

Joy in the Word!

A Confessing Christ Newsletter

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"Look Up and Raise Your Heads"

(A Reflection on Luke 21:28)

by Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945)

Let's not deceive ourselves. "Your redemption is drawing near" (Luke 21:28), whether we know it or not, and the only question is: Are we going to let it come to us too, or are we going to resist it? Are we going to join in this movement that comes down from heaven to earth, or are we going to close ourselves off? Christmas is coming—whether it is with us or without us depends on each and every one of us.

Such a true Advent happening now creates something different from the anxious, petty, depressed, feeble Christian spirit that we see again and again, and that again and again wants to make Christianity contemptible. This becomes clear from

the two powerful commands that introduce our text: "Look up and raise your heads" (Luke 21:28 RSV).

Advent creates people, new people. We too are supposed to become new people in Advent. Look up, you whose gaze is fixed on this earth, who are spellbound by the little events and changes on the surface of the earth. Look up to these words, you who have turned away from heaven disappointed. Look up, you whose eyes are heavy with tears and who are crying over the fact that the earth has gracelessly torn us away. Look up, you who, burdened with guilt, cannot lift your eyes. Look up; your redemption is drawing near.

Something different from what you see daily will happen. Just be aware, be watchful, wait just another short moment. Wait and something quite new will break over you. God will come.

(Dietrich Bonhoeffer in "I Want to Live These Days with You: A Year of Daily Devotions," translated by O.C. Dean, Jr., Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2007. Originally in Vol. 13 of Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke, London, 1933-1935," edited by Eberhard Bethge, Ilse Todt and others, Chr. Kaiser Verlag).

"Come, O Sacred One of Israel"

by

Joan Chittister, OSB

"Come, O Sacred One of Israel," the church sings today. Celebrate the Jewish tradition and the prophets in your own life who call you to a commitment to the widows, the orphans, and the strangers among us.

"Come, O Flower of Jesse's Stem," the church reminds us to pray before Christmas. Celebrate the ancestors of Jesus who prepared the way for his

coming and then celebrate, too, the people who have made our own lives possible: the ancestors who educated us, who protected us, who mentored us, who trained us in the spiritual life, and who, in their love for us, gave us a sense of ourselves.

"Come, O Key of David," we sing in anticipation of the birth of Jesus. Celebrate the Jesus who opens our eyes to lepers,

our hearts to strangers, and our lives to truth. Celebrate, too, the people who think differently than we do. Openness, after all, is the key to human growth.

"Come, O Radiant Dawn," we plead as the memory of Incarnation fills us. The celebration of the God of Growth in our lives—those moments of insight in which life comes newly alive in me—helps us

*Flocks feed by darkness
with a noise of whispers,
In the dry grass of
pastures,
And lull the solemn
night with their weak
bells.*

*The little towns upon
the rocky hills
Look down as meek as
children;
Because they have seen
come this holy time.*

*God's glory, now, is
kindled
gentler than low
candlelight
Under the rafters of a
barn:
Eternal Peace is sleeping
in the hay,
And Wisdom's born in
secret in a straw-roofed
stable.*

*And O! Make holy
music in the stars, you
happy angels.
You shepherds, gather
on the hill.
Look up, you timid
flocks, where the three
kings
Are coming through the
wintry trees;*

*While we unnumbered
children of the wicked
centuries
Come after with our
penances and prayers,*

"Come, O Sacred One of Israel" *CONTINUED*

to recognize those moments when I begin to see differently, to live differently, to function differently. A new friend, a new work, a new idea are all "radiant dawns" in life that can

enable me to become more than I ever dreamed I would.

(Joan Chittister, OSB, in "Light in the Darkness: New Reflections on the Psalms for

Every Day of the Year," New York, The Crossroad Publishing Co., 1998)

Light of lights! All gloom dispelling,
Thou didst come to make thy dwelling
Here within our world of sight.
Lord, in pity and in power,
Thou didst in our darkest hour
Rend the clouds and show thy light.

Praise to thee in earth and heaven
Now and evermore be given,
Christ, who art our sun and shield.
Lord, for us thy life thou gavest,
Those who trust in thee thou savest,
All thy mercy stands revealed.

St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274)

I behold a new and wondrous mystery. My ears resound to the shepherds' song, Piping no soft melody, but chanting full forth a heavenly hymn. The angels sing. The archangels blend their voice in harmony. The cherubim hymn their joyful praise. The seraphim exalt his glory. All join to praise this holy feast, beholding the Godhead here on earth, . . . He who is above, now for our redemption dwells here below; and he that was lowly is by divine mercy raised up.

