

# “Rise Up and Follow”

A sermon in the Advent sermon series  
“*Tidings of Comfort & Joy—God’s Incarnation  
Expressed in Beloved Christmas Carols*”

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- Isaiah 60:1-3, 6-7, 16, 19-22 (Good News Translation) <sup>1</sup> Arise, Jerusalem, and shine like the sun; The glory of the LORD is shining on you! <sup>2</sup> Other nations will be covered by darkness, but on you the light of the LORD will shine; the brightness of his presence will be with you. <sup>3</sup> Nations will be drawn to your light, and kings to the dawning of your new day.... <sup>6</sup> Great caravans of camels will come, from Midian and Ephah. They will come from Sheba, bringing gold and incense. People will tell the good news of what the LORD has done! <sup>7</sup> All the sheep of Kedar and Nebaioth will be brought to you as sacrifices and offered on the altar to please the LORD. The LORD will make his Temple more glorious than ever.... <sup>16</sup> Nations and kings will care for you as a mother nurses her child. You will know that I, the LORD, have saved you, that the mighty God of Israel sets you free.... <sup>19</sup> “No longer will the sun be your light by day or the moon be your light by night; I, the LORD, will be your eternal light; the light of my glory will shine on you. <sup>20</sup> Your days of grief will come to an end. I, the LORD, will be your eternal light, more lasting than the sun and moon. <sup>21</sup> Your people will all do what is right, and will possess the land forever. I planted them, I made them, to reveal my greatness to all. <sup>22</sup> Even your smallest and humblest family will become as great as a powerful nation. When the right time comes, I will make this happen quickly. I am the LORD!”
- Luke 2:15-16 (Good News Translation) <sup>15</sup> When the angels went away from them back 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.” <sup>16</sup> So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph and saw the baby lying in the manger.
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: Being a Christian requires more than awareness of Jesus; it requires following his example.

Each Sunday of Advent and on Christmas Eve this year we’re taking a look at a different beloved Christmas carol. We’re looking beyond their familiarity to find their message about why the birth of Jesus changes our lives and gives us life.

Last week in the carol “It Came Upon the Midnight Clear” we heard that in the birth of Jesus the Son God was choosing to “bend near the earth,” eliminating the distance between God and humanity and encouraging us to help bring “peace on earth, goodwill to all.”

And two weeks ago on the First Sunday of Advent our focus was the mysterious Advent hymn “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.” Its text reminds us that we need a savior to rescue us, to redeem us, to “save us.” From what? From our instinctive desire to serve and satisfy our self-centered tendencies. We pray for Emmanuel—Hebrew for “God-With-Us.”

This morning we turn to a song from the spiritual tradition, “Rise Up, Shepherd, and Follow.” Today it’s commonly understood that African-American spirituals often contained certain words or images which served as a coded means of communication that the slaveowners didn’t pick up on. By singing as they worked or ate or socialized after the day’s work, the enslaved people could share secret signals about clandestine meetings planned for the middle of the night. They could offer coded instructions and directions to those about to attempt to escape to the north. For instance,

- singing “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” signaled that it was time to make a break for the North;
- singing “Wade in the Water” reminded freedom-seekers to walk in streams and rivers so the dogs couldn’t track their scent.

The slave masters didn’t pick up on the coded messages in the spirituals.

But this song is different, according to James Weldon Johnson, the early twentieth century poet, songwriter and civil rights activist. The song “Rise Up, Shepherd, and Follow” wasn’t intended to send surreptitious signals. Johnson’s research suggested to him that “Rise Up, Shepherd, and Follow” and other Christmas-themed spirituals were probably created rather late in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in the period *after* the Emancipation Proclamation’s abolition of slavery.<sup>1</sup>

This “spiritual carol” contains a quirky little feature. Maybe you noticed it right away; I didn’t. Let me point it out to you by asking you a Bible question: “*How many of each kind of animal did Moses take with him on the ark? How many?*” The answer, of course is... that *Moses* didn’t take any animals; it was *Noah* who built the ark.” The question’s error is so obvious that it’s easy to miss, isn’t it? The same is true in this carol. The refrain urges, “Follow the Star of Bethlehem; rise up, shepherd, and follow.” But in the biblical stories of the birth of Jesus, who was it who followed the star? Not the shepherds but the Kings, the Wise Men.

What’s happening in this spiritual is something we all do with the Christmas story: we take the very different accounts from the gospels of Matthew and Luke and conflate them into one story. For instance:

- Matthew tells of Wise Men and a star. Luke doesn’t.
- Luke tells of angels appearing to shepherds in a field, and shepherds visiting a baby placed in a manger. Matthew has no shepherds or singing angels, no baby in a manger.

