

# The Touch of God

*A Cantata for Christmas*

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## 1. Sweet Surprise

(Chorus)

The touch of God comes as a sweet surprise;  
when you least expect it, a tap on the shoulder.  
Just when you think that the Maker of the universe  
has wandered away or lost interest  
or maybe never was,  
out of the winter comes a light.  
In the least expected time and place,  
the familiar voice is there, above and behind us,  
calling our name in the whisper of a dream  
or a sky full of angels,  
and the message is always the same:  
“Do not fear. I am here.  
I will be with you and I will guide you.  
I will always love you.”

In the bleak mid-winter, frosty wind made moan.  
Earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone.  
Snow had fallen, snow on snow, snow on snow  
in the bleak mid-winter long ago.<sup>1</sup>

Out of God=s compassion came a holy light,  
piercing through the darkness of our lonely night.  
‘Twas foretold for ages God would come anew,  
but who could guess the way  
this promise would come true?

## 2. Gabriel’s Visit

(Chorus)

[Luke 1:26-35]

*Narrator: The great angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a young woman who was engaged to be married to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The young woman’s name was Mary. The messenger Gabriel came to her and said, “Greetings!”*

“Fear not, for God has favored you.  
The ages your worth will proclaim,  
for you shall conceive and bear a son,  
and Jesus will be his name.  
He shall be called the Son of God  
and sit on David’s throne.  
His holy kingdom shall have no end  
and never shall be overthrown.”  
“But how can this be?” then Mary asked.  
“I never have known a man.”  
“The Holy Spirit will bring to you  
a child of the great *I Am*.”  
“Fear not, for God has favored you.  
The ages your grace will proclaim,  
For you shall conceive and bear a son  
and Jesus will be his name.  
He shall be called the Son of God  
and sit on David’s throne.  
His holy kingdom shall have no end  
and never can be overthrown.”

### 3. Joseph=s Dream

(Baritone and Chorus)

[Matt. 1:18-24]

*Narrator: So Mary was going to have a baby, which for an unmarried woman was a shameful thing, punishable by death. Being a good man, Joseph had resolved just to quietly end their engagement, but then he had a dream with a messenger of his own.*

What a dream! How strange, how real!  
Mary will have a boy  
who=ll somehow save his people, the angel said,  
from their sin, from *our* sin.  
Who will he be, this child,  
this fatherless boy of mine?  
How can we raise a gift from God above  
to the world?  
But as he grows up to be a man  
I can teach him to work with wood,  
how to work with his hands.  
We=ll make benches and tables  
and cabinets and crosses  
and wheels for a chariot or cart.  
Working together with hammer and chisel  
We=ll make things of beauty to last for a lifetime.  
So proudly I=ll watch him out there in the workshop  
and loving him just as my own,  
hold him close to my heart.

*Joseph, faithful Joseph, following their dreams,  
walking by a donkey, wading through the streams,  
knocking on the inn doors, looking for a place  
for to birth a baby full of love and grace.*

If this baby is the Christ,  
where will his journey end?  
The world=s not kind to those who come to save it.  
Holy Lord, hold him in your hand!

### 4. Journey to Bethlehem

(Flute and piano)

[Luke 2:1-7]

*Narrator: And so, by order of the Emperor Augustus, Joseph and Mary journeyed from Nazareth to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, in order to be registered there, because Joseph was descended from the house and family of David. When they arrived, the inn was already full, and there was no room for them to stay, although it was time for Mary to deliver her firstborn. So when the baby arrived, they wrapped him in strips of cloth and placed him in the hay trough of a stable behind the inn. And that night, God sent a messenger to a group of shepherds who were working in the hills nearby.*

### 5. Angels' Announcement

(Chorus)

[Luke 2:8-18]

Mary birthed her baby in a humble place.  
Through the cold and darkness shone his holy face.  
Joseph strong beside her, wondering at the sight,  
high above a bright star shining through the night.

Fear not, for unto you this day  
is born a child in Bethlehem.  
You will find him sleeping in a manger  
wrapped in bands of cloth.  
He is your Messiah  
and will save the people from their sin.  
Go and see your Messiah come!  
Fear not, for I have joyful news  
for you and people everywhere.  
Unto you is born a child  
in Bethlehem of Judah.  
He is your Messiah  
and will save the people from their sin.  
Go and see your Messiah come!  
Hosannah, praise the Lord!  
Praise to God in highest heaven!  
Peace on earth.

### 6. Shepherds= Dance

(Flute and Bodhran)

## 9. Innkeepers' Welcome

(Chorus)

This stable is cold and bare,  
but the best that we could do.  
Our guests are gone now  
and there's room in the inn.  
Come in from the cold now, sister Mary, and rest.  
Shabbat shalom. You are welcome in our home.  
Settle by the hearth, brother Joseph.  
We will light candles and break bread together.  
Chase off the winter chill beside our warm fire,  
safe in your mother's loving arms, little Jesus.  
You remind me of my own boy, my Joseph.  
You have his kind and gentle eyes, the same ones.  
He lives in Arimathea now with his family,  
our grandchildren.

