



## SING TO THE LORD!

*An Advent Study Program  
The Rev. Dr. Sharyn Hall*

### INTRODUCTION

This program was developed when Sharyn Hall was Assistant Curate at St. Cuthbert's, Oakville, a medium sized parish of approximately 225 families. Adult education was a priority for the parish, but with a high number of Toronto commuter parishioners, flexibility and accessibility was necessary for participation.

### THE PROGRAM

Advent is a time for reflection in preparation for the birth of Jesus at Christmas. Often the cultural traditions of Christmas take most of our time. We buy presents in stores already crowded with shoppers. Churches compete for revenue by holding bazaars in November. The Christmas decorations are retrieved from the attic or basement, and we begin to "Deck the Halls". Food is an important part of Christmas festivities, and puddings and cakes require planning and special recipes. All of these activities can bring us joy.

On the four Sundays of Advent, we are reminded that there is another kind of joy. The coming of the Messiah means "Joy to the World" beyond our understanding. God incarnate in Jesus is a mystery which generations of preachers and hymn writers have attempted to capture in words.

Christmas carols are as much a part of Christmas as presents and pudding, but sometimes the words become so familiar that we forget to ponder their meaning. This study program offers reflections on four well-known hymns or carols to promote thought and discussion about the importance of Jesus in our lives and in this holy season of Advent.

By choosing a topic which is popular in our cultural traditions, people are encouraged to participate in a learning experience.

### PREPARATION AND PROCESS

Realizing that people are reluctant to attend four study sessions during the month of December, this program was designed for flexible use. Booklets were created which could be the basis of group discussions, or could be used for individual study at home. The booklets also made it possible for people to combine home study with group participation by preparing ahead or catching up if a meeting was missed. Each of the four units is independent so there is no need to worry about losing one's place with the group.

The booklets were made 'in house' on the computer and then commercially bound. A donation of two dollars per

booklet was requested. Booklets were made available to the congregation three weeks prior to Advent.

Instead of offering the program in four weekly sessions, another option is to do the whole program in one evening. This was the method chosen at St. Cuthbert's Anglican church in Oakville where this program was developed. St. Cuthbert's is a medium-sized parish of just over two hundred families, but this program could be adapted for a parish of any size.

The date for this evening in the first week of Advent was arranged in September and published in the fall newsletter. The evening began with dessert and coffee/tea. The organist and choir were invited to attend so that singing could be an important part of

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the evening. The units were examined individually. First the hymn or carol was sung by everyone; then the leader outlined a brief history of the words and music, followed by questions or comments. This pattern was repeated four times with a break in the middle for more dessert.

**UNIT ONE:  
O COME, O COME, EMMANUEL**

This favourite Advent hymn has a long history. The text can be traced to the ninth century in the Roman liturgy of Vespers to salute the coming of the Messiah. Each day in the week before Christmas, an antiphon was sung before and after the Magnificat using one of the scriptural titles for the Messiah, beginning with "O". A hymn was created from five of the antiphons in the twelfth century. In 1851, John Mason Neale published *Medieval Hymns and Sequences* in which he included his translation of the Latin hymn. His translation appeared in *Hymns Ancient and Modern* (1861) with the fourth verse omitted. *The Book of Common Praise* (1938) has all five verses, but *The Hymn Book* (1971) also omits the fourth verse. The new hymn book *Common Praise* (1998) alters Neale's translation and returns to the seven-part format of the original antiphons.

The verses of the hymn are the voices of the people of Israel who pray for the Messiah to bring freedom and honour to God's chosen people. The refrains are the answering voice of faith. The original Latin refrain is, "Emmanuel shall be born for thee, O Israel", a sure expectation of the coming birth.

The origin of the tune, which is in the style of Gregorian chant, was a mystery for a long time. It was first printed with the text in 1854, but it was not until 1966 that it was identified as a fifteenth century processional chant used by French Franciscan nuns. The arrangement is by Healey Willan (1880-1968) who was born in Britain, and came to Canada in 1913 to teach at the Toronto Conservatory of Music. During his long post as organist at the Church of St. Mary Magdalene in Toronto, he wrote a great deal of liturgical music, often based on his extensive knowledge of Gregorian chant.

