



Christmas Oratorio

by J.S. Bach



Advent Devotional

Bach's Christmas Oratorio tells the story of Christ's birth in a unique way, even when compared to Bach's passions. Whereas the passions tell the story in a straightforward manner, the Christmas Oratorio uses only snippets of the Biblical text and divides them over six cantatas. However, there is one similarity between the Passions and the Christmas Oratorio and that is the use of chorales throughout the work. During Bach's time, these chorales would have been sung by the entire congregation as a response to the story. These chorales also provide us some of the deepest theology ever espoused in music by a classical composer. This devotional is a gift from us to you. We hope this devotional gives you the opportunity to experience these texts in a way that deepens your spirituality, no matter what tradition you come from. And we hope that it aids you in your preparation for the coming Christmas season.

Chorales from Part 1

How Can I fitly greet thee, how rightly Thee extol

Desire of every nation, O glory of my soul.

O Lord, I pray Thee carry the torch to light my way,

That I may know thy pleasure and serve Thee day by day.

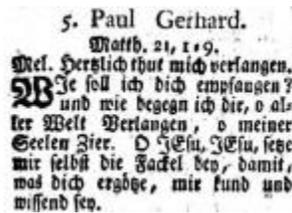
The chorale, 'How can I fitly greet thee, how rightly do extol?' (Wie soll ich dich empfangen und wie begegn ich dir), is the first of nine chorales included in the first three cantatas of the Christmas Oratorio. It is the response of the congregation, vicariously performed by choir and orchestra, to the preceding contralto aria 'Prepare thyself Zion,' that alerts the people of Israel to prepare for the coming of the long-expected Messiah.

The words are a lyrical translation of the first stanza of Paul Gerhardt's (1607-1676) 10-stanza Advent hymn published in 1653, at the conclusion of the 30-years war's religious conflict in central Europe that brought death to eight million. This stanza is based on Matthew 21: 8, describing the multitude welcoming Christ into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. It begins with a question that reflects the uncertainty of appropriate ways to receive the Christ Child. Lines 3-4 answer the question by praying that Jesus will carry "the torch," a traditional metaphor for The Bible that will show the appropriate way or ways to receive him. Some translations render this, 'a way or ways to serve him.'

Advent was a busy season for members of the congregation of St. Thomas Church, Leipzig, which included shopping at Leipzig's Weihnachtsmarkt, (Christmas Market), and fulfilling community, church and family pre-Christmas observances. Bach's preoccupation with church and community musical rehearsals and performances meant his family probably did not see much of him until well-after Christmas. Substitute the Green Hills shopping mall for Weihnachtsmarkt (Christmas Market) and today's frenzied pre-Christmas activity—sound familiar?

Bach chose these words from the hymnal in use at St. Thomas Church, Privilegirte ordentliche und vermehrte Dresdnische Gesang-Buch, (Dresden and Leipzig, 1730), where they are referenced to be sung to the abiding, popular, poignant Phrygian melody HERZLICH TUT MICH VERLANGEN (1601) [PASSION CHORALE, United Methodist

Hymnal, 286], as seen in this excerpt from that hymnal:



Today's singers and audiences relate PASSION CHORALE solely with 'O sacred head now wounded,' sung in the Holy Week remembrance of the passion of Jesus Christ, causing some to suggest Bach's use of the melody was an attempt to connect Advent with Passion. This was probably not Bach's intent, given he took the words and suggested tune from the parish hymnal where it is referenced to two other texts, and the wider use of the melody as the setting of two-dozen different hymns. On the other hand, congregants of St. Thomas Church on the first Sunday of Advent, 1734-35, might have recalled that Bach provided six settings of HERZLICH TUT MICH VERLANGEN in the St. Matthew Passion performed at Good Friday services, 1727, 1729, in four different harmonizations and three different texts. Then, as today, aural perceptions and associations are in the ear and tonal memory of the listener.

—**Carlton R. Young** - scholar and general editor of the *United Methodist Hymnal*



*He came among us meek and poor,
That He know what we endure,
In heaven rich in wealth are we,
There like the angels we will be.
Kyrie eleis.*

When first reading these words from Bach's Christmas Oratorio I notice the interesting juxtaposition of God's coming to live among us in our poverty and the notion of heavenly riches we will experience as a result. While there are many things to be said about both expressions, above all else in this short text, I find myself drawn to one word: meek.

Meek and meekness are not words we commonly use; at least I do not. Given its use in other familiar texts, many of us probably have some set connotations for the word meek. Definitions range from spineless and submissive to patient, gentle, easily imposed on, and not inclined to anger or resentment. While these are not all bad qualities, some definitely can be perceived as negative. One pastor I know has expressed meekness as strength under control, while another author suggests it is strength that is submitted to an appropriate authority. Now, those are new ideas for understanding a word we may look past more readily than explore.

