

December 25, 2007— Christmas Day Festival Worship

Faithful, Joyful, and Triumphant

Faithful

“Oh, Come, All Ye Faithful”. *Adeste Fideles*. I would imagine that many of us are just getting warmed up when we start singing that Christmas hymn and don’t really start paying attention to the words and their meaning until we come to, oh, “Bethlehem” or so.

But the opening words are still important, even if they also serve as a title for the carol. The “Oh, Come” marks this as what is called a gathering hymn — it’s a call to come together and join in worship. But a call to whom?

To the *Faithful*. So this isn’t one of your generic carols that basically says “Ho, ho, ho — everybody, no matter who you are, have a merry Christmas”. No, this is an invitation only to those who can truly appreciate the wondrous event of Christ’s birth for what it truly is and means — it’s a call to believers to act on their faith and praise the Lord who keeps his promises.

His first promise should never have been necessary. It was the one he made in the Garden of Eden after Adam and Eve had bound themselves and all creation into sin with their decision to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God spoke it to the serpent, but the promise was for sinners: “*I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.*” (Genesis 3:15). It was a promise that Satan would not always have his way people, and, most importantly, that from the woman’s descendants would come One who would defeat the devil, crushing him for good.

That promise was repeated and amplified through the following centuries, and God’s faith-full people held onto it as the most precious thing they had. Abraham was anxious for a son not just because he and Sarah were old and childless, but because the Lord had promised him that all people would be blessed through his offspring — that the Savior of the world would come from among his descendants. Abraham was glad to believe God — and the Lord credited it to him as righteousness.

That promise of the Savior to come — that blessing — was passed down from Abraham to Isaac to Jacob to Judah and down from father to son through the generations. And God added details through his prophets, so that his people would know what salvation this Anointed Savior, this Messiah, this Christ, would bring, and also so that they would know how to recognize him when he came.

The Lord promised that the serpent-crushing Savior would be a son of David but also God living with us — Immanuel. He promised that he would be and would be called “*the LORD Our Righteousness*” (Jeremiah 23:6) and that he would be *pierced for our transgressions* and himself be *crushed for our iniquities* — and the *punishment that would bring us peace* would be *upon him*, and we would be *healed by his wounds* (Isaiah 53:5). The Lord gave hope to his people as they suffered and as they struggled with their sins, and for all *those who walked in the darkness* but who put their trust in him, he promised a *great and dawning light* (Isaiah 9:2).

God even revealed where the Christ was to be born with one of his promises:

Micah 5:2-5

“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
though you are small among the clans of Judah,

out of you will come for me
 one who will be ruler over Israel,
whose origins are from of old,
 from ancient times.”
Therefore Israel will be abandoned
 until the time when she who is in labor gives birth
and the rest of his brothers return
 to join the Israelites.
He will stand and shepherd his flock
 in the strength of the LORD,
 in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God.
And they will live securely, for then his greatness
 will reach to the ends of the earth.
And he will be their peace. (NIV)

And so God’s people looked to him with joy and eager anticipation, waiting for the promised Messiah and the salvation he would bring. The faithful still look to him and sing, “Oh, Come, Oh, Come, Emmanuel”
We sing Hymn 23.

Some of Abraham’s and David’s descendants got confused. They thought that God’s promise was about making them or their nation great in the eyes of the world. They looked for human glory instead of God’s greatest glory — the glory of his grace, the outpouring of his undeserved love on undeserving people with the gift of his one and only Son.

The promise was always all about that gift. It was always the Son of God, the Word. It was always Christ. It was always the baby Jesus, laid in the manger in Bethlehem so that after a perfect and obedient life he could be nailed to a cross and laid in a tomb just outside of Jerusalem — and rise from that tomb as the firstborn from the dead, adding the promise that all who believe in him will be God’s children and live with him forever in heaven.

John the Apostle and Evangelist wrote about this gift of Life and Light, and what God gives to the faithful who receive him:

John 1:1-14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.

Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.

There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John [*the Baptist*]. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God — children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. (NIV)

The faithful always look to this miracle of grace and put their trust in the Son of God made flesh — the Promised One, “*Of the Father’s Love Begotten*”.

We sing Hymn 35.

Joyful

The faithful come, and they are *joyful*. How could they — how could we — not be? God has kept his promise. He sent his Son, our Savior. The good news — the gospel — of a child born and comfort given is a beautiful thing, leading us to shout and sing for joy.

Isaiah 52:7-10

How beautiful on the mountains
are the feet of those who bring good news,
who proclaim peace,
who bring good tidings,
who proclaim salvation,
who say to Zion,
"Your God reigns!"

Listen! Your watchmen lift up their voices;
together they shout for joy.
When the LORD returns to Zion,
they will see it with their own eyes.

Burst into songs of joy together,
you ruins of Jerusalem,
for the LORD has comforted his people,
he has redeemed Jerusalem.

The LORD will lay bare his holy arm
in the sight of all the nations,
and all the ends of the earth will see
the salvation of our God. (NIV)

In Christmas joy, we sing "God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen".

The joy of the faithful is not just for them. Jesus, that baby born in Bethlehem, came to save all the world from its sin. He's everyone's Savior, and we want what he wants: for all people to hear the good news of their Salvation and to put their faith in him, that this great joy might be enjoyed by them as much as it is given for them. We know that that was God's desire from what the angel said and how the shepherds responded:

Luke 2:8-20

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,
"Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests."

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it

were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told. (NIV)

Once again, how can we keep from singing when we hear this news of great joy? We join in hymn 52, “*On Christmas Night All Christians Sing*”.

Triumphant

The faithful are not just joyful, though. They — we — are also *triumphant*.

Now, we didn’t win anything. Every battle we ever fought against sin on our own we lost. But our brother is the eternal God. The baby we see at Christmas in Mary’s arms and that we greet and come to adore is the almighty Son of God made flesh and blood, who left his majesty above in heaven to do the will of his Father — to provide purification for our sins.

When Christ our King triumphs, the victory is ours.

Hebrews 1:1-9

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.

For to which of the angels did God ever say,

“You are my Son; today I have become your Father”?

Or again, “I will be his Father, and he will be my Son”?

And again, when God brings his firstborn into the world, he says,

“Let all God’s angels worship him.”

In speaking of the angels he says,

“He makes his angels winds, his servants flames of fire.”

But about the Son he says,

“Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever, and righteousness will be the scepter of your kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy.” (NIV)

We sing Hymn 53— “*To Shepherds as They Watched by Night*”.

“God’s own you are; you cannot fail.” This truth certainly gives the faithful reason to be joyful! To know that the same God who kept his promise to send our Savior now also promises to bless, empower, and protect us because we belong to him is another wonderful and comforting, joyful, Christmas truth. God’s promises to his people never fail, because his love never fails.

Romans 8:28-39

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.

What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written:

“For your sake we face death all day long;
we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.”

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (NIV)

We are more than conquerors. As we come and adore Christ the Lord — at Christmas, and all year long — we are faithful, joyful, and triumphant. And we will live forevermore, because of Christmas Day.

We sing the song “*Mary’s Boy Child*”.

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