose goings forth are from of old, from everlasting" (Mic. 5:2). "Little among the thousands of Judah." The NIV has "small among the clans of Judah." The NLT gives us, "Only a small village in Judah."

No matter how you say it, Bethlehem, at least geographically and numerically, was not of much account. Yet it was involved in biblical history from quite early on. First mentioned in Genesis, it was the place where Jacob's wife Rachel died (Gen. 35:16, 19). It was also the locale of the love story of Ruth and Boaz, recorded in the book of Ruth. And it was the birthplace of David, who later became the king of Israel.

During his reign, David's son Absalom led a rebellion against his father. The king was forced to flee from Jerusalem, with his faithful followers. Finally, the rebellion was put down, and King David was escorted back to the city, and his throne. One of those who had supported him in exile was a man named Barzillai (II Sam. 17:27-29). On his restoration, David wanted to bestow some honour on this man. But Barzillai was an elderly man, and he requested that his son Chimham be favoured in his place. David consented, and did so (II Sam. 19:37-40).

The name Bethlehem (*Beyth Lechem* in Hebrew) means house of bread. And there, over two millennia ago, the One who called Himself "the Bread of Life" was born (Jn. 6:35). The little town was thus granted an honour beyond compare.

O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie!
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by.
Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting Light;
The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.

There is one stanza of Phillips Brooks' lovely carol (Stanza 4) that is seldom used. It relates to the fact that the song was originally written to be used by the children in his Sunday School, at their Christmas service.

Where children, pure and happy, pray to the blessèd Child,
Where misery cries out to Thee, Son of the mother mild;
Where charity stands watching, and faith holds wide the door,
The dark night wakes, the glory breaks, and Christmas comes once more.