



Light
in the
Darkness

December 7, 2023

Humanity has been grappling with the concept of peace since the dawn of history. When we think of peace today, certain ideas tend to come to mind: A setting uncluttered by noise, a region free of violence, or perhaps a home where family members stop their bickering. These images are striking in that they emphasize something that isn't there: conflict, war, tension, sounds, commotion. But peace is more than a lack of something. It is also a greeting: Peace be with you; and a benediction: Go now in peace; and a gift: Peace I leave with you. What if peace is not an absence, but a presence? May tonight's concert confirm in us the conviction to be agents of peace in our lives and the world.

Come to Me

Alec Koukol, soloist

Dan Forrest

"Come to Me, all you who labor, and I will give you rest."

*"Come to Me, all who are weary and burdened,
and you will find rest for your souls."*

"Come, My Child, Learn My heart, For I am gentle and lowly."

"See how great My love, my love for you,
That I have called you My child." *"Come to Me..."*

(Gospel of Matthew 11: 28-30)

The Coming of God

Ann Weems

Our God is the One who comes to us

in a burning bush,

in an angel's song,

in a newborn child.

Our God is the One who cannot be found

locked in the church,

not even in the sanctuary.

Our God will be where God will be

with no constraints,

no predictability.

Our God lives where our God lives,

and destruction has no power

and even death cannot stop

the living.

Our God will be born where God will be born,

but there is no place to look for the One who comes to us.

When God is ready

God will come

even to a godforsaken place

like a stable in Bethlehem.

Watch . . .

for you know not when

God comes.

Watch, that you might be found

whenever

wherever

God comes.

To number our days

J. Barrie Shepherd

These Advent days, Lord God,
with their long-repeated rituals and customs,
their counting down of weeks and days and hours,
make me acutely conscious of time
and the relentless passage of the years.
It caught me only the other day as I climbed
the attic steps to bring down the decorations
and suddenly thought, Didn't I just put
these things away two or three months ago?
Surely it can't be that time again already!

When I was a child,
Christmas took forever to arrive
and the months stretched out so far
I could scarce remember back one year before.
Nowadays, in this time of a year's dying,
I know too well that momentary glimpse of years,
past Christmases, slipping through my fingers
like sand at the seashore, sifting,
sifting into the empty wind.

This psalm recalls me to
the limits of my days, Lord God,
reminds me that, like grass, I soon will wither,
fade, and be forgotten. Yet, despite all this,
its message cries no morbid, sad self-pity.
Its voice is a majestic one,
singing of a vast divine eternity,
a refuge, dwelling-place secure from everlasting
to everlasting, a God whose purpose and whose wisdom
far out pass the farthest reaches
of my own circumscribed imagination.

Even so this sacred season,
as we wait with expectation for the Child,
as empty hearts prepare him room,
busy lives are charmed to silence, even adoration,
we forget our fearful self-preoccupation
and are drawn within that timeless magic circle
where death becomes irrelevant,
all time becomes the present,
and the present is a gift which
you offer now within this holy birth. Amen.

God's distant call flares in the night,
so long expected, so longed for;
and all my life, Christ called my name,
and now at last I'll answer Him.

*Renewed, his hope, his light in us,
incarnate, fragile, our Lord appears, alleluia, alleluia!
Eternal, so perfect, his cry of changeless love.*

Alive, awake, His call is here:
it is the crying of the Child;
I know Christ's call, its hidden flame,
it makes my spirit flare with hope.
Renewed, his hope...

This room, this stem, this flowering Love,
this mustard seed, it grows to the greatest tree,
the birds of souls have nested there.
The light of the night now blazes at dawn,

You've led me here, O little child,
your being singing with God's life.
The kingdom sings, it choirs with earth,
all creation lives Christ's peace.
Renewed, his hope...

(Euan Tait)

I didn't brave the frigid temperature
to attend the Christmas Eve liturgy.
I went to the 10:30 a.m. Eucharist
when it was marginally warmer.
Driving slowly, carefully home, I saw
in the Medical Building's entrance,
a man surrounded by his stuff.
I'd once noticed someone sleeping there.
However will he endure this cold?
The Salvation Army is on this block.
Should I stop to tell them about him.?
Old, widowed church ladies don't
take in homeless men for Christmas.
But perhaps, my sisters, we should.
Perhaps this is St. Joseph who
first shepherded Mary and her babe
to the Catholic's warming center.
Maybe he is Jesus whom yearly
we hymn in beauty by candle light
then leave to freeze to death
on some anonymous doorstep.

Swaddling

Madeleine Mysko

*And she gave birth to her firstborn son
and wrapped him in bands of cloth (Luke 2:7)*

Advent, and I'm down on my knees
under the rafters, dragging out
the manger scene my mother
mailed to me in 1969, all the way out
to San Antonio, the first year
of my marriage, when I was so sick
with the crushing loneliness that came
of telling no one in the world
how really miserable I was.

Advent, and I'm taking them one
by one from inside the crumbling
cardboard stable, unwrapping them:

the chipped plaster Mary and Joseph,
the shepherds and sheep, the one cow.
Last of all, the baby in the manger:

as plump as he's represented in paintings
by Raphael, but so small I can close
my fingers over him, make him disappear.

His eyes are closed, his mouth a dot of
red paint. He's lying naked on the sculpted
straw, except for one stroke of white
across his middle – perfunctory, not like
real swaddling, but think of the loincloths
artists provide, depicting the crucifixion.

Arms out-stretched, one chubby foot
fixed to the other at the ankle:
so dear, but also so exposed.