*QUESTIONS TO PONDER*

A) This hymn refers to several events in the history of the Hebrew people. Can you identify

these events? Why is this "Jewish" hymn appropriate for Advent?

- B) The "rod of Jesse" and the "tree of Jesse" are associated with the birth of Jesus. Why is Jesse important? What was his lineage? (Isaiah 11; Ruth 4:17-22)
- C) The Emmanuel prophecy is found in Isaiah 7:10-17. This prophecy is not about the birth of Jesus. What is its significance for Christians? (Matthew 1)

*OF FURTHER INTEREST*

Gregorian chant has become popular in recent years. What is this new appeal? Gregorian chant receives its name from Pope Gregory the Great (c.540-604). What other important things did this pope do?

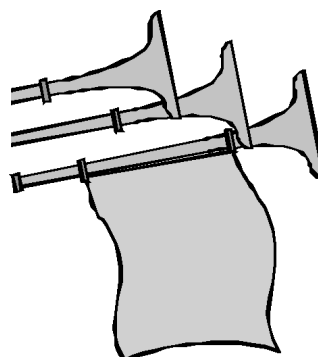
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**UNIT TWO:  
JOY TO THE WORLD**

*Let the sea make a noise and all that is in it, the lands and those who dwell therein. Let the rivers clap their hands, and let the hills ring out with joy before the land, when he comes to judge the earth.*  
PSALM 98:8-9

Isaac Watts based his hymn text on these two verses of Psalm 98, and published it in his *Psalms of David* (1719) under the heading, "The Messiah's Coming and Kingdom." Although the text is not about Advent, or the nativity, it has become a popular Christmas carol.

The theme of the text is summarized in the first line, "Joy to the World!" There is great rejoicing in all of creation, heaven and earth, because Jesus has come to restore everything to its true glory. The verbs in this hymn are all in the present tense, bringing Jesus into the present day, and making his existence timeless.



Isaac Watts (1674-1748) was raised in a family which held strong views of religious independence from the Church of England. He became a minister in the Independent Church and a pioneer of congregational hymnody. He wrote more than 1600 hymns which stress faith, hope, and the majesty of God.

In *The Book of Common Praise* (1938) three possible musical settings are given for this text; however, the most popular one has a melody commonly attributed to George Frederick Handel (1685-1759). The melody appears in a collection by William Holford entitled *Voce de Melodia* (1835). The melody was adapted from Handel, perhaps by Holford, or by Lowell Mason who furnished the harmonies. Mason (1792-1872) was born in Massachusetts and became devoted to musical education, founding the Boston Academy of Music in 1832. As an organist and choirmaster, he composed and arranged many hymn tunes.



John, and devoted himself to missionary work. Understanding the importance of hymns for teaching and evangelism, he wrote over 5000 texts. "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing" was published in his first collection, *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1739).

The text refers to the appearance of angels to the shepherds after the birth of Jesus (Luke 2:8-15). Wesley attempts to describe the mystery of God incarnate in Jesus by emphasizing Christ's divinity, royalty, and power. The poetry of phrases such as "veiled in flesh" and "risen with healing in his wings" suggests images of a God-like figure. The power of Jesus to give new life to humanity was a strong element of Wesley's evangelical message.

**QUESTIONS TO PONDER**

- A) Jesus is given royal status in this carol as King and Saviour who reigns over the earth. Is Jesus royal because of his Davidic lineage, or because of the kingdom of God?
- B) What are the "thorns" which "infest the ground"? Does this refer to a parable? (Mark 4:1-20) Is it also a hint of the crown of thorns?
- C) The connection between the natural world and Jesus is emphasized by the joy of the whole earth. How do you understand the connection between Jesus and creation?

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**OF FURTHER INTEREST**

Isaac Watts was a Nonconformist, a term which means anyone who refuses to conform to the doctrines or discipline of the established church. Originating in the seventeenth century, nonconformity has an interesting history which stretches to the present day.

