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November 25 Comfort, Comfort Now My People

TEXT: Johannes G. Olearius
Translated, Catherine Winkworth

b. September 17, 1611
d. April 24, 1684

Johannes Olearius was a philosophy professor at the University of Wittenberg, Halle, Germany, but he is primarily remembered for his hymn writing. Three hundred and two of his hymns were included in one of the most important German hymnals of the 1600s, *Geistliche Singe-Kunst*. One of the hymns was the basis for "Cantata 129" by Johann Sebastian Bach.

TUNE: Louis Bourgeois

b. 1510, Paris, France
d. 1561, Paris, France

Louis Bourgeois, a French composer, is famous for his Psalm tunes and was one of the three primary composers of the famous Genevan Psalter. OLD HUNDREDTH, the melody to which we sing "The Doxology," is commonly attributed to him. We may think people feel strongly about changes in church music today, but the local church authorities had Bourgeois sent to prison in 1551 for replacing the tunes of some well-known psalms "without a license."[5] John Calvin intervened and obtained his release. Still, controversy remained as people did not want to learn new tunes. The town council ordered the burning of Bourgeois' instructions to singers, declaring they were confusing. GENEVAN 42 was originally written for a setting of Psalm 42. When the tune is sung at a brisk tempo, its irregular meter is rollicking and joyful as befits the text.

As you sing this hymn . . . you are singing Isaiah 40:1, 3, printed under the hymn title. Isaiah records many tumultuous years for Israel. Some kings in this prophet's day were righteous, some were unrighteous. But throughout, the book is punctuated with God's promises of a Messiah who would bring comfort. Read this promise in #4 of the "Christmas in the Bible" section.

How Israel longed for comfort! Isaiah used the word "comfort" seven times to describe God's kindness to Israel. Pastor Mark Dever says of Isaiah, "The book is far more about God's tenacious concern in judgment and love for his people than his people's love for him . . . whether that love is expressed through his judgment upon their evil or through his promises of future deliverance."[6] Pastor Scotty Smith calls the words of Isaiah a description of "Advent arms."[7] "He gathers the lambs in His arms and carries them close to His heart" (40:11). What could be more comforting?

The Hebrew word for comfort can also be translated "repent."[8] At its root is the idea of breathing deeply or sighing, perhaps a sorrowful sigh for sin or a breath of relief when comfort is found. Significantly, Isaiah's words are in the present tense. The Israelites did not have to wait until Jesus was born to know comfort through repentance. God would have mercy on them then. Today, too, we do not have to wait for the return of Christ to find comfort. Comfort begins with our repentance, which means turning from sin. By repentance, we become reconciled with God, and that is where we find comfort and peace. Advent is a time for repentance, a time to sweep out the dirt and get ready for the coming Guest. Stanza four entreats, "Let your hearts be true and humble" as you prepare for Christmas. The promise of comfort is assured, for "God's word is never broken."

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Comfort, Comfort Now My People 1

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. . . . A voice
cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD*;*
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

ISAIAH 40:1, 3

GENEVAN 42
Text: Johannes G. Olearius; Tr. Catherine Winkworth
Music: Louis Bourgeois



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November 26 On Jordan's Bank the Baptist's Cry

TEXT: Charles Coffin || b. October 4, 1676
d. June 20, 1749

Carolo (Charles) Coffin was born in Buzancy, France. He showed much promise as a child, and by age thirty-six, he became the principal of the College at Beauvais, and later the Rector of the University of Paris. But Coffin is most remembered for his hymns—over ninety can be found with English translations. This hymn may not be well-known, yet it is printed in 145 modern hymnals. Englishman John Chandler translated the original text in Latin in the nineteenth century.

A man of strong convictions, Coffin appealed against the positions of the Pope's 1713 edict on doctrine, called the *Constitution Unigenitus,* condemning a French movement called Jansenism that sought to reform the church's understanding of grace. As a result, the Catholic Church refused to grant him a Christian burial. But like Martin Luther, Coffin stood firm on the principles of God's Word. No wonder he wrote in stanza four the prayer, "let Your light restore earth's own true loveliness once more."