In the beatitudes Jesus says "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth." What does that really mean? Perhaps another angle comes from Psalm 37, which surely Jesus was referencing. Psalm 37:1 says, "Do not fret because of the wicked; do not be envious of wrongdoers, for they will soon fade like the grass, and wither like the green herb." Verses 10 and 11 say, "Yet a little while, and the wicked will be no more; though you look diligently for their place, they will not be there. But the meek shall inherit the land, and

delight themselves in abundant prosperity."

An article in *Christianity Today* by Carolyn Arends says this about meekness:

If meekness isn't weakness, what is it? The word has an association with domesticated animals, specifically beasts of burden. At first blush, this etymology doesn't thrill me; I don't particularly aspire to be ox-like. But when I think about it, an ox at the plow is not weak but extraordinarily strong. The key, though, is that this power is harnessed and directed. . . . Psalm 37 is all about strength in meekness. It deals with trusting God to be God, and with not trying to do his job. The meek, for example, don't repay evil for evil; they rely on God for justice (vv. 1-3). And the meek let God provide their hearts' desires rather than trying to manipulate people and circumstances to get what they want (v. 4).

Meekness does not seem to be an abundant quality in the way much of the world thinks and moves and has being. If Christ in his meekness is our model, we can let God do God's work and let go of our need to be in control. Does "inheriting the earth" or the prosperity of the meek come from letting go of burdens? Perhaps we, in taking on the cloak of meekness, have much to gain, a richness in how we live, just not the earthly riches many seek after. The 16th verse of Psalm 37 says, "Better is a little that the righteous person has than the abundance of many wicked." It is countercultural, but everything about how Christ came into this world is countercultural. So is the gospel.

—**Andrew Risinger** - Associate Minister of Music



*Ah Jesus Child, my heart's delight!
Make here Thy little bed this night,
My heart will be a shrine for Thee,
So dwell thou there in peace with me.*

When my son was an infant, my favorite time of day was evening. As we sat in the rocking chair in his nursery, he would snuggle into my arms, and I would sing to him as he slowly drifted off to sleep. In those moments, any stress and exhaustion that I had carried with me that day would fade away. Clarity about what was most important would return, and together, my son and I would be enfolded in a quiet peace.

So often, the hustle and bustle of the Christmas season can feel stressful and exhausting. We rush from place to place, from one activity to the next, not wanting to miss out on a single thing. It is so easy to forget that Jesus, the very reason for our celebrations, needed only the simple comforts of a warm stable and the care of his loving parents.

This chorale invites us, in the midst of our frantic preparations for Christmas, to make room for the Christ Child. This might mean seeking out opportunities for worship with loved ones, finding a quiet space to pray, or simply taking a few deep breaths at each traffic light to welcome this "Jesus Child" into our hearts. It may not take away our stress and exhaustion, but I suspect that it might help clarity to return, reminding us of what is most important. May we make space for our heart's delight this Christmas season, and in doing so, may we be enfolded in a quiet peace.

—**Rev. Erin Racine** - Minister of Congregational Care and Hospitality

Chorales from Part 2

*Break Forth, O Beauteous morning light and fill the Heavens with glory.
Ye shepherds folk, restrain your fright, and hear the Angels story.
This little child whom you will see our comfort and our joy will be,
Against the foe sustain us, and peace at last regain us.*

In an age of cosmic revelation, with the Hubble telescope giving us ever more dramatic glimpses into the scope of God's Creation and the mysteries of time, the account of the shepherds being chosen to receive this message from the angels is more, much more, than we might have imagined not all that long ago. We now know that planet Earth is a tiny speck in a universe that is still expanding, making that night at Bethlehem infinitely more dramatic. The God who created this expanding universe is the same God who became one of us with the words that changed Creation forever: "Here's my Son."

The shepherds are afraid of this, perhaps giving us a lesson in cosmic good manners. They also know that this world is not what God intended: there are foes, there are wars, there is pain, there is death. Yet instinctively they sense that this Baby at Bethlehem is God's personal intervention to bring healing and comfort, that this child is the Prince of Life and Peace.

Those of us living here and now know that this corner of God's Creation has gone more terribly, savagely wrong than the shepherds could have imagined, yet we too can share their joy. The baby at Bethlehem is God's assurance that there will be a New Creation. The morning light is breaking; the heavens are filled with glory. We must join them in their awe, their reverence, their joy, and their hope.

—**Rev. David Lowes Watson** - retired scholar, teacher, and former pastor of West End UMC



*Behold! In gloomy stable stall,
There lies the ruler of us all;
Where once the hungry oxen fed
The Virgin finds her Child a bed.*

I have an easy time imagining what the birthplace of Jesus looked like, or at least what I wish it looked like. Growing up with lovely nativity sets and glittery Christmas cards, I can picture the shiny stable where the Savior of the world was born. I can see the bright face of Mary illuminated by the star and the rosy cheeks of the baby nestled in the straw.

But the truth is that the place of Jesus' birth was anything but shiny and bright. It was noisy, dark, crowded, and smelly. Whatever it looked like, it was a place where two exhausted, transient peasants - were shoved because nobody felt like welcoming them.

As I ponder the words of this anthem, I'm struck by two in particular: "gloomy" and "hungry." I don't think I've ever heard the word "gloomy" used this time of year. We think of Christmas as merry and bright! And who wants to talk about hunger? Christmas is a time for feasting! But hidden in these two words is the true good news of the Incarnation. Jesus was born into the gloomy, hungry places of our world and our lives. That's where

God chose to show up first. God appeared as a poor peasant in a noisy, crowded, and gloomy corner where no one who was anyone would care to look.

When we look at our nativity sets and Christmas cards, it's easy to forget the shocking truth of this story. But here is the good news of Christmas: God shows up in gloomy places. God meets and fills the hungry. God has come to meet us in our places of gloom and hunger. There is no place so dark—in our world or in our hearts—that God cannot illuminate and redeem. Thanks be to God!

—**Rev. Carol Cavin-Dillon** - Senior Pastor



*In chorus now to Thee we raise
With mighty voice our songs of praise
That Thou our long awaited Guest
Hast come at last, beloved and Blest*

Just before this chorale, we hear the angels sing, "Glory to God in the highest, and peace on the earth." After it, we hear the shepherds' words, "Let us go to Bethlehem and see what has taken place." They don't say, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see IF this is true." Nor is it "Well, that was pretty spectacular, with the angels and all." But let's wait to hear news from Bethlehem before we go. If it's that big, we'll hear about it." No, they want to see what HAS taken place.

In Hebrews, we find faith defined as "the reality of what we hope for, the proof of what we don't see." (Hebrews 11:1, CEB) The shepherds had faith that their longings were fulfilled. Even before seeing, they believed.

Faith has always been difficult, and maybe never so hard as in our present day. We can instantly see what is happening not only around our globe but even further away in our solar system. We can view the effects of Hurricanes Harvey and Irma as they happen, and we can watch cells multiply in a Petri dish. The intensity of our present can make us forget our past longings and to notice how they are fulfilled.

The chorale is a reminder to remember and to celebrate. To ask, "What can strengthen my faith? What makes a song of praise well up in me?"

Wait. Believe. Praise.

—**David Bone** - Executive Director

The Fellowship of United Methodists in Music and Worship Arts



Chorales from Part 3

*That God has blessed his people thus,
shows His mighty love for us.
All Christendom must thus adore,
And joyous thank Him evermore.
Kyrie eleis!*

Most families who observe Christmas have traditions or rituals that mark Advent and Christmastide as special times of year. Of course some families are better than others at keeping up with these annual traditions. As I was growing up, my family was particularly bad at following through on many of our best laid plans for establishing traditions. I used to joke with my mother that one of my favorite family Advent rituals was setting up the Advent wreath and then forgetting to light it until Christmas Eve. She never found that joke very amusing. Nevertheless, it accurately captured the struggle our family often had establishing routines during the hectic Christmas season.

The traditions that stood the test of time were those that emerged organically from our life together. One annual ritual that continued for many years was the obligatory “pajama picture” at the top of the stairs on Christmas morning. My family lived in a two-story log house in middle Tennessee. The first floor consisted of the living spaces and my parents’ room. My siblings and I lived upstairs. To get to our rooms, one had to traverse a steep flight of roughly hewn log steps up to the dimly lit top floor of the house. That treacherous incline was the barrier that divided the rest of the world from our childhood inner sanctum. There were many times in my young life that I was thankful for those steps. They took me to a secluded space where I could retreat from the cares and stresses of childhood and teen drama. But on Christmas morning each year, those stairs became a veritable force field keeping my siblings and me from what we wanted most: our presents.