**UNIT THREE:  
HARK! THE HERALD ANGELS SING**

The author of this hymn is well known as one of the founding brothers of the Methodist movement. Charles Wesley (1707-1788) was educated at Oxford and ordained an Anglican priest in 1735. He became an itinerant preacher with his brother,

The music is adapted from the second song in the *Festgesang* by Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847). Mendelssohn composed this collection of songs for male voices and brass for the Gutenberg festival in 1840 to celebrate the 400th anniversary of the invention of printing. William Hayman Cummings (1831-1915) was organist at Waltham Abbey when he adapted the music and published it in 1856.

**QUESTIONS TO PONDER**

- A) How many references to angels are in the Christmas story? Why are angels so busy?
- B) Jesus is given several titles in this text: King, Christ, Lord, Godhead, Man, Prince, Sun. What do these titles mean to you?
- C) The line, "risen with healing in his wings" may refer to Malachi 4:2. Have you ever thought of Jesus with wings? How would you interpret this line?

**OF FURTHER INTEREST**

Charles Wesley wrote many texts for hymns which have remained popular for generations. Look for other hymns by Wesley in various hymn books.

#### UNIT FOUR: IN DULCI JUBILO

The history of this carol is long and complicated because it has been translated and adapted many times. The text may be as old as the fourteenth century. Its early form was a mixture of Latin and German phrases which was an attempt to make the meaning easier to understand. The German parts were first translated into English by John Wedderburn in his *Gude and Godly Ballates* (c.1540). This version is found in the *Oxford Book of Carols* and is often sung by choirs as an anthem. Other English versions can be found in song books of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The melody may be as old as the original text, and appears in song books in Martin Luther's time, as early as 1533. Two hundred years later, J.S. Bach composed two organ preludes based on the same tune.

In 1853, John Mason Neale wrote new words to the same melody for his *Carols for Christmastide*. "Good Christian Men, Rejoice" is a free adaptation of the original text. Neale (1818-1866) was a prolific writer of hymns, and his translations of Latin and Greek texts introduced many ancient and eastern hymns into Anglican worship.

The harmonization of this melody in the *Hymn Book* (1971) is by Frederick R.C. Clarke, a former professor of music at Queen's University in Kingston. In *Common Praise* (1998) an older arrangement of the melody by John Stainer (1840-1901) is used, and Neale's text is altered to be more modern and inclusive.

#### QUESTIONS TO PONDER

- A) Neale's text states that Jesus was born to bring salvation to humanity. How do you understand phrases such as "endless bliss", "heaven's door", and "you need not fear the grave"?
- B) In the original carol, the closing line is "O that we were there!" Can you imagine yourself in that time and place, witnessing the events of the Christmas story?
- C) The title of the carol, "In dulci júbilo", means "In sweet jubilation". Many Christmas carols refer to joy and call us to rejoice. What does "Christmas Joy" mean to you?

#### OF FURTHER INTEREST

Not all carols are religious. Carols were originally popular songs for dancing. What 'secular' carols do you know? (For example, "The Twelve Days of Christmas")

#### EVALUATION

About 30 people attended the evening and had an enjoyable time. People who do not regard themselves as singers were willing to participate because the hymns and carols were familiar. The choir members enjoyed learning a little about the words and music they knew so well. The booklets were kept by the participants for further reference.

People who were not able to attend the evening but took a booklet home, also expressed pleasure in using the study program for their own Advent reflections.

The program required considerable time to prepare the booklet, but thereafter, the leader was able to enjoy the discussion as much as the participants.

#### REFERENCES

Information from the following books has been used in the preparation of this study program:

1. *The Book of Common Praise*. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1938.
2. *Common Praise*. Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 1998.
3. *Hymns that Live* by Frank Colquhoun. Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1980.
4. *The Hymn Book of the Anglican Church of Canada and the United Church of Canada*, 1971.
5. *If Such Holy Song: The Story of the Hymns in the Hymn Book 1971* by Stanley L. Osborne. Whitby, Ontario: The Institute of Church Music, 1976.
6. *The Oxford Book of Carols*. London: Oxford University Press, 1928.



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