TUNE: Trier manuscript, 15th c.
Adapted, Michael Praetorius || b. February 15, 1571
d. February 15, 1621

Michael Praetorius was a highly esteemed German composer, organist, and teacher. He is known for the development of musical forms based on Protestant hymns. His works include a collection of 1,200 chorales and song arrangements for the Lutheran church. Another of his Christmas hymns in this book is "Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming."

As you sing this hymn . . . you are singing of what today might be called the prequel to the Christmas story. This was the ministry that God gave to John the Baptist. Refresh your memory of this amazing story by reading "Christmas in the Bible," #18 and 19.

Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, and Mary, the mother of Jesus, were cousins and pregnant at the same time. Both births were miraculous, and John's parents are greatly honored in the story in Luke 1:57–80. John's words to Israel are also words to us today. Christ is coming—prepare the way in your hearts.

Stanza two in "On Jordan's Bank the Baptist's Cry" guides us to prepare through repentance. Stanzas three and four acknowledge our salvation as a gift of His grace, without which we are as doomed as flowers—bright for a season, but then gone. The world's current darkness cannot be transformed by political policies or social programs. It can only be restored by His light that entered our world with Jesus' coming. The final stanza is a doxology to the Trinity, leading us to give praise for this wondrous story of God's rescue.

Do you think of repentance as part of your Christmas preparation? Typically, we prepare for Christmas through decorating, gift buying, special cooking, traveling, and attending parties. But John the Baptist reminds us that Christmas preparation must begin with a personal inventory of our lives. Consider your sin—both the bad you've done and the good you've left undone. Then bring them to God in confession. No, you don't clean yourself up before you come to God. You bring the dirt to God, acknowledging it and asking Him to make you clean. Tell Him you need forgiveness as you prepare today for celebrating the Nativity.

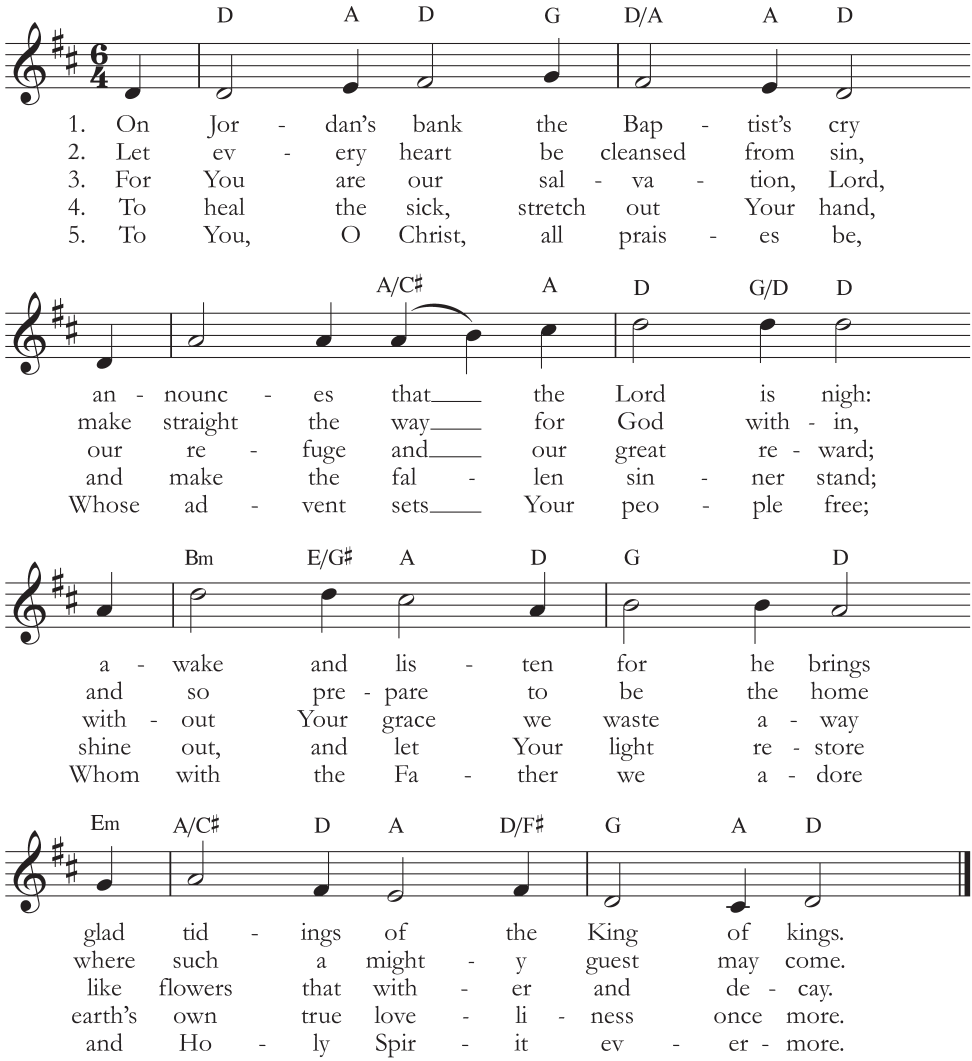
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On Jordan's Bank the Baptist's Cry 2

