

HALLELUJAH!

AN ADVENT DEVOTIONAL ON HANDEL'S *MESSIAH*



INTRODUCTION

Advent and Christmas are filled with singing – and perhaps no piece of choral music is more familiar this time of year than George Frideric Handel's *Messiah*. Originally intended for the Easter season, it's now become a Christmas classic, not least because it explores the mission and meaning of the One who arrives on Christmas morning.

Advent means "arrival." It's a time of anticipation and study, waiting and preparing, all so our Christmas "hallelujahs" might ring out with wholehearted joy. This year, *Messiah* itself will be our guide to the season's mysteries, combining the power of Scripture with the power of music (every word in the oratorio is from the Bible), and deepening our understanding of Advent, Christmas, and a musical masterpiece that has stirred hearts for centuries.

All you'll need is this devotional, your favorite Bible, and a recording of *Messiah* (many are freely available online). Carve out some space and time for listening, reflection, practice, and prayer. The shadows all around us these days are real – and so are the candles we light in the darkness, the music we hear and sing together, and the hope, peace, joy, and love leading us toward Bethlehem.

SDG*

* The three letters Handel scrawled at the end of the original *Messiah* score, an abbreviation for *Soli Deo Gloria* ("To God alone the glory").

THE STORY OF MESSIAH

George Frideric Handel was born in 1685 in what is now Germany, though he lived in London for much of his adult life. He was a champion of Italian opera, but as tastes changed, he began composing English-language oratorios, a musical form that draws its name from the Latin *oratorium*, "a place of prayer." An oratorio is broadly similar to opera (a large-scale work for orchestra, chorus, and solo singers), but without the costumes, scenery, and acting – and typically with a focus on a religious figure or story. Handel's first oratorio was *Esther*, performed in 1732. A decade later, after writing about a half-dozen others, he turned to *Messiah*.

The libretto (the oratorio's text) was compiled by one of Handel's collaborators, Charles Jennens, an independent scholar whose family's wealth allowed him to devote his life to music and literature. Every word in *Messiah* is from the King James Version of the Bible and the Coverdale Psalter (the translation of the Psalms in the Book of Common Prayer, which Jennens considered more poetic and singable than the Psalms in the KJV). Jennens gave the libretto to Handel as a gift, hoping it would inspire him to compose an oratorio worthy of its subject. Soon after, when a group of Irish charities invited Handel to debut a new work for a benefit concert in Dublin, the stars aligned – and *Messiah* was born.

Handel worked with astonishing speed, completing the entire score in just 24 days of round-the-clock composition – a fact often cited as a sign of divine inspiration. But while he may well have been inspired, Handel was quite accustomed to the pace: for example, he completed his next oratorio, *Samson*, in about a month, starting the day after he finished *Messiah*! And for his part, Jennens was actually concerned by Handel's speed, worrying it would lead to a sloppy, inferior product.

The Dublin concert's proceeds would go toward funding local hospitals and freeing people from debtors' prison – a striking cause, since at that point in Handel's career, he himself was deeply in debt. His Italian opera company had collapsed; his last production in that style, which closed quickly after being essentially ignored by the London public, premiered just a few months before he left town for Dublin.

Jennens, too, was in distress, struggling with severe depression and aftershocks of grief. His younger brother, Robert, had died of suicide, and Charles believed that part of Robert's despair had involved a crisis of faith. Compiling the libretto for *Messiah*, then, was for Charles a way to wrestle with his own sorrow, reassuring himself – and, he hoped, many others – that God is living, loving, and active in our lives.

The Dublin debut was a smashing success. Some 700 people attended, far exceeding the music hall's capacity (men were instructed not to wear their swords, and women not to wear hoop skirts, in order to make more room!). The proceeds freed more than 140 people from debtors' prison, and a subsequent performance enabled Handel to pay off his own debts.