And yet if you look at our nativity scene in the lobby’s display case, you’ll see both stories all mixed together: shepherds beside Wise Men, sheep out front and camels out back. We all tend to meld together the two nativity stories, and so does this carol.

So consider the carol’s message: “Rise up and follow!”

Take that first phrase: “rise up.” That simple instruction runs counter to how modern society conditions us. Most of us simply don’t want to “rise up” if we don’t have to. Here’s what I mean.

In the early decades of the Television Age televisions didn’t have remote controls. Changing the channel or adjusting the volume was a mini-exercise routine—*get up, walk a few steps, bend over, reach, straighten up, walk a few steps, sit down. (Repeat.)* Countless stand-up comics used to joke that the purpose of having children was to make *them* get up and adjust the TV. Nowadays, though, we have remote controls for TVs and sound systems, garage doors and fireplaces, ceiling fans and Christmas lights. “Remotes” have conditioned us to resist “rising up” if at all possible. We would rather illustrate Newton’s First Law of Motion that an object at rest will remain at rest. Modern life has conditioned us to resist “rising up.”

But aren’t there times when we feel driven, called, compelled to “rise up” in response to something? Last week Time Magazine announced its 2019 “Person of the Year.” Swedish teenager Greta Thunberg was selected for her initiative and her compelling passion about urging meaningful and effective action to address harmful climate change. Greta first learned about climate change issues at age 8. When she was 15 she began

sparking a collective movement to fight climate change after protesting alone outside the Swedish parliament during school hours on Fridays.... The teen held up a now universally recognized hand-painted sign that read “*skolstrejk för klimatet*,” which

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<sup>1</sup> LindaJo H. McKim, *The Presbyterian Hymnal Companion*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993, 52-53.

translates to “School strike for the climate.” Her solo protest... eventually prompted millions of people in 150 countries “to act on behalf of the planet.”<sup>2</sup>

Greta realized how essential it was for her to “rise up.” She couldn’t wait and wonder and depend on the chance that someone else would. First she noticed a need, then she chose to act. She “rose up.”

Or maybe you’re more familiar with the sentiment as it’s expressed in the Broadway musical sensation “Hamilton” where the protagonist urges the members of the Continental Congress to take bold, courageous action, singing

Rise up  
We will wise up  
And keep our eyes up  
Remembering.<sup>3</sup>

God calls us to “rise up” as disciples of Jesus. We’re called to rise up, to act as God’s agents, first to announce God’s will and then working to help bring about that plan in our world.

And after “Rise up,” what about the carol’s second instruction: “follow”? For a lot of people today that word has become a noun – we hope that our social media posts will get lots of “follows” because of our clever or charming or insightful observations about daily life or our photos of kids or vacations or pets or food. That kind of following involves little activity beyond pulling our phone out of a pocket or bag.

Besides, in the carol, *who* is supposed to do the following? And *what*, exactly, are those followers supposed to follow?

Since this carol came into being only about 150 years ago, the carol can’t be speaking to those Bethlehem shepherds of antiquity, of course. So *who is* it addressed to? Notice that the song sings “Rise Up, Shepherd...” It calls to a shepherd (singular), not “all you shepherds wherever y’all are out there.” In other words, the song is personal. Addressed to you. To me. To each of us individually. We’re not to wait and see if someone else will step forward. You’re being called, I’m being directed, each of us is being urged to “rise up” and “follow the Star of Bethlehem.”

But wait: by following “the Star of Bethlehem” I don’t think the carol is telling us to become amateur astronomers. No, this carol urges us to dedicate ourselves to following Jesus, the “star” of the story, the true “star” who came out of Bethlehem.

This season of Advent is a time of beginnings, of promise, of expectation. The season of Advent heralds more than a mere announcement telling us that God engaged with humankind in the birth of Jesus. God wants more of us than merely for us to be *aware* that Jesus once walked the earth. Being a Christian does not consist of simply *knowing about* Jesus. Being a Christian demands that we make a decision, a choice, that we act, that we *rise up*, that we commit to *following* Jesus.

- Following his example by being generous in offering unconditional love.
- Following his example by befriending and protecting people who are sick, lonely, powerless, disadvantaged, in the minority, vulnerable.
- Following his example by living with hope.
- Following his example by being less judgmental and condemning and being more welcoming and encouraging.
- Following his example by living the Kingdom of Heaven-way here and now.
- Following his example by exhibiting obedience and trust in God always.

So what’s the message from today’s carol? “You...! Rise up! Take notice! Follow Jesus! Live life the way he did: for God’s sake.

[sermons: se20191215; © 2019 Jon M. Fancher]

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/greta-thunberg-time-s-2019-person-year-n1099396> accessed 12/11/2019

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.letssingit.com/hamilton-lyrics-ibeyi-rise-up-wise-up-eyes-up-o9r5fqd> accessed 12/15/2019