Come to the table now, for all is ready.  
Baruch ata Adonai, Lord and Ruler over all,  
Who taught us to greet the Shabbat  
by lighting candles.  
Blessed be our God  
who brings forth bread and wine from the earth.  
And may God bless you, Jesus, son of Joseph,  
as he blessed Ephraim and Manasseh,  
the ancient sons of Joseph.  
May God bless you and protect you.  
May God show you kindness  
and be gracious unto you.  
May God bestow favor upon you  
and grant you peace.<sup>2</sup>  
You are welcome in our home  
You are welcome at our hearth  
You are welcome in my heart.

## 7. Mary's Lullabye

(Soprano)

Sleep now my baby, rest from your journey,  
wrapped safely in my arms, little Jesus.  
Shepherds adore you, a star shines over you!  
You are a miracle, little Christ child.  
The angel told me you would come.  
The shepherds told us that angels came  
and spoke to them of you,  
that you, who are to be the Christ,  
would be found here in this stable,  
and that is how they would know you!  
How strange! How very strange!  
Sleep now my baby, rest from your journey,  
wrapped safely in my arms, little Jesus.  
Shepherds adore you, a star shines over you!  
You are a miracle, little Christ child.  
Sleep now for your journey.  
Rest now, cradled in God's own arms and mine.

## 8. Shepherds' Pipe

(Flute)

*Narrator: In the traditional Christmas story, Mary and Joseph are rebuffed by innkeepers and left to sleep outside in a stable. Yet it seems unlikely that the people of Bethlehem, whose religion demanded hospitality to strangers, could be so callous, and Matthew reports that by the time the Magi arrived, they found Jesus and his family in a house. A house? What house? If indeed there was no room for them when they arrived and they had to spend that first night out back in a stable, then perhaps it was the very same innkeepers who took them in as soon as a room was available.*

## 10. Simeon's Prophecy

(Tenor)

[Luke 2:25-35]

## 11. The Wind of God

(Chorus)

*Narrator: Now there was in Jerusalem a man whose name was Simeon, a righteous and devout man who was longing for the deliverance of Israel. The Holy Spirit rested on him and revealed that, though he was aged, he would not die before he had seen the Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon went into the great temple, and at the same time Joseph and Mary brought the baby Jesus, forty days old, into the temple for the rite of purification, as was customary under the law. Simeon saw the child, and immediately took him in his arms, praising and thanking God, and his parents were amazed at what the prophet said.*

*Simeon reminds us that we must not, dare not separate the sweet babe of Bethlehem from the man he would become -- the holy child whom rich and poor alike could adore, from the homeless prophet of God who was both deeply loved and passionately hated, and who would ultimately, like so many prophets before and since, be murdered for what he said and was.*

Master, you told me that I would not die  
before I see the fulfillment of our hope:  
Your Christ, the anointed one.  
Now you release me in peace as you promised,  
for I have seen with my own eyes  
your salvation for all people,  
a light for the whole world  
and for the glory of your people, Israel.  
The Lord bless you and keep you, little child,  
for you are destined to be  
the fall and rise of nations.  
The words you speak will be rejected by many,  
for you will unmask  
the secret thoughts of their hearts  
and pierce them like a sword,  
even the heart of your mother here.  
Lord God of our ancestors,  
you release me now in peace  
for I have seen with my own eyes  
and held in my arms  
your light for the whole world.

The wind of God that was and is and shall be  
blows where it will in a darkened world,  
uninvited, unsettling, unmerited,  
finding us, touching faces, filling voids,  
disquieting, displacing, disrupting our reality,  
and disturbing heart and mind,  
seeking in new and unexpected ways to say,  
“Here is who I Am.

I came, I am with you, I will come to you.”  
Whether in a burning bush or in tongues of flame,  
a cloud by day or a whisper in the night,  
a baby in a manger or an empty tomb.  
We choose to hear, believe, be moved,  
or build walls to keep it out,  
and still the wind whistles around them,  
calling our name.

What shall I give him, poor as I am?  
If I were a shepherd I would give a lamb.  
If I were a wise man, I would do my part,  
yet what I have I give him, give him my heart.<sup>1</sup>

The touch of God comes as a sweet surprise.

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<sup>1</sup> The melody of *In the Bleak Mid-winter* was composed by Gustav Holst in 1906. The poetry of the first and final verses was written by Christina Rossetti around 1872. Other verses are original.

<sup>2</sup> The text of *Baruch ata Adonai* (in *Innkeepers' Welcome*) is a traditional Jewish home prayer recited at sundown on the Sabbath when candles are lighted, and is followed by a traditional Shabbat blessing for children.