The following year, however, the London debut of *Messiah* was both a commercial flop and a cultural scandal. For a venue, Handel chose the Covent Garden Theater, a public playhouse – offending many who thought it an inappropriate setting for the sacred words of Scripture. And for key soloists, Handel chose secular theater actors (some with checkered reputations) – offending many who deemed them unfit to proclaim the oratorio's message. It isn't hard to spot another irony here: for Jesus, too, was criticized by the religious authorities for consorting with "tax collectors and sinners." In any case, the debut was so unpopular that Handel cut the theatrical run short and put *Messiah* on the shelf, perhaps for good.

But seven years later, in 1750, he had an idea. London's Foundling Hospital, a charity devoted to the care and education of abandoned and orphaned children, had just constructed a new chapel, and they were looking to raise funds. Perhaps inspired by the Dublin debut, Handel and the Hospital arranged for a benefit concert in the chapel itself. Orphans were seated up in the balconies, and ticket-buyers were seated down below.

The event was a sold-out sensation, with many turned away at the door. On one hand, here was a fashionable, entertaining way for wealthy Londoners to "see and be seen" helping the poor. And on the other hand, here was a sacred oratorio in a sacred space, a beautiful, inspiring way for the community to come together, benefactors and beneficiaries in sight of one another, surrounded by glorious music. When the choir's words, "For unto us a child is born," echoed through the chapel, the emotional and theological resonance – for both the children and the patrons – must have been extraordinary.

So extraordinary, in fact, that the performance of *Messiah* became an annual tradition at the Foundling Hospital for the rest of Handel's life and beyond. So began the career of what would become one of the most beloved, well-known pieces of choral music in history.

Hallelujah!



THE BIG IDEA

Charles Jennens believed his younger brother, Robert, died of suicide at least in part because of a crisis of faith related to certain provocative theological ideas circulating at the time (sometimes referred to as "Deism"). As he compiled the libretto for *Messiah*, Charles set out to refute these ideas – or at least offer a compelling alternative.

In brief, Deism holds that God may have created the cosmos originally, but doesn't engage with it or care for it today – much as a "clockmaker" might make a clock, wind it up, and walk away. To the contrary, Jennens argued that the essence of the Christian Gospel is that God loves us and cares for us yesterday, today, and tomorrow, and that the life and death of Jesus – the Messiah – proclaims that God is by no means an absentee clockmaker, but rather Emmanuel, "God with Us," living and loving and active and present in our lives. Indeed, this central message is part of what makes *Messiah* so fitting for Advent and Christmas, even though it was originally performed during Lent and Eastertide.

Even the form of *Messiah* – an oratorio in three parts – helps convey this central message. It suggests a coherent, cosmic design, a majestic, divine work of art into which we are "swept up," and in which we can each play a part. Part I focuses on prophetic visions of the Messiah (especially from the prophet Isaiah), and how, for Christians, such visions are fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth, including the story of his birth; Part II focuses on Jesus' life and passion, culminating in the triumph of his resurrection, ascension, and the birth of the church; and Part III focuses on how humanity, too, ultimately participates in Christ's redemption. And woven throughout it all, like a golden thread, is the proclamation that God isn't absent, but present; not aloof, but loving; not passive, but active; not distant and without us, but right here, right now, Emmanuel, "God with Us."

Rather than write an essay or preach a sermon on this subject, Jennens had a bigger, better idea: work with Handel to create a popular, moving, enduring work of art that could reach more people than any essay could, a stirring sermon made of song.

WEEK ONE
HOPE

LIGHT
One Candle

READ
O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence. + Isaiah 64:1

Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. + Mark 13:33

LISTEN
Messiah, Part I, Scene 3: The prophecy of Christ's birth

(8) Behold, a virgin shall conceive (Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:23)

(9) O thou that tellest good tidings to Zion (Isaiah 40:9; 60:1)

(10) For behold, darkness shall cover the earth (Isaiah 60:2–3)

(11) The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light (Isaiah 9:2)

(12) For unto us a child is born (Isaiah 9:6)

REFLECT
Advent begins in the darkness – which is exactly where candles of hope are best lit, looking ahead to Christmas morning. Indeed, the very idea of "Messiah" (from the Hebrew word for "the anointed one") evokes a figure who arrives in the shadows of despair, conflict, sorrow, and hate, bringing hope, peace, joy, and love. As the earliest Christian communities sought to understand and follow Jesus, they scoured sacred Scripture (particularly the Hebrew prophets) for signs, hints, and glimpses of this messianic promise: how God will come and dwell with us, scattering shadows with light.

Accordingly, the Gospel writers frequently lift up poetic imagery from the Book of Isaiah. Mark does it in this week's passage, underscoring that no matter how difficult, how desperate, how overshadowed

things seem, there is always cause for hope – precisely because the Messiah's signature move is to arrive in the middle of the night. Keep alert!

Jennens follows the Gospel writers' lead: of the 81 biblical verses included in *Messiah*, 21 are from Isaiah, making it the most-quoted source in the oratorio. In the five selections for this week, Jennens draws from across the prophet's work, interpreting various messianic visions in Christian terms.

In the first (No. 8), the theme of the entire oratorio appears: God is by no means distant or absent, but rather is Emmanuel, "God with us." And in the last (No. 12), the Christmas message shines through: "For unto us a child is born!" – a refrain that must have resonated with effervescent grace in its original performances in London's Foundling Hospital, a charity devoted to the care and education of abandoned and orphaned children.

PRAY

God of light and love, who dwells with us in every shadow, kindle a new hope in our hearts. Keep us alert to the signs of your coming, in Bethlehem long ago, and in our lives yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Thank you for the visions of prophets, the artistry of Gospels, and the soaring beauty of music. This Advent, grant us the grace and courage to sing with anticipation and joy: "For unto us a child is born!" Come, Jesus, come! Amen.

PRACTICE

- Each morning this week (or each evening before bed, if that works better for you), light a candle of hope, and surround it with music: listen to this week's selections from *Messiah*, follow the daily *Messiah* devotions, or sing a carol or two. In prayer, lift up the world's shadows, near and far, and ask for the grace to become a candle of hope.
- The world is awash in loneliness – reach out to someone this week who might need a kind word.
- The gift of music: Which songs strengthen your sense of hope for the future? Make a playlist, exchange playlists with a friend or family member, and get together to sing the songs (singing together on the phone works, too, or exchange voice memos of singing; the power of music is amazing!).

- Conversation starters: What signs of hope have you seen this week, near or far? When you're feeling hopeless, what helps you the most? Which moments in this week's selections from *Messiah* do you find most striking?
- Inspired by the Foundling Hospital, pick a local organization that gives people a sense of hope for the future, and schedule some volunteer time this Advent season. Not sure which one to choose? Ask three people you respect, "Which local organizations do you think are most effectively giving people hope these days?" This simple question opens up lots of amazing conversations!

KING OF KINGS

One of the most familiar stories about *Messiah* is that King George II attended the London premiere and stood during the Hallelujah Chorus (such standing is now customary). There's no evidence of this – not the King's standing up, and not even his attending, both of which presumably would have been mentioned in the press. What likely happened is that the custom of standing during the chorus developed over the years as a way of honoring its hymn-like character and its climactic position in the work, and the story about the King subsequently developed in order to (a) explain the custom (and give it the romance of a royal imprimatur) and (b) retrospectively flatter the King as a pious monarch who humbly stood to recognize the "King of Kings."

But here's a true story you may not know: on January 1, 1863, a great crowd – including Frederick Douglass, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Ralph Waldo Emerson – gathered in Boston Music Hall, anxiously awaiting confirmation that President Lincoln had officially signed the Emancipation Proclamation. When the word came, the crowd erupted in joy and euphoria, and a company of musicians and singers took the stage to perform – you guessed it – Handel's Hallelujah Chorus! In that context, the "King of Kings" refrain resounded as joyous praise for the God of liberty, the God of the exodus from slavery, the God opposed to the world's pharaohs, principalities, and powers of injustice.