These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan,
where John was baptizing.

JOHN 1:28

PUER NOBIS
Text: Charles Coffin, Tr. John Chandler
Music: Trier Manuscript, adapt. Michael Praetorius



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November 27 For Ages Women Hoped and Prayed

TEXT: Jane Parker Huber || b. October 24, 1926, Tsinan (now Jinan), China
d. November 17, 2008, Hanover, Indiana

Jane Parker Huber was born in China to missionary parents. They returned to America in 1929 when her father was appointed the president of Hanover College. Jane graduated from Hanover in 1948, married a pastor, and moved to Indiana. It wasn't until 1976 that she began writing hymns, but by 1996 she had over 125 hymns published. Jane was awarded a Doctor of Humane Letters in 1988 by Hanover College. In this hymn, Huber pictures the state of mind of what was probably a very early teenage girl who receives the shocking and almost incomprehensible news that she will be the mother of the Messiah. And though the centuries-long national prayer for a Messiah was the prayer of every Jew, no doubt many women dreamed of having the unparalleled honor of being the mother of the Messiah.

TUNE: Traditional English Folk Tune
Arranged, Ralph Vaughan Williams || b. October 12, 1872, Gloucestershire, England
d. August 26, 1958, London, England

It is unlikely that Jane Parker Huber used this tune for her text. But in this collection, it seemed appropriate and unifying to use the same tune for the parallel texts that speak of Mary and Joseph. KINGSFOLD is an ancient tune that some scholars think goes back to the Middle Ages and was used with a variety of texts in both England and Ireland. It was first published in 1893. The composer Ralph Vaughan Williams arranged it for a setting of another text by Horatius Bonar named, "I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say." This tune is unusual as it sounds both minor and major, but is likely based on one of the seven modal keys from early music. Modal keys use different arrangements of whole and half steps than major or minor.

As you sing this hymn . . . you come alongside someone who was crucial to the Christmas story—Jesus' mother, Mary. The opening stanza reveals a paradox that this highest honor would also come to enormous grief. Read and meditate on the story from "Christmas in the Bible," #9–21.

You will see that Mary's humility is remarkable. She did not understand how she could be pregnant before marriage, but she simply responds to the angel's explanation with these words: "I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38). There is no argument or reluctance.

Mary's prayer that follows is sometimes called the *Magnificat,* based on the third word in her prayer, "My soul magnifies the Lord" (v. 46). It is incredible that such a young, probably illiterate, peasant girl understood the ways of God as described in her song. Few others write with such clear and insightful theology of the nature of God.

Why should we sing a hymn—a Christmas carol—about Mary? Do we offer it as a form of worship of Mary—a type of veneration or honoring of a "saint"? No. We know that Mary, like all of us, needed a Savior. In her prayer, she says, "he has looked on the humble estate of his servant" (v. 48). Then she proclaims, "my spirit rejoices in God my Savior" (v. 47b) and "he who is mighty has done great things for me" (v. 49). We do not come to Mary as a means of reaching her Son. Rather, we learn from her obedience and devotion. Her song becomes our song of praise. As the carol says, "we join the song that Mary sings."

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For Ages Women Hoped and Prayed 3

The angel said to her, ". . . You will conceive
in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call
his name Jesus." . . . And Mary said, "Behold,
I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me
according to your word."

LUKE 1:30–31, 38

KINGSFOLD
Text: Jane Parker Huber
Music: Traditional English Melody; Arr. Ralph Vaughan Williams



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November 28 The Hands That First Held Mary's Child

TEXT: Thomas H. Troeger || b. 1945

Thomas Troeger is ordained in both the Episcopal and the Presbyterian churches and is professor emeritus at Yale Divinity School. A poet of many hymns and a flutist, he has served as the national chaplain of the American Guild of Organists. Troeger has written twenty books on hymnody and worship, preaching, and poetry, including *Wonder Reborn: Preaching on Hymns, Music, and Poetry*. The craftsmanship of a professional poet is clearly evident in this rare accounting of the earthly father of Jesus. John Greenleaf Whittier once said, "A good hymn is the best use to which poetry can be devoted."[9]

TUNE: Traditional English Folk Tune
Arranged, Ralph Vaughan Williams || b. October 12, 1872, Gloucestershire, England
d. August 26, 1958, London, England

Ralph Vaughan Williams started collecting folk songs in 1903 by going into the English countryside, noting down, and transcribing songs traditionally sung in various locations. He named this tune KINGSFOLD and used it in hymnody. Many of these tunes are also found throughout his nine symphonies and hundreds of other compositions. To connect the two hymn texts about Mary and Joseph, we chose to employ the same tune for both carols.

As you sing this hymn . . . you are singing one of the only Christmas hymns that mentions Joseph, the earthly father of Jesus. We know little about Joseph. We know he was a carpenter because Matthew and Mark both refer to the amazement people had at Jesus' wisdom and teaching when He was "a carpenter's son." Read "Christmas in the Bible," #9–12, to be reminded of Joseph's extraordinary trust and obedience at the angel's words.

Scripture testifies that Joseph was devoted to Mary and was concerned for her comfort, privacy, and safety. "Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly" (Matt. 1:19 NIV). Once an angel appears and explains it to him, there is no indication of doubt in Joseph's mind that this newborn was sent by God and was the Son of God: "He did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him" (v. 24 NIV). The poet's imagination then links his care for Mary to his handling of the newborn infant.

The prophet Isaiah had already revealed Immanuel as a name for this baby, and Matthew defines that name as "God with us" (v. 23). Yet the angel told Joseph the child should have a second name: Jesus, which means, "God saves." J. C. Ryle helped us understand the significance of the name when he wrote, "He, who is the King of kings and the Lord of lords, might lawfully have taken some more high-sounding title. But He does not do so. The rulers of this world have often called themselves great, conquerors, bold, magnificent, and the like. The Son of God is content to call Himself, Savior."[10]

What awful irony that the tools of Joseph's profession were used to crucify his son. We too can use the tools and skills God gives us for good or evil. In the final line, Troeger implores us to hold the child and be charged with faith. Let us be obedient like Joseph, even if we don't understand a call from God.

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The Hands That First Held Mary's Child 4

When Joseph woke up,
he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him
and took Mary home as his wife.

MATTHEW 1:24 NIV

KINGSFOLD
Text: Thomas H. Troeger
Music: Traditional English melody; Arr. Ralph Vaughan Williams



TROEGER: The hands that first held - IP 5008928 'The hands that first held Mary's child' by Thomas Troeger
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