

## The Story

Judy Twist

The custom of holding Lessons and Carols sometime during the Advent or Christmas season originated at King's College in Cambridge in the year the Great War ended. It was a rather fancy way to tell a simple story, high church and glorious. But whether you tell the story in a Gothic cathedral with priests in surplice and cassock, or in a village church with little kids in bathrobes and paper crowns, it's the same story repeated, wondered at, puzzled over, relished, and entered into for 2,000 years. And whether it's sung with sophistication by boy choristers in ruffles accompanied by a masterful organ, or with a willing simplicity by a few octogenarians at a church piano, it's the same song, sung with astonishing trust in its ancient oddness and candid faith in its startling relevance.

It's such a good story. And so, we tell it year after year until its truth dawns on us, its power changes us, its vision redirects us, and all its promises come true. No matter who you are or where you find yourself on life's journey, the story and the song are for you.

If you're a little restless in spirit, if every now and then you're blindsided by a longing you can't quite name, if you've ever felt far away from yourself, if you wish you could clear away what's standing between you and the joy you know is in you—if that's how it is with you, restless and distant from your own heart, the story is yours. The story, about people in a kind of exile, yearning for a light, for someone to bring them home. The song, your own heart's cry for a breakthrough, for joy at last—O Come, O come! Rejoice, rejoice! If this is the story you need to hear, I hope you heard it.

If you're exhausted from the effort to climb to the top, if your heart's a little soured from doing the things it takes to get there and to stay there, if you're asking yourself what it's costing you, whether you might be happier some other way—if that's how it is with you, tired of climbing, wondering if down might be better than up, the story's yours. The story, about a God who comes down, lays glory aside, abandons privilege to become small, and all for love. If this is the story you need to hear, I hope you heard it.

If you're feeling stymied as you survey an unjust world, if you're angry and depressed about how things are, if you're tempted to throw in the towel—if that's how it is with you, edging towards despair, the story's for you. The story about the fear engulfing a proud tyrant's city, while in a village just nine miles away—lightyears away—heavenly peace holds sway. A vision, the powerful down from thrones, the poor up from the dust, justice no longer denied. If this is the story you need to hear, I hope you heard it.

If you've made a mess of something, maybe your life, if there are unkempt places in your heart you'd rather never come to light, if you know what you deserve and fear an accounting, if you think you're not good enough for God to love you—if that's how it is with you, hiding something, ashamed, the story is for you. The story of a truce between earth and heaven, of pardon and peace and the erasure of shame, a story in which the feared judge turns out to be someone so like us, knowing our weaknesses well, from the inside out. If this is the story you need to hear, I hope you heard it.

If you're sad tonight, if you carry a heart pierced with the fresh pain of recent loss, or an old loss still sharp, if you're acting brave but really want to curl up and cry—if this is how it is with you, grieving, bereft, the story's for you. The story about a hard journey, following a star on sheer faith, keeping company with others in the long cold night as life and love are somehow born again. If this is the story you need to hear, I hope you heard it.

And if you're joyous, at peace and full of hope, if you're amazed by all the love you've received and all the love you've given in your life, if even your sacrifices are wellsprings of joy, if your thanks cannot be counted—if this is how it is with you, awestruck and grateful, the story is for you. The story about love in the beginning, about love in the end, about light in shadows that shadows cannot overcome, about the unaccountable graciousness that makes you the apple of God's eye. If this is the story you need to hear, I hope you heard it.

Dear friends in Christ, the church doesn't offer certainty or safety. Faith won't fix your problems. We have no armies, no power to force right where there is wrong. No doctrine or rule in our tradition can change a heart or mend it. We have nothing efficient to offer the world.

But we have a story. We have songs. The story of fierce love, tenacious hope, the surprise of God in flesh appearing. The Christmas story. And we tell it to all who need to hear it, with all who need to sing it, we share it with love. No matter where you find yourself on life's journey, it's yours. A gift to you from God.

May it save your life, heal your heart, soothe your pain, shield your gladness, awaken your desire, strengthen your hope, and give you joy that never ends. [