WEEK TWO
PEACE

LIGHT
Two Candles

READ
A voice cries out, "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together." + Isaiah 40:3-5

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins… "I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."
+ Mark 1:4,8

LISTEN
Messiah, Part I, Scene 1: Isaiah's prophecy of salvation

(1) Sinfony (Instrumental overture)
(2) Comfort ye my people (Isaiah 40:1–3)
(3) Ev'ry valley shall be exalted (Isaiah 40:4)
(4) And the glory of the Lord (Isaiah 40:5)

REFLECT
Isaiah 40 was likely written in the context of the Israelites' forced exile in Babylon, perhaps at or near the cusp of their return. The prophet calls out to the people with encouraging words of comfort and peace: *Your long ordeal is coming to an end! God is coming to you – prepare a way in the wilderness!*

This idea of a "way in the wilderness" was an evocation of the exodus story (Moses leading the people through the wilderness), and so functioned as a promise of a "New Exodus," with God leading the

people out of captivity into freedom. In Mark's Gospel, John the Baptizer picks up the same image of a "wilderness way" – thus framing Jesus as a New Moses, Jesus' "way" as a New Exodus, and Jesus himself as the One through whom "the glory of the Lord" will be revealed.

The fact that Jennens and Handel begin the oratorio this way is telling: the overture begins simply, building momentum with a rising fugue – and then the opening words are Isaiah's (and by extension, Mark's) words of comfort, peace, and good news for a beleaguered people. And please note: the good news isn't merely that God's *favor* is on its way, as if drifting down from on high, but rather that *God* is coming to walk with the people, to dwell with the people, to usher us from captivity to freedom, from conflict to peace, from exile all the way home. Mark puts it this way: "he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit" – the Spirit being the One who envelops us, dwelling with us and within us.

PRAY

God of peace, give us the wisdom and courage to be peacemakers, the strength to make a way in the wilderness accessible to all, the valleys lifted up, the mountains made low, the rough places plain. Fill us with your Spirit, your comfort, and your shalom, all for the love of the world. Come, Prince of Peace, come! Amen.

PRACTICE

- Each morning (or evening) this week, light a candle of hope and a candle of peace, and surround them with music: listen to this week's selections from *Messiah*, follow the daily *Messiah* devotions, or sing a carol or two. In prayer, name the kind of peace you envision. Which places, which people?
- Isaiah imagines peace as "leveling the ground." Find one obstacle you can remove for someone else this week. Shovel a walk. Give someone a ride. Cover a shift. Make a meal. Open a door. Make a way!
- The gift of music: Which songs give you a sense of God's shalom? Listen (and sing!) those songs this week, and find out which songs bring the most peace to a friend or family member.
- Conversation starters: What's your idea of a completely peaceful day? What specific steps would help shalom to thrive in your

community? Where do you see peace threatened by injustice – and what kind of liberation is necessary? Which moments in this week's selections from *Messiah* are most striking?

- Listen again to "And the glory of the Lord," close your eyes, and notice as one voice enters, then another, then another. Afterwards, take a moment and ask: Which voices in the great fugue of life am I not hearing? For the sake of peace, how might I listen?



