

Christmas Carols December 26, 2021

PRELUDE, WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

This is typically a “No Bulletin – Hymn Request” Sunday at Germantown UMC.

Today, we are going to do something different. Instead of Christmas Carol requests, we are going to explore the backgrounds and messages of seven specific Christmas hymns.

This information comes from the books “101 Hymn Stories” and “101 More Hymn Stories” by Kenneth W. Osbeck.¹

Hark! The Herald Angels Sing

Turn to Hymn #240.

Luke’s Gospel says:

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”²

“Hark! The Herald Angels Sing” was written by Charles Wesley, the brother of John Wesley, who together formed what would become the United Methodist Church. It is one of the more than 6,500 hymns that he wrote, including “And Can It Be,” “Christ the Lord is Risen Today” and “O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing.” “Hark” is thought to have been written approximately one year after his dramatic Aldersgate conversion experience in 1738, and has been noted to be one of the four most popular hymns in the English language.

It first appeared in a book of hymns and sacred poems in 1739 with the first line, “Hark, how all the welkin rings, Glory to the King of Kings!” Welkin is an archaic word for heavens or sky. This text was altered in 1753 to its current version.

The text is Christian doctrine in poetic form. Following the telling of angelic visit to the shepherds, the hymn teaches such spiritual truths as the virgin birth, Christ’s deity, the immortality of the soul, new birth, and a concern for Christ-like living.

The tune of the hymn was contributed by one of the master composers of the early 19th century, Felix Mendelssohn. A boy prodigy, he made his first public appearance as a pianist at the age of nine. He was not only a noted performer and conductor but was also a prolific composer in his short 38 year life.

A little known fact is that in 1627, the English Puritan parliament abolished the celebration of Christmas and all other “worldly festivals.” During the remainder of the 17th and well into the 18th century, there was a scarcity of Christmas carols from England. Christmas didn’t reemerge until the Victorian era. Wesley’s “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing” represents one of the relatively few, important carols to have been written during that dark time.

*CHRISTMAS HYMN #1 “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing”

No. 240

***1. Hark! the herald angels sing, “Glory to the new born King,
peace on earth, and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled!”***

¹ Kregal Publications, Grand Rapids, MI., 1982 and 1985

² Luke 2:13-14 (ESV)

***Joyful, all ye nations rise, join the triumph of the skies;
with th' angelic host proclaim, "Christ is born in Bethlehem!"***

Refrain: Hark! the herald angels sing, "Glory to the new born King!"

***2. Christ, by highest heaven adored; Christ, the everlasting Lord;
late in time behold him come, offspring of a virgin's womb.
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see; hail th' incarnate Deity,
pleased with us in flesh to dwell, Jesus, our Emmanuel. (Refrain)***

***3. Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace! Hail the Sun of Righteousness!
Light and life to all he brings, risen with healing in his wings.
Mild he lays his glory by, born that we no more may die,
born to raise us from the earth, born to give us second birth. (Refrain)***

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel

Turn to Hymn 211.

"O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" is truly an amazing collection of expressions regarding spiritual truths. Its origin comes from medieval Roman Church of the 12th century, maybe even earlier. Then, in the 19th century, John Neale rediscovered the text and put it to music, as he did with the hymns "The Day of Resurrection," and "All Glory, Laud and Honor."

The tune is a hauntingly catchy modal melody originally a Plainsong or Chant, the earliest form of singing in the Church.

In our hymnal, we have antiphons, a short sentence and a response, that is recited that goes with each of the verses. We've never done this, though it or something similar would have been done when it was first written. So, let's turn to 211 in our hymnal. We will read responsively an antiphon on the right hand side of the page, then sing the corresponding verse from the left. So, one antiphon and one verse at a time.

CHRISTMAS HYMN #2 "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" with Antiphons No. 211

Leader: O Emmanuel, our King and Lawgiver, the Expected of the nations, and their Savior.

People: *Come and save us, O Lord, our God.*

***1. O come, O come, Immanuel, and ransom captive Israel
that mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear.***

Refrain: Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel shall come to you, O Israel.

Leader: O Wisdom, who came forth from the mouth of the Most High, reaching from one end to end, and ordering all things mightily and sweet:

People: *Come, and teach us the way of prudence.*

***2. O come, thou Wisdom from on high, and order all things far and night;
to us the path of knowledge show and cause us in her ways to go. (Refrain)***

Leader: O Adonai, and leader of the House of Israel, who appeared to Moses in the fire of the burning bush and gave him the law on Sinai:

People: Come, and with Your outstretched arm redeem us.

**3. O come, O come, great Lord of might, who to thy tribes on Sinai's height
in ancient times once gave the law in cloud and majesty and awe. (Refrain)**

Leader: O Root of Jesse, who stands as a ensign of the peoples, before whom kings shall keep silence and to whom the Gentiles shall make their supplication:

People: Come, and deliver us and tarry not.

**4. O come, thou Root of Jesse's tree, an ensign of thy people be;
Before thee rulers silent fall, all peoples on thy mercy call. (Refrain)**

Leader: O Key of David and Scepter of the house of Israel; who opens and no one shuts, who shuts and no one opens:

**People: Come and bring forth from prison the captive who sits in darkness and
in the shadow of death.**

**5. O come, thou Key of David, come, and open wide our heavenly home.
The captives from their prison free, and conquer death's deep misery.
(Refrain)**

Leader: O Dayspring, Brightness of the light eternal and Sun of justice:

**People: Come, and enlighten those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of
death.**

**6. O come, thou Dayspring, come and cheer, our spirits by thy justice here;
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night, and death's dark shadows put to
flight. (Refrain)**

Leader: O King of the Gentiles and their Desired One, Cornerstone that makes both one:

People: Come, and deliver us from whom you formed out of the dust of the earth.

**7. O come, Desire of nations bind, all peoples in one heart and mind.
From dust thou brought us forth to life; deliver us from earthly strife.
(Refrain)**

Angels from the Realms of Glory

Turn to Hymn 220.

We are about to sing "Angels from the Realms of Glory" for the first time since I have been in Germantown. I don't have a reason why we've not sung it. I was surprised to discover that fact.

After the great English hymnwriters Charles Wesley and Isaac Watts comes James Montgomery, who wrote this carol. He was born in Scotland in 1771, the son of Moravian missionaries. While attending seminary, he learned of the sudden death of both his parents on the mission field in the West Indies. Discouraged, he became a newspaper editor, which allowed him to advocate for social change and publish his poems. Over the course of his life, he wrote approximately 400 hymns.

The composer was Henry Smart, who was only 3 years old when the poem was published. Though self-taught, he was recognized as one of the finest organists and composers of his day. He wrote the tune for the hymn "Lead On, O King Eternal." The last 15 years of his life, he was totally blind, yet it was during this time that he wrote the tune for this hymn.

"Angels from the Realms of Glory" was published on Christmas Eve, 1816, and calls the angels, shepherds, magi, and saints to "Come and worship, come and worship, worship Christ, the newborn king."

CHRISTMAS HYMN #3 "Angels from the Realms of Glory" No. 220

***1. Angels from the realms of glory, wing your flight o'er all the earth;
ye who sang creation's story now proclaim Messiah's birth:***

***Refrain: Come and worship, come and worship,
worship Christ, the newborn king.***

***2. Shepherds, in the field abiding, watching o'er your flocks by night,
God with us is now residing; yonder shines the infant light: (Refrain)***

***3. Sages, leave your contemplations, brighter visions beam afar;
seek the great Desire of nations; ye have seen his natal star: (Refrain)***

***4. Saints, before the altar bending, watching long in hope and fear;
suddenly the Lord, descending, in his temple shall appear: (Refrain)***

It Came Upon the Midnight Clear

Turn to Hymn 218.

Following along with "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing" is another carol of the story of the angelic appearance. "It Came Upon the Midnight Clear" was written by American pastor and author Edmund Hamilton Sears, who lived from 1810-1876.

The tune of the carol was contributed by the well-known American musician and composer of the 19th century Richard Storrs Willis. He wrote the tune in 1850 and it has become the standard tune for the carol in the United States, though not in Great Britain.

The words of the carol were published in 1849. It is generally considered to be one of the first hymn carols to emphasize the social implications of the angels' message – that of achieving peace and good will toward others. This is especially poignant in that the author wrote it during a time of social unrest, with tensions between the North and South threatening to divide the country. Sears wