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MY DANCING DAY

Reflections of the Incarnation in Art & Music

- How does this painting or piece of music make me feel?
- Does God have a message here for me? Does God have a message here for me?

I have discovered over time that God has touched these artists. He has spoken to their hearts and blessed them with great talent so that He can reach out to us through them. I can see and hear God's beauty and feel His love for me when I learn to experience the arts fully, but to drink them in with all of my senses takes time.

In the following pages, we will travel through gospel accounts of the birth of Jesus by using a variety of devotional celebrations. By this I mean I will guide you through an exploration of artistic art and music that will, in turn, lead you to experience the Christmas season that is so unique. Through this process, you will gain a deeper understanding of the arts, and more importantly, you will turn your mind toward putting Christ as the renewed focus of Christmas. In the following pages, you will grow closer to keeping Him at the center of your life throughout the year. You will realize that you will not be able to start Christmas without Him, and you will not have to put Christ on the Christmas ornaments. Your passion for Him will be so great that the Christmas season will not be able to hold it!

Put your to-do list away, turn off your cell phone, and linger with me for a while.



CHAPTER ONE

GOD'S COMFORT



"Strengthen me with raisins, refresh me with apples..."

(SONG OF SONGS 2:13, 15)



The Building of the Tower of Babel from the Bedford Hours (1145-1230) (Gothic), Master of the Duke Bedford workshop, British Library, London, UK. © British Library Board. All rights reserved. The Bridgman Library.

(SEE HISTORICAL ILLUMINATIONS CHAPTER 2)

The story featured in this illumination is described in the Bible as an episode of human pride. As you gaze at this illustration, notice all the activity involved in the building of this tower to God. Enjoy all the colorful activity, and appreciate the work that the artist put into the depth perspective. This story of the Old Testament reminds us that man has always tried to create his own ways to find the glorious nature of God. But instead of holding this story at arm's length, begin to see all this color and activity as the never-ending list of activities we insist upon around the holiday season. Contemplate how God's ways are always better than man's ways, and allow yourself to desire freedom from the routine. When you give yourself permission to break the mold, I believe you will find it natural to begin asking yourself, as I did, important questions about the purpose for all this activity and wondering what kind of changes need to be made to refresh your spirit.

So, what does it take to fall deeply in love with Christmas? How does someone go about cultivating this kind of passionate feeling for a season? Over time, I have discovered that it takes falling in love with the One who made Christmas possible. It takes opening our hearts deeply to the story of the birth of His son, Jesus Christ, and being willing to hear the story as though we are hearing it for the first time.

But how can we renew, or create, the romance for the story of Jesus? And how can we cultivate

the skills to approach it anew every passing year? This, I believe, is the gift of the great masters, the painters and composers who dedicated their lives to communicating the stories surrounding Jesus. It was through a study of their sacred work that I was able to pull back and see the full arch of his story as I never had before. By doing this, I realized what a fantastic gift Jesus himself is for us. As I spent time in meditation over each nuance of the story presented by these great artists from the past, a truth slowly seeped into my awareness. I realized that this was a true story about real people, not some tired myth from long ago without any personal connection to me. I came to understand that God had written a beautiful love story for us, and it changed my Christian perspective.

Imagine with me that you are hearing the story of the birth of Jesus for the first time. You begin to see it with new eyes and a new understanding that touches your heart. You start to grasp that through the gift of Jesus, God shows us that we are precious to him. In sending his son, he demonstrates he is a father who desires for us to live a life that isn't flat but filled with his presence. He reaches out to us as his children, and wants good things for us. In the following story, we will see how He is willing to come to us where we are so that we can be changed to be more like him, not because he doesn't accept us for who we are, but because he knows there can be so much more.

To begin to see how the arts can change your

Chapter 1 - God's Comfort



"COMFORT YE"

from Handel's Messiah

Let the music begin, and allow your body to move with it. Close your eyes and let the music drift through you. Ask yourself, what kind of music is comforting? The answer is, of course, a lullaby. With the opening music, Handel is gently rocking us like a baby to comfort us. He follows this with a vocal solo that enters very softly and eases us into the song: "Comfort ye..." Then he rocks us some more. He is saying, "Slow down, let God take control."

This is a musical technique called word painting, and Handel is a master craftsman. Word painting is a musical effect that highlights the poetic imagery of the words. It is music that attempts to stimulate the feeling of the words and allows us to connect our own mental images or impressions to it. If you allow yourself to feel the rocking, then you can associate that with another time in your life when you were comforted by this kind of a rhythmic embrace. Yes, it is all right to let your

mind go to something personal in meditation like this, because in that way, the art becomes real for you, and a part of you. In this way, the composer has connected with you.

Once you allow yourself this freedom, it becomes fun to find all the other examples of Handel's mastery of his craft. When the text says "and cries unto her," the singer cries out. When he comes to the word "accomplish," Handel makes sure we have a sense of arrival. On the word "iniquity," he pauses and creates a sense of tension through the use of a dissonant chord, so that he can then give us a feeling of relief and resolution on the word "pardon."

Next he follows with a recitative, which is a style of singing that is more declaration than song. He uses this technique to deliver the passage quoted by the New Testament writers in relation to John the Baptist. With this dramatic opening, Handel is setting the stage and preparing the audience for what is to come: our Lord Jesus Christ.

Becoming familiar with the technique of word painting in music is the first step to a deeper understanding of the art form, and one that I have found to be a revelation to my classes over the years. A basic understanding of word painting can suddenly demystify the appeal of these celebrated masterpieces. When you realize that the composer is expressing the feelings of the words with his music and you connect this to something in your own life, then the piece becomes less about taste

and more about universal human emotions joining us together in song.

Handel is able to capture the feeling of Isaiah's passage in music. Through this opening aria, we hear God telling us that he is in control. Fear not, because he has good things in store for us and the end of the story is glorious. With this song, we can begin to fully appreciate how secure we are as children of a loving God.

This passage in Isaiah is traditionally accepted as the foretelling of the birth of Christ. If you acknowledge these passages as a fulfillment of Christ as the Messiah, the passage will connect you to the long heritage of God's message of comfort for the current age. Think now how similar this passage

is to those words written by the apostle Paul in the New Testament, and featured much later in the text of the Messiah:

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for all, how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

(ROMANS 8:28, 31-32, 37 NIV)

THOUGHTS FOR MEDITATION

- Think of all the wonderful stories that are in the Bible. Do you have a favorite character that you relate to the most?
- Spend some time thinking about how God worked in that character's life.
- Now think about your life like a story. Can you see God's handwriting there?

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