St. John Chrysostom (ca. 350-407)

"We Hear the Christmas Angels"

A Christmas Eve Sermon by Herbert R. Davis
Texts: Isaiah 9:2-7, Titus 2:11-14, Luke 2: 1-14

Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ

Let us pray: Grant, O Lord, that we may hear your Word in the angel's song. Grant, O Lord, that we may believe your Word as good news. Grant, O Lord, that we may be witnesses to the Word made flesh, full of grace and truth. Grant, O Lord, that we might see the light that shines

in the darkness and trust that the darkness cannot overcome the light of the world: Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

What do we hear tonight?

What is the song in our heart tonight? It's been a tough year in our lives. We hear the

“We Hear the Christmas Angels” *CONTINUED*

guns of war and violence. We hear the clash of fear and anguish on the daily TV or radio shows. We have had our fair share of failures and disappointments. But have we heard any angels sing? “Do not be afraid; for behold I bring you good news of great joy...for unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, Christ the Lord.” I wonder what do we hear amid noisy gongs and clanging cymbals as we gather tonight?

This hit me some years ago when I was playing Santa Claus. Our grandson had been diagnosed with cancer and the family had planned a benefit for him at the local mall, where we operated the Santa Claus chair for an afternoon. I was enlisted to play Santa and my wife, Lillian, was enlisted to play Mrs. Santa, since I can't hear too well. She was to make a list of the children's requests. The ritual was simple; you greet the children with Merry Christmas, ho, ho, ho, and try to get them on your knee for the “Santa Picture,” which costs two dollars. And then you ask what they want for Christmas. The children sometimes forget, or have a long list, or shout one very important toy. Often they are so afraid they don't say a word. Some bring a long, detailed list, which includes cost, model number, and suggested retail store.

Near the end of our shift, a young girl about seven or eight, approached Santa with a determined look. She walked up to me, jumped on my lap and before I could say ho, ho, ho she said, “Santa, I am here to make sure that Tommy Jones doesn't get anything for Christmas. He is the rottenest, meanest boy in our class. He doesn't respect our teacher, he disrupts the class and he makes our teacher cry.” As an old preacher I wanted to shout, “Wait a minute, saving Tommy Jones is what Christmas is about!” I wanted to say, “The baby is born in the manger to save sinners. Christmas is about the redeeming love of God, the love that shines in the darkest souls, that changes humbug scrooges into good, rejoicing Christian men and women.” I wanted to say, “Did you hear the angel's song about good news and great joy?” But before I could say a word, she was off my lap, and she turned and pointed her finger at me, as little girls of great conviction do, and said, “If Tommy Jones gets anything for Christmas, I will never believe in you again and I will never celebrate

Christmas.” She walked out like John the Baptist. We never got her picture and Lillian was afraid to ask her for the two dollars.

I said to myself, this little girl has Christmas all wrong. She thinks Christmas is about us, about our goodness, and not about God's great love. She thinks Christmas is first and foremost about judgment. And then I remembered my father's favorite Christmas carol. He would start humming it around October 15. It would build until it rang in our ears: “You better watch out, you better not cry, better not pout, I'm telling you why...”

His singing wasn't very good, but his feeling for that song was magnificent. At the supper table he would hum, “He's making a list, he's checking it twice..” Then he would shake his finger at Jim and me and say, “He gonna find out who's naughty or nice...” Finally, with a twinkle in his eye, he would finish up, “He sees you when you're sleeping, he knows when you're awake, he knows when you've been bad or good, so be good for goodness sake.” Dad never sounded like an angel, and his carol had no great joy, but it served his purpose. We were half decent children for November and December.

Maybe the little girl understood more about the modern Christmas than I do. It's hard to hear the angel's song of great joy; it is hard to hear the good news when our focus is Tommy Jones, or our theme song is, “You Better Watch Out,” or when judgment abounds.

It may be especially hard at this Christmas when many people who were nice and not naughty, who were good for goodness sake, who played by the rules, who worked hard, didn't borrow beyond their means, and cared for their families, have suffered by the present recession. You can sense the anger as the sinners seem to be blessed and those who helped bring down the economic system are riding high. There is a nasty mood brewing between Main Street and Wall Street. There is a sense we need John the Baptist; not a Virgin giving birth to another poor boy in a barn. We need one who will cast the sinner into the fire and reward the honest, hard working Main Street resident.