During our first Christmas in the house, my father decided to take a picture of my siblings and me at the top of the stairs in our PJ’s before we came down to get our presents. This impromptu photo session was the genesis of this most enduring, and frustrating, tradition. Because our presents were downstairs under the tree, we were not allowed to descend until after the pajama photo. Each Christmas morning, my siblings and I would wake up and pace the floors upstairs until the clock struck whatever time my parents deemed an acceptable time to be awakened. Because we could not go downstairs, we had to yell instead. We would gather at the top of the stairwell, shout for my parents, and then listen carefully for the slow shuffle of feet into the living room. As we heard our parents begin to stir, the excitement began to build as we anxiously watched for my dad to finally appear at the bottom of the stairs with the camera. After what seemed an eternity, he would arrive and take our picture. Then we would scurry down as quickly as we could to discover what presents were waiting for us. While I always disliked having to wait so long to get to my presents, the intense anticipation always made the moment of finally receiving them that much more joyful.

Overwhelming joy in the aftermath of a long period of waiting is the very experience of the people of God at Christmas. This chorale text speaks of the necessary elation that is the natural response to the great gift of love with which God has blessed God’s people. The Hebrew Scriptures tell us how the people of Israel longed for the days when God’s justice and righteousness would be made manifest in the world. They were a people caught

between warring empires as they suffered oppression, foreign rule, and exile from their homes. At times it felt as if God had abandoned them. The prophets lamented their plight and hoped for the day when God would set things right. They wondered how long they must wait.

With the arrival of the Christ child, those who came to know God’s saving grace in Jesus proclaimed that the time of waiting was at an end. Finally the seeming separation between God and God’s people was obliterated as God had come to dwell on Earth. In Jesus Christ, God’s intention for all of humankind was made known. In his ministry to the hurting, the sick, the poor, and the marginalized, Jesus declared that the kingdom of God had drawn near. God’s love for all people, especially those forgotten, ignored, or abused by the powers of this world, was intended to shape our lives together. This continues to be the great blessing and hope that is celebrated each year at Christmas.

Although we joyously thank God for the revelation of God’s mercy in the blessing of Jesus Christ, we admit that sometimes it feels as if we are still waiting. There are moments when we also feel separated from God. But at Christmas we are reminded that the waiting is over. The kingdom of God is at hand. We need only open our eyes and look for the ways in which God’s presence is already evident. We need only listen for the stories of God’s grace transforming the lives of people in our midst. We need only become attentive to the people that are close to the heart of God. We are not waiting for God so much as God is waiting for us. Like my childhood-self racing down the steps to find my presents, Christmas is a time for all of God’s children to run toward God’s presence. May we be people who adore the gracious gift of Jesus Christ, God with us. May the Lord’s mercy transform our lives together until that time when God’s reign shapes all of creation.

—Rev. Brandon Baxter - Minister of Spiritual Formation



*Thee my Master, faithful serving, here live I, live with faith unswerving.
Then my soul, to Heaven soaring, soon will rise through the skies
Joyous and adoring.*

When I read these words, I’m naturally drawn to the words “faithful serving.” But I must confess that in serving I don’t always live with faith unswerving or find my soul soaring with joy and adoration. The day to day work of serving the needs of others can be frustrating, messy, and depressing.

I can get overwhelmed by all the needs I see in my community and in the world. I wonder why I even try. What difference can I make? But I take a deep breath and try to focus on the person, the task, the need that’s in front of me right now. God doesn’t expect me to change the world all by myself but only to act and serve those that I meet each day, trusting God to do the rest. I’m inspired and find comfort in Becca Stevens’ words in her book, *Love Heals*:

It’s daunting to try to love the whole world one person at a time, but that is the task of being a disciple...It’s easy to tell ourselves that the small things, like buying fair trade or smiling at a neighbor, can’t make any difference in the great suffering of the world. It’s hard to imagine that our small acts change the balance of love in the world. Yet it is even harder to imagine the world being a more loving place if we do nothing. In our small sacrificial choices, we show that we love the world. It takes a great deal of

humility to face universal issues by simple loving the next person who crosses our path.

Fortunately, there are times when I've served and have felt as if my soul was soaring and I was filled with joy knowing my serving had made a difference in some way. I am grateful and humbled that God has been able to work through me. These memories inspire me to keep on serving, even when I'm feeling frustrated and overwhelmed.

If you ever find yourself wanting to give up and asking what difference can the little you do make, I hope you will find strength and be encouraged to continue to serve, knowing that the world will not change if we do nothing. All we are asked to do is to try to love the whole world one person at a time, serving the next person in need that crosses our path. Trust God to take it from there.