Thou Shalt Know Him When He Comes

Hal H. Hopson

Thou shalt know him when he comes,
Not by any din of drums,
Nor the manner of His airs,
Nor by any thing he wears.
Thou shalt know him when he comes,
Not by His crown or His gown,
But his coming known shall be,
By the holy harmony
Which his coming makes in thee.
Thou shalt know him when he comes. Amen.

(Anonymous)

Give Thanks

Philip Keveren

Peace, peace, wonderful peace, peace to the world is given.
 Hushed are the angels, so still is the night;
 Then in the East shone a heavenly light.
 Join in the chorus, His praises sing!
 Glory to God to the newly born King.
Peace, peace...

Peace, peace, bearer of peace,
 all of good will receive Him.
 Holiest of nights, O most wondrous of days;
 Shepherds and kings lift their voices in praise.
 Join in the chorus, His praises sing!
 Glory to God, to the newly born King.
Peace, peace...

Improvisation

Philip Keveren

The Angels and the Shepherds

Bohemian Carol, arr. Stephen Paulus

Shepherds, O hark ye, glad tidings we bring.
 Peace and good will to the world now we sing.
 See in the manger Christ the Anointed,
 Whom for your Savior God hath appointed. Alleluia.

In yonder manger behold now he lies,
 Whom angel voices foretold from the skies.
 Seeking Thy mercy, we kneel before Thee,
 Singing Thy praises, humbly adore Thee. Alleluia.

Still through the ages the song doth resound,
 Peace and goodwill on the earth shall abound,
 Bear we the tidings of every nation,
 Born is the Christ Child for our salvation. Alleluia!

Bird in the Body of the World

Angela Alaimo O'Donnell

December fifth, the first day of frost,
 boxwood leaves silver in the sunlight.
 Car windows coated, the glassy grass
 crackles, fragile underfoot.
 The sparrow steps lightly, as if he knows
 what's coming. Days of deep darkness,
 nests full of snow,
 wind that blows you into windows.
 He does not curse, nor does he bless
 the weather. He only takes what comes,
 each dawn a day he never expected
 to see. He is one of the Holy Ones.
 He doesn't know the world is a wreck.
 Everything that is is perfect.

Congregational Hymn

Joy to the World

G.F. Handel, arr. John Rutter

1. (Congregation and Choir sing)

Joy to the world! the Lord is come: Let earth receive her King;
Let ev'ry heart prepare him room, And heav'n and nature sing,
And heav'n and nature sing, and heav'n and heav'n nature sing.

2. (Choir alone)

Joy to the earth! the Savior reigns: Let us our songs employ;
While fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains,
Repeat the sounding joy, repeat the sounding joy,
repeat, repeat the sounding joy.

3. (Choir alone)

Nor more let sins and sorrows grow, nor thorns infest the ground,
he comes to make his blessings flow, far as the curse is found.

4. (Congregation and Choir sing)

He rules the world with truth and grace, And makes the nations prove
The glories of his righteousness, And wonders of his love,
And wonders of his love, And wonders, wonders of his love.

Of Form and Formless

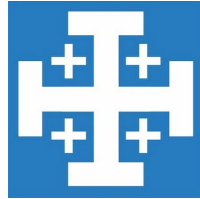
Chris Ellery

"And as they were eating, Jesus took bread..."

[-Matthew 26:26a (KJV)]

When the celebrant raises the host, I see the nucleus of every atom.
I see the sun, primordial earth,
a pregnant womb.
I see an egg, an acorn, an embryo, the iris of every eye,
a whole note of every anthem, the wide-open mouth of a child.
Life sings and cries its incessant, insatiable desire for delight.
Foxfire blooms from rotting wood
as the galaxy spirals in the shape of zero.
All that is made offers itself to unmaking. I make a living paten of my hands
and receive my own little wafer,
a holy morsel tasting of nothing,
a wisp as dry as dust and ashes,
a hole punched through impermanence, a portal of presence. It could be
anyone, everyone, everything.

All is well, all is well Angels and all rejoice!
For tonight darkness fell into the dawn of love's light.
Sing alleluia!
All is well, all is well. Let there be peace on earth.
Christ is come, Go and tell that He is in the manger.
Sing alleluia!
All is well, all is well. Lift up your voice and sing.
Born is now Emmanuel. Born is our Lord and Savior.
Sing alleluia! All is well.



The Westminster Choir
Dr. John Semingson, Director of Music Ministries
Dale Nickell, Associate Director of Music Ministries and Organist
Phillip Keveren, Arranger and pianist
David Davidson, violin
David Angell, violin
Seanad Chang, viola
Sari Reist, cello
Jane Kirchner, flute
Ron Sorbo, percussion
Rev. Dr. Donovan Drake & Rev. Dr. Guy D. Griffith, readers

Music Notes

The anthem *Come to Me* is given to the glory of God and in loving memory of Scott Ball by his many friends and loved ones at Westminster.

Ann Weems, "The Coming of God" in *Kneeling Bethlehem*, (Philadelphia, The Westminster Press, 1980) p. 13.

J. Barrie Shepherd, "To number our days" in *A Child is Born* (Philadelphia, The Westminster Press, 1988) p.20.

The anthem *His Light In Us* is given to the glory of God and in loving memory of Doug MacCallum by the Westminster Choir, Advent 2018.

Bonnie Thurston, "Christmas Story" in *Christian Century* (December 2023).

Madeleine Mysko, "Swaddling" in *Christian Century* (December 2023).

Angela Alaimo O'Donnell, "Bird in the Body of the World" in *Christian Century* (November 2023).

Chris Ellery, "Of Form and the Formless" in *Christian Century* (November 2023).