*And lay them down in
the sweet-smelling hay
Beside the wise men's
golden jars.*
Thomas Merton

*Lord, how can one
preach thy eternal
word?*

*We are a brittle crazy
glass:*

*Yet in thy temple thou
dost us afford*

*This glorious and
transcendent place,*

*To be a window,
through thy grace.*

*But when thou dost
anneal in glass thy story,*

*Making thy life to shine
within*

*The holy Preacher's;
then the light and glory*

*More rev'rend grows,
and more doth win:*

*Which else shows
wat'rish, bleak, and thin.*

*Doctrine and life,
colours and light in one*

*When they combine
and mingle, bring*

*A strong regard and
awe: but speech alone*

*Doth vanish like a
flaring thing,*

*And in the ear, not
conscience ring.*

George Herbert

*Three kings are here,
both wealthy and wise,
Come riding far over the
snow-covered ice;
Royal in throng, Noble
in song,
They search for the
child,
The Redeemer of wrong;
With tambours and
drums
they go sounding along,
With tambours and
drums
they go sounding along.*

*God's angel speaks
Saint Joseph anigh:
"With Jesus thy charge
into far Egypt fly.
Stay not nor stand;
Herod's at hand."
The ass hastens panting;
the hot desert sand
has rescued our Saviour
from Herod's ill band,
has rescued our Saviour
from Herod's ill band...
Flemish carol*

*The goal of humankind
is not progress
toward a final stage of
perfection;
it is the creation
of what is possible for us
in each particular state
of history;
and it is the struggle
against the forces of
evil,*

"We Hear the Christmas Angels" **CONTINUED**

We need someone who will rein in those corrupt politicians and restore justice to the halls of Congress. You can feel the anger in the pointed finger of the little girl demanding that Tommy Jones be punished; that all things be made right or "I'll never believe in Santa again." It's hard to hear an angel sing in times like these.

Yet this is the time when the angel sings! The angel sings to those of us who are most deeply frustrated and troubled by the world as we see it defined by wars and recessions, corruption and death. The angel sings at times when promises are not fulfilled and dreams fizzle and fade. The angel sings when there are too many Tommy Jones' in our lives.

It is into this world in a real town called Bethlehem, in the real time of Emperor Augustus; real time when corrupt politicians were plotting to kill a new born king, time when Main Street folks were being taxed, that a poor, frightened woman, with a husband who didn't know how to make ends meet, gave birth to a child. It is this event; this common, ordinary moment that we celebrate tonight because we heard or we think we heard or we want to hear the angel saying, "Be not afraid, I am bringing you good news of great joy, for unto you is born Christ the Lord." We believe this is the true light that shines in the darkness and won't go out. We believe his is the love that never ends. We believe this is the breaking in of the kingdom where justice and love kiss. This is a world defined by grace and truth, not greed and fear. This is the time when the whole creation is bent from death to life. This is the event of which we sing, "Joy to the World, the Lord has come."

I don't know how one hears the angel sing, "Be not afraid, I bring you good news of great joy." I only know it happens.

Every Advent we sing that great hopeful hymn, "Wake, awake, for night is flying." These words describe the birth of our Lord and the church's response. The hymn was written by Philipp Nicolai, a Lutheran pastor in 1599. In that year, a plague hit his parish and 1700 people died. In one week he had 130 funerals. In the midst of such a time when death seems to rule, when darkness laughs at the light, Pastor Nicolai heard the angel song, "Be not afraid." When his people expected pity and closure, he gave

them hope and vision and he reminds them of their glory in the words of that hymn:

Zion (the church) hears the watchmen singing,
Her heart with deep delight is springing
She wakes, she rises from her gloom;
For her Lord comes down all glorious,
In grace arrayed, by truth victorious;
Her Star is risen, her Light is come!
Ah, come Thou blessed One,
God's own beloved Son, Hallelujah!
We haste along, An eager throng,
And gladsome join the advent song.

Where we shall join the choirs immortal,
In praises round Thy glorious throne;
No vision ever brought,
No ear hath ever caught, Such great glory!
Therefore will we, eternally,
Sing hymns of joy and praise to Thee!

How is it possible that out of the depth of a plague, the church rises up with songs of praise, with visions of glory, with hope amazing? I don't know how it happens, but it does. The church hears the angel's song!

How do shepherds, keeping watch over their sheep, worrying about wolves and rustlers, sick children and overworked wives, wondering about the wool market and winter wheat, hear the angles song, "Do not be afraid. I am bringing you good news of great joy for all people: today is born in the city of David a Savior, Christ the Lord. Yet they do! They run to the manger and tell Mary and Joseph and the whole world, in this poor place the "Lord has come all glorious, in grace arrayed, by truth victorious." Christ the Lord is born!

How do we who gather here tonight, worried about the 401Ks, the college tuition, the recent CAT scan for cancer, the son or daughter at war, the never ending mortgage payment, how do we hear the angel's song?

I don't know how, but we do. We (too) haste along, an eager throng, singing "Joy to the World." As we share the table, eating the bread and drinking the cup, we too know that at this manger we are united with "love divine, all love excelling, joy of heaven to earth come down," a love that will not let us go. We too know that

“We Hear the Christmas Angels” *CONTINUED*

this birth has twisted the world from darkness to light, from separation to reconciliation, from a world of tears to a world where every tear shall be wiped away. We know the Tommy Jones’ of the world are not in control, they do not mock the angel’s song.