LIGHT

Three Candles

READ

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me
because the Lord has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives
and release to the prisoners,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor…
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.
+ Isaiah 61:1-3

God has shown a strong arm;
scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts;
brought down the powerful from their thrones
and lifted up the lowly;
filled the hungry with good things
and sent the rich away empty.
+ Luke 1:51-53

LISTEN

Messiah, Part I, Scene 5: Christ's healing and redemption

(18) Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion (Zechariah 9:9–10)

(19) Then shall the eyes of the blind be opened (Isaiah 35:5–6)

(20) He shall feed his flock like a shepherd (Isaiah 40:11; Matthew 11:28–29)

(21) His yoke is easy (Matthew 11:30)

From Messiah, Part II, Scene 7: God's ultimate victory

(44) Hallelujah (Revelation 19:6; 11:15; 19:16)

REFLECT

Mary's song evokes and echoes its ancient forerunner, Hannah's song of gratitude to God for the newness of life embodied in her son, Samuel. Hannah joyfully sings of divine majesty and power turning the world upside down: God "raises up the poor from the dust," even as "the bows of the mighty are broken" (1 Samuel 2:1-10). Likewise, Mary joyfully sings of how God "lifts up the lowly" and "brings down the powerful from their thrones" (Luke 1:52).

These jubilant, powerful women step into a mighty river of gladness, going back at least as far as the prophet Isaiah, who declares that God's Messiah comes with good news for the poor, the oppressed, the prisoner, and the brokenhearted – graciously giving them garlands of flowers, the oil of gladness, and a mantle of joyful, grateful praise.

In Jennens and Handel's scene focusing on Christ's healing and redemption, soaring soprano and alto voices continue this tradition of gladness, comfort, and reassurance ("Rejoice greatly!") – ultimately joined by tenors and basses in a celebration of how following Jesus is available and accessible to all, since "His yoke is easy!"

But the consummate expression of joy in the oratorio, of course, is the Hallelujah Chorus, a triumphant fugue, a swirl of voices, strings, and trumpets, unsurpassed in the history of majestic, celebratory music. Like Mary's song (and Hannah's), the chorus ecstatically praises God – that's what "hallelujah" means: "hallelu" (praise) + "jah" (God) – for all God has done and is doing and will do for all people, turning the world upside down, making "the kingdom of this world" into "the kingdom of our God." Hallelujah!

PRAY

God of good news of great joy for all people – help us to lift our voices in songs of joyful praise. Even among the shadows of sorrow and despair, help us rejoice in what you have done, are doing, and will yet do. With Mary, Hannah, and Isaiah, let us sing "Hallelujah" of how you lift up the lowly, scatter the proud, and fill the hungry with good things. Come, Jesus, come! Amen.

PRACTICE

- Each morning (or evening) this week, light candles of hope, peace, and joy, and surround them with music: listen to this week's selections from *Messiah*, follow the daily *Messiah* devotions, or sing a carol or two. In prayer, name the joys you feel, or wish to feel, in your life.
- Take Mary's lead and fill the hungry with good things. Invite someone to dinner, stock a community fridge, bring groceries to a neighbor, or donate to a food pantry. Make your donation something delicious!
- The gift of music: Host a dance party (for one, for two, or more!) filled with as much joy and singing along as you can muster.
- Conversation starters: What's one of your most joyful memories? Looking ahead, what joys are you most anticipating? Where do you see joyful signs of God "lifting up the lowly"? Which moments in this week's selections from *Messiah* are most striking?
- Make some good, joyful trouble this week. Push back against one small (or large!) injustice: write the letter, show up at the protest, amplify a marginalized voice. Let justice sing!



WHAT IS A FUGUE?

A fugue is a complex musical form, in which a central theme (called the subject) is introduced by one voice or instrument alone and then imitated, overlapped, and chased by the other voices in succession. The word comes from the Latin *fuga*, "flight" – connoting both the experience of flying and the dynamics of fleeing and chasing.

Handel uses this technique at key points in *Messiah*, building momentum and creating an immersive, ecstatic sense of being "caught up" in an endless, beginningless swirl of beauty, a kind of musical icon for God's "world without end, Amen" (as the Book of Common Prayer puts it).

In the Hallelujah Chorus, for example, the basses begin the "And he shall reign forever and ever" theme, passing it upward to the tenors, altos, and sopranos, until all four parts spin and swirl together. And in the oratorio's finale, the Amen Chorus, the basses sing a long, flowing melody on the single word, "Amen," and then, one by one, the tenors, altos, and sopranos join in, gradually building a massive, whirling, uplifting architecture of sound – and bringing the oratorio to its soaring conclusion.