—**Reverend Lisa Gwock** - *Pastor for Missions and Outreach*



*Rejoice and sing, rejoice and sing, your heavenly King
As man is born lays aside His glory;
He is adored as Christ the Lord,
And every tongue repeats the wondrous story.*

The act of singing is my business. Singing is an act that requires mental, physical, spiritual, and emotional forces to work together in a very unique way. It uses our body in ways that no other act of expression does. It is an immensely special way to express and communicate.

The human voice is the only instrument made directly by God himself. All other instruments, though maybe divinely inspired, required human hands to create and execute. The human voice is personal, and uniquely equipped to offer praise and rejoicing.

So it is fitting that this afternoon ends with a chorale that invites us all to sing praise and rejoicing for the birth of the Savior. Jesus certainly sang as evidenced by the story of the Last Supper. The Bible is filled with songs, whether they are Biblical canticles or the Psalms. And over the years we have added to that repertoire with hymns and spiritual songs from all walks of life, cultures, and denominations. As we prepare for Christmas, a season where the music is timelessly interwoven with our traditions and culture, let us remember that the gift of voice and song is a gift of God; and that we are called to use that gift to offer praise for the gift of Christ.

—**Matthew Phelps** - *Minister of Music*

Upcoming Events and Services

Candlelighting Service

Sunday, December 10 beginning at 5:30 p.m. in the Sanctuary

The Candlelighting Service is a long time West End tradition featuring all the singing choirs and all the handbell choirs. At 5:10 p.m., the handbell choirs begin ringing carols with the service beginning at 5:30 p.m. in the Sanctuary. The service retells the Christmas story through scripture, from the prophecy to the birth, with carols being sung by the choirs and congregation. The service ends with lighting of candles and singing of Silent Night. It is a very meaningful way to celebrate the Christmas season by focusing on the birth of the Christ-child and the implication it has on our lives today. Early arrival is encouraged as this service fills up quickly.

OEF Christmas Outing: Skate on Over

Friday, December 15 from 3:30 - 5 p.m.

Gather your gloves, lace up your skates, and grab a jacket as you join the Older Elementary Fellowship (Grades 4 - 6) for a fun December outing to the Centennial Ice Sportsplex at Centennial Park on December 15, from 3:30 - 5 p.m. The cost is \$8 for ages 12 and up and \$9 for ages 13 and up. Register by December 13 at westendumc.org/oeficeskating. It is important that we know who will be participating since tickets will be purchased in advance. Parents are needed to chaperone and friends are welcome.

Youth Christmas Party: Ugly Sweater Progressive Dinner

Friday, December 15, 6 - 9 p.m.

This is an evening for ALL of our students in grades 7-12 to come together for fun, fellowship, yummy food and a lot of laughter. We will travel together to the homes of Eva Whalen, Mary Frances Harrell and Rachel Ballenger. Bring a fast food gift card to share with our friends who live on the street AND a gift for our Dirty Santa Gift Exchange. Please don't buy your gift—try to find something unique in your home to exchange!

Sunday, December 24 ♦ Worship ♦ 11 a.m. ♦ Sanctuary

(No 8:45 a.m. Service or Sunday School)

Family Christmas Eve Service

Sunday, December 24 at 4 p.m. in the Sanctuary

This service is for the whole family. Young children are encouraged to dress in costumes that will help us retell the Christmas story through carols, the portrayal of the first Christmas, and Holy Communion. All are invited to come and experience Christmas anew.

Traditional Christmas Eve Service

Sunday, December 24 at 10:30 p.m. in the Sanctuary

With the sacrament of Holy Communion and music of the choirs, this traditional service is one of the highlights of our West End worship, celebrating Christ's birth as a gift for all time. An organ prelude of Christmas music begins at 10 p.m. in the Sanctuary and the service begins at 10:30 p.m.

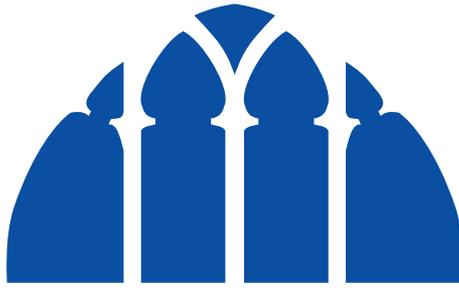
Sunday, December 31 ♦ Worship ♦ 11 a.m. ♦ Sanctuary

(No 8:45 a.m. Service or Sunday School)

New Year's Eve Taizé Service of Prayer and Healing

Sunday, December 31 at 6:30 p.m. in the 4th Story Theater

Prayer that quiets the mind, opens the heart, feeds the soul. Come clear out the Old Year and bring in the New with meditative music, candles, and walking prayer on the labyrinth. Come as you are, but come! The Taizé Team will be there to welcome you!



WEST END
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