So we leave this manger tonight with vision of a new creation, dreams of a time when death shall be no more. We leave with schemes and plans for tomorrow. We leave in the darkness knowing the light shines and can never be put out. We leave not as mean spirited people but as a people of grace and peace. We leave not trusting in the bailout, or Wall Street, or Main Street, but our trust is in a back alley in the little town of Bethlehem, where,

“in thy dark streets shineth,
The Everlasting Light;
The hopes and fears of all the years
Are met in thee tonight.”

And we sing:

“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 Emmanuel!”

I don’t know how, but I know you hear the angel’s song, “Be not afraid!”

Amen.

*old ones and new ones,
which arise in each
period
in a different way.*
Paul Tillich

*Jesus, Jesus, oh, what a
wonderful child.
Jesus, Jesus, so holy,
meek, and mild;
new life, new hope the
Child will bring.
Listen to the angels sing,
“Glory, glory, glory,”
let the heavens ring!*
African-American carol

“Redeemer Come, With Us Abide”

by Steven Small and Gail Miller, Co-conveners of Confessing Christ

In his book *Pray Like This*, William Story includes the following Advent Antiphons:

O Wisdom, Breath of the Most High,
pervading and permeating all creation:
Come and make us friends of God.

O Lord of lords and Leader of the house of
Israel, who appeared to Moses in the burning
bush and gave him your law on Sinai:
Come and save us with outstretched arm.

O Root of Jesse, standing as a signal to the
nations, before whom all kings are mute, to
whom the nations do homage:
Come and save us, delay no longer.

O Key of David and Ruler of the house of
Israel, when you open nobody can close, when
you close nobody can open:
*Come and proclaim liberty to the captives and
set the down-trodden free.*

O radiant Dawn, Splendor of eternal light
and Sun of Justice:

*Come and give light to those who live in
darkness and the shadow of death.*

O King of the nations, the Ruler they long
for, the Cornerstone binding all together:

*Come and save the people you fashioned from
the dust of the earth.*

O Emmanuel, our King and our Lawgiver,
the Anointed of the nations and their Savior:
Come and save us O Lord our God.

The Spirit and the Bride say, Come!
Amen! Come Lord Jesus, come soon!

At the Communion table, we proclaim the
mystery of our faith: “Christ has died, Christ is
risen, Christ will come again”. In Advent, our
focus ought rightly to be on Christ’s coming
again: “Not as of old a little child to bear and
fight and die, but crowned with glory like the
sun that lights the morning sky” as one of our
Advent hymns reminds us. In Advent, we are

*A faith that is accessible
only in the night
is not the religion that
the world wants.
But if the darkness
is indeed our real
situation,
then a religion that
leads us away from it
into realms of light
is nothing but a
deception.
The only light worth
having is one that
sometimes illuminates
the darkness.*
Douglas John Hall (adapt)

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preparing to celebrate Christ's Incarnation at Christmas, but that is not what we are waiting for. The Advent antiphons and lessons all point to the truth that our risen Lord, Jesus Christ, promised he will come again. We're waiting for our risen, victorious Lord. When he does come again in glory he will establish in fullness that kingdom which we, who follow him, are given to foreshadow, until he comes. That is why in Advent we look forward in hope.

However, this "not yet" of our faith holds within it the "already" of the risen Christ living among us and manifesting himself in his body on earth – the church. Confessing Christ loves and cares for Christ and his church and seeks to be a servant of the church in four specific ways:

1. by supporting and creating means for joyful theological discussion
2. by providing opportunities for Christ-centered collegiality for pastors
3. by lifting up our heritage; both within the United Church of Christ and the Ecumenical Church
4. by equipping local churches through Christ-centered resources.

These are lofty goals, which not only can be but are realized in down to earth simple practices, lived out day by day, week by week in our churches by faithful pastors throughout the United Church of Christ.

Sometimes at clergy meetings, we can be burdened with a spirit of gloom and doom as we lament all that is NOT happening in our congregations. But Advent won't let us stay there. Advent and the hope of Christ coming again says, "Lift up your heads." Let the words of this wonderful hymn lift your hearts and minds as well:

Lift up your heads, ye mighty gates;
Behold, the King of glory waits;
The King of kings is drawing near;
The Savior of the world is here!

O blest the land, the city blest,
Where Christ the Ruler is confessed!
O happy hearts and happy homes
To whom this King in triumph comes!

Fling wide the portals of your heart;
Make it a temple, set apart
From earthly use for heaven's employ,
Adorned with prayer and love and joy.

Redeemer, come, with us abide;
Our hearts to Thee we open wide;
Let us Thy inner presence feel;
Thy grace and love in us reveal.

May your Advent season be filled with faith, joy, love and hope that Jesus Christ, God in human flesh, will come again at the end of this age with power and great glory. To Him be glory forever and ever.