Come to think of it, the Bible is also a kind of fugue, its many authors chasing key subjects in harmony and counterpoint, resonance and dissonance and soaring poetry – a fact we can feel as we listen to the many biblical voices in *Messiah*. Advent and Christmas, too, create another fugue, a thematic architecture we can inhabit each year: singing songs, exploring mysteries, and allowing our hearts to be "caught up" in the wondrous, endless swirl of God's beauty and light.



WEEK FOUR
LOVE



LIGHT
Four Candles

READ
But that same night the word of God came to Nathan: Go and tell my servant David: Thus says the LORD: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle. Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, "Why have you not built me a house of cedar?" Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David: Thus says the LORD of hosts: I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel; and I have been with you wherever you went… + 2 Samuel 7:4-9

And Gabriel came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus." + Luke 1:28-31

LISTEN
Messiah, Part III, Scene 1: The promise of eternal life

(45) I know that my Redeemer liveth (Job 19:25–26; 1 Corinthians 15:20)

(46) Since by man came death (1 Corinthians 15:21–22)

Messiah, Part III, Scene 4: The acclamation of the Messiah

(53) Worthy is the Lamb (Revelation 5:12–14) + Amen

REFLECT

Again and again in Scripture, love takes the form of companionship: walking together along the way. When David suggests that he build a "house of cedar" for God (in other words, a temple), God's initial reaction is to remind David that since the exodus from Egypt, the divine quarters – "a tent and a tabernacle" – have been humble and mobile by design, precisely so the Israelites and God can journey together: "I have been with you wherever you went." God even suggests that the reason God called David into leadership in the first place is that David was a shepherd, a companion accustomed to being on the move, "following the sheep" and caring for them at every turn.

Accordingly, Jesus will arrive through an ordinary birth by an ordinary young woman in an ordinary town, dwelling with us and loving us not as a mighty priest enthroned in a temple, but rather as a "good shepherd" out and about, accompanying us wherever we go, including through death and beyond. The angel's words of greeting to Mary announce this very promise: "God is with you." And sure enough, after Mary says, "Yes," Jesus arrives as Emmanuel, "God with us," the One who walks with us and lives with us in deep companionship and communion.

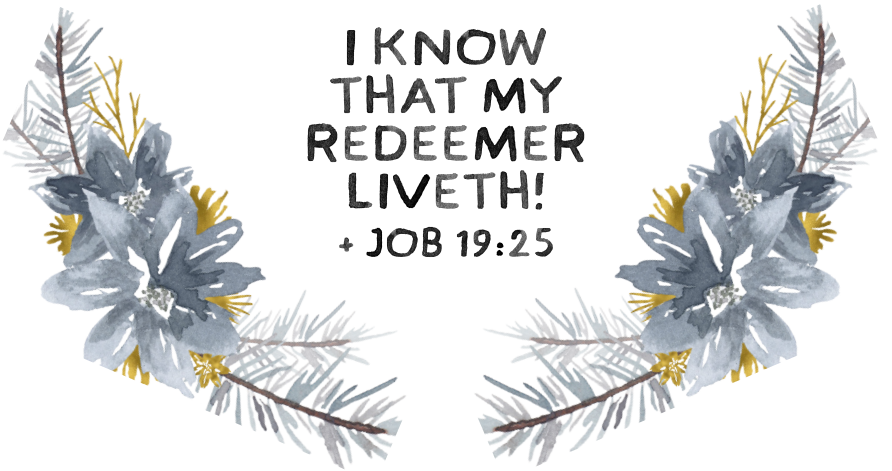
Jennens and Handel pick up this last theme – our communion with Christ – in Part III of the oratorio. Because Jesus lives, we live. And because we live in Jesus (as "the Body of Christ"), we partake in his life, his resurrection, his ongoing ministry of hope, peace, joy, and love. As Paul puts it in his letter to the Christian community in Corinth, just as "in Adam" all die, in Christ all will be made alive (1 Corinthians 15:22). According to this divine poetry, the ancient story of sin is reversed into a story of salvation: death-dealing powers are overcome by the power of love. And this great journey of companionship and communion, this bringing us and all creation back to life, begins on Christmas day!

PRAY

God of love, thank you for walking with us, for shepherding us, for caring for us: going where we go, dwelling where we dwell. Fill us with your Spirit of loving-kindness, so we might love one another, and thereby live in communion with you. Come, Good Shepherd, come! Amen.

PRACTICE

- Each morning (or evening) this week, light candles of hope, peace, joy, and love, and surround them with music: listen to this week's selections from *Messiah*, follow the daily *Messiah* devotions, or sing a carol or two. In prayer, name the ways you feel God's love, and the love you have for others.
- Walk together in companionship: Invite someone for a walk this week, especially someone you haven't spent much time with lately. (And leave your phone in your pocket!)
- The gift of music: Many songs revolve around love. Try hearing – and singing – your favorite love songs this week as songs about God's love for you, for your neighbors, and for all creation.
- Conversation starters: If you were to draw a scene exemplifying love, what would it look like? What experiences make you most aware of God's loving companionship with us? Which moments in this week's selections from *Messiah* are most striking?
- Tell someone you love them – but don't stop there. Take a little time this week to tell them why. Name something particular you love, admire, remember, or are grateful for. In the spirit of the season, make love specific and incarnate.



CHRISTMAS EVE

LIGHT

Four Candles, plus the Christ Candle

READ

Now in that same region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them, and Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told them. + Luke 2:8-20

LISTEN

Messiah, Part I, Scene 4: The annunciation to the shepherds

(13) Pifa ("pastoral symphony")

(14) (a) There were shepherds abiding in the fields (Luke 2:8)

(14) (b) And lo, the angel of the Lord (Luke 2:9)

(15) And the angel said unto them (Luke 2:10-11)

(16) And suddenly there was with the angel (Luke 2:13)

(17) Glory to God in the highest (Luke 2:14)

REFLECT

Perhaps no other Christmas story captures the season's "Emmanuel" theme more vividly than Luke's story of the shepherds and the angels. Think of it: here is God arriving to dwell with us – and the arrival is announced not at the Jerusalem Temple or at Herod's glittering palace, but in the middle of nowhere to a bunch of nobodies, ordinary people like you and me, shepherds and shepherdesses watching our flocks by night. God with us!

What's more, not only is God's arrival *announced* to a group of poor shepherds, Jesus essentially *arrives as* a poor shepherd, a good shepherd, an ordinary baby who will become an ordinary rabbi tending to a flock, teaching and healing ordinary people – and leaving aside, despite his status, the robes of the academy and the riches of royalty. God with us!

Accordingly, Jennens and Handel set the scene with an instrumental, pastoral portrait, and then bring Luke's story to life, verse by verse, with soloists delivering the details – until the chorus suddenly, gloriously bursts in, in effect creating for the audience an immersive, sonic "glimpse" of the heavenly host filling the night sky: "Glory to God in the highest!" As the chorus fills the air, with its climbing, swirling, fugue-like elements, the audience takes up the position of the shepherds in the fields on Christmas Eve.

PRAY

God of hope, peace, joy, and love; God of Christmas Eve and Christmas morning; God of Mary and Joseph, the shepherds and the magi, the mighty and the lowly: we thank you and praise you for coming as a Messiah who is also Emmanuel, a God who not only saves but also dwells with us. Glory to God in the highest! Give us the courage to take our place among this great cloud of witnesses, to play our part in the great oratorio of creation, praising you for Jesus, our loving shepherd, our reason for joy, our Prince of Peace, our hope against hope. Welcome, Jesus, welcome! Amen!

