

# **Charles Wesley**

# **Reflects on Advent**

*An Advent Reflection in One Act*

by  
Chuck and Carol Puckett

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### **Setting**

Wesley's study.

### **Time**

Late in Wesley's life (approximately 1777), on his birthday, December 18.

### **Cast of Characters**

**Charles Wesley.** On the occasion of his 70th birthday.

**Sally Wesley.** His wife.

Lights come up on a desk and chair in Wesley's study. A coat rack is upstage. A piano may be present. Depending on staging, possibly a bookshelf and other accoutrement. The desk is the important thing: it is a mess. Papers and books are piled high, 3-4 small paintings are visible. An ink well with quill is in sight. Unseen (beneath papers) is another inkwell. After a moment, CHARLES WESLEY enters. He wears a cape, coat, vest, leggings, and wig, and uses a cane. He blows on his hands and shivers, then crosses to the desk, and begins shuffling through papers, looking for a clean sheet. He speaks a few lines of poetry to himself.

CHARLES  
WHERE IS THE HEAVENLY, HOLY CHILD?  
HEIR TO THE ALL-EXALTED THRONE

CHARLES (CONT'D)  
No that's not it.  
  
HEIR TO THE EVERLASTING THRONE

CHARLES (CONT'D)  
Yes! Much better.

He pulls several candidate papers out, peers at them, looks for his spectacles, finds them, puts them on, reads and discards papers until he finds one he can use. He sits, dips the quill in the inkwell, starts to write, notices there is no ink, looks at quill, in inkwell, then calls out.

CHARLES (CONT'D)  
Sally! Is there no ink? "Who heaven and earth have reconciled". There's no ink in the well.

SALLY  
(from off)  
Use the other inkwell, Charles.

CHARLES  
I only see the one.  
(finds the other inkwell)  
(MORE)

CHARLES (CONT'D)

Ah, here it is.

**(writes and speaks)**

WHERE IS THE HOLY, HEAVEN-BORN CHILD?  
HEIR OF THE EVERLASTING THRONE  
WHO HEAVEN AND EARTH HATH RECONCILED  
AND GOD AND MAN REJOINED IN ONE?

CHARLES (CONT'D)

A reasonable beginning. A very reasonable beginning.

**He pushes back from desk, removes his spectacles and discovers the audience.**

CHARLES (CONT'D)

These verses come to me while I am out walking. Back when I was still riding the countryside to preach, verses would come into my head like wildfires. Perhaps it was the horse's rhythm that suggested the meter. A slow walk for four-four time, a trot for three-four, a canter makes for six-eight. The glory of God's creation all about me always provided a theme. Now Sally and I live in London and I am constrained to my daily perambulation. If I am deemed worthy, and the idea for a hymn is given to me, I must get it written down as soon as may be. Before I become too sedentary to remember the rhythm.

**(scribbles)**

SHALL WE OF EARTHLY KINGS INQUIRE?  
TO COURTS OR PALACES REPAIR?  
THE NATION'S HOPE, THE WORLD'S DESIRE  
ALAS! WE CANNOT FIND HIM THERE.

**SALLY WESLEY enters. She is dressed in a plain black dress and a small mop hat. She is a lovely woman, who is aging gracefully, although still CHARLES' junior by twenty years. CHARLES crosses to her, and embraces her lightly, gives her a small kiss on her forehead. She helps him remove his coat, and takes his wig.**

SALLY

Is this one to be a hymn, Charles?

CHARLES

I daresay we have the germ of another Hymn for the Nativity of Our Lord.

**(MORE)**

CHARLES (CONT'D)

I remember as it were yesterday when we published the first edition. December 20th, 1744. Old Strahan printed it for 27 shillings. You remember Strahan, don't you, Sally?

**She shakes he head and smiles. He strikes his forehead.**

CHARLES (CONT'D)

What am I thinking? Like John says, "absent", as usual. No, we had not yet even met.

**(takes her hands)**

Dearest Sally. It was on that outward leg of my preaching trek, when I chanced to fall ill in South Wales, very near your parents' home.

SALLY

I wonder if you were all that ill.

CHARLES

The happiest illness in a life that has had its share. But there you nursed me. And there you married me a year later.

SALLY

After father was assured that you could be guaranteed a hundred pounds a year.

CHARLES

A guarantee made by John.

SALLY

A guarantee made by John. A hundred pounds annual from the proceeds of your publishing efforts. Still and all, the demand for your hymns and John's sermons was not so brisk then as now, my dear.

**CHARLES crosses back to desk and picks up a small pamphlet**

CHARLES

Nevertheless, it was a Christmas to remember. I have always kept a special place in my heart for this time of year. It is certainly not the incessant feasting and vulgar gift-giving everyone has become so mad about. How presumptuous people are! What greater gift can we give each other than the gift of grace already given by God? No, no it is rather the overwhelming thought that God has made Himself incarnate, come to live among man, long awaited, long-expected, freeing us from sin and fear.

## 1.1 "Come Thou Long-Expected Jesus"

### Come Thou Long-Expected Jesus

CHARLES & SALLY

COME THOU LONG, EXPECTED JESUS  
 BORN TO SET THY PEOPLE FREE  
 FROM OUR FEARS AND SIN RELEASE US  
 LET US FIND OUR REST IN THEE  
 ISRAEL'S STRENGTH AND CONSOLATION,  
 HOPE OF ALL THE EARTH THOU ART  
 DEAR DESIRE OF EVERY NATION  
 JOY OF EVERY LONGING HEART

**CHARLES falls silent and listens  
 to SALLY.**

SALLY

BORN THY PEOPLE TO DELIVER  
 BORN A CHILD AND YET A KING  
 BORN TO REIGN IN US FOREVER  
 NOW THY GRACIOUS KINGDOM BRING  
 BY THINE OWN ETERNAL SPIRIT  
 RULE IN ALL OUR HEARTS ALONE  
 BY THINE ALL SUFFICIENT MERIT,  
 RAISE US TO THY GLORIOUS THRONE

CHARLES

What a bird I have to sing with me! A  
 nightingale who's voice is full of God's glory.

SALLY

You have a strong voice, as you well know. You  
 preached to thousands for many years in the  
 meadows and fields, and not once did I hear of  
 anyone complaining that they could not hear  
 you.

CHARLES

Speaking voice, yes. Booming voice, even. But I  
 do well to carry a tune to the end of the song  
 that contains it. It is for singers such as  
 myself that John gave the direction, "Sing  
 modestly". And especially his advice not to  
 "bawl, so as to be heard above or distinct from  
 the rest of the congregation."

**SALLY laughs.**

CHARLES (CONT'D)

Ah, but it was for you John advised, "Sing  
 lustily and with good courage."

SALLY

Then I suppose it was for John himself and George Whitefield that he advised, "Sing them exactly as they are printed here, without altering or mending them at all."

CHARLES

"How all the welkin sing", you mean.

**They laugh and CHARLES sits.**

CHARLES (CONT'D)

You have the loveliest voice of anyone I've ever known or will know. And I am certainly not the only soul holding that opinion. There was the time, when I was still preaching on horseback, at the church in Colinshire it was. The minister there was very keen to have you sing for his congregation.

SALLY

And I would not, save he allowed you to preach for his congregation.

CHARLES

Which he did not.

SALLY

And therefore I did not.

**(she kisses the top of his head)**

And I was proud to deny them my voice if they were denied yours. Happy birthday, dear Charles.

**She steps out.**

CHARLES

**(shaking his head)**

I'm afraid that like so many churches of our day, Colinshire was a church on the outside only.

**(gets an idea and begins to write)**

WE SEARCH THE OUTWARD CHURCH IN VAIN

THEY CANNOT HIM WE SEEK DECLARE

**(pauses, looks up)**

THEY HAVE NOT FOUND THE SON OF MAN

OR KNOWN THE SACRED NAME THEY BEAR

CHARLES (CONT'D)

Most certainly true. Most certainly true.

**He crosses downstage and finds the audience.**

CHARLES (CONT'D)

And so my birthday comes 'round once again. I have often supposed that 'twas the proximity of my birthday to the celebrated nativity of Jesus that marks this time so special to me. I must confess, the circumstances of my own birth were aggravated to the point of concern. I appeared well before my mother's term was complete, and lay so still and quiet and cold, they worried for my life. Why, they even wrapped me in a wool blanket until the time I should have been born. "Swaddling clothes" they might have seemed. Our gracious mother, Susanna, taught all of us there in our home at Epworth. The occasion of a Wesley's fifth birthday was celebrated by learning one's A-B-C's. On one's birthday. The next day, we were set to examining books for reading, which we were well on our way to doing within a week. Susanna Wesley wasted no time on fundamentals. Epworth holds so many fond memories for me. And John. Imagine a family of eighteen. Or was it nineteen? When one is growing up in a household the size of small village, it's easy to lose count. A village composed entirely of girls, I should add. All except John and Samuel and father. And myself, of course. There were never parents more devoted to their children than Samuel and Susanna Wesley. Why, John and I so wanted to maintain that perfect home that we made a pact at Oxford. Neither would marry without the consultation and consent of the other. Fortunately for my happiness, he readily agreed to my marriage with Sally. I... I also commended John to his marriage with Molly Vazeille. I have been constantly thankful for John's support of my marriage. Perhaps, in other circumstances, he might have said the same... Yes, we had I'm sure the finest upbringing possible in Epworth. Sally and I have endeavored to provide the same for our children, though perhaps with less ability. And firmness. And certainly with far fewer students. Sally has borne me eight children. No, we were not as prolific as Samuel and Susanna, I'll grant you, but eight is a goodly number of children. Only three survived childhood. Oh, but what three they are! Young Charles is quite the musician, you know. When he was only eighteen, the King asked Charles to play for him personally, at Christmas.

(MORE)

CHARLES (CONT'D)

And every year thereafter. They would have made him organist at St. Paul's, if only his name hadn't been Charles Wesley. The Anglican church has no great love for John or I. But respect... They do indeed respect us. Our Sarah has been blessed with my affliction. She writes verses incessantly. Truth be told, I feel she may be a better poet than I. And the youngest, Samuel, may eclipse even Charles at the keyboard. Pride is, I know, insufferable, but pride in one's children may possibly be excused. They are three of my greatest joys, at times to the point of speechlessness. Joy. Joy and grace...

**He crosses back to desk and finds his quill and paper.**

LORD, WE RECEIVE THE GRACE AND THEE  
WITH JOY UNSPEAKABLE RECEIVE

**He needs a new sheet of paper,  
finally finds one.**

Paper, paper... the organization of my papers is so much less than perfect. John says he dreads my visits, because of the derangement of books I leave behind. Derangement, indeed. Only John would use the word thus. Ah, here we are!

AND RISE THINE OPEN FACE TO SEE  
AND ONE WITH GOD FOREVER LIVE

**SALLY enters.**

CHARLES (CONT'D)

There! Another verse complete. It gives me great joy to praise my Creator. For joy is that great good He has so abundantly given me.

SALLY

The most joyful man I know. Masters Handel and Watts wrote your sentiment exactly, didn't they? "Joy to the world, the Lord is come".

CHARLES

"Let earth receive her king." But do not forget: George Handel wrote tunes for three of my hymns as well, you know.

SALLY

Yes, dear, I know. But none of your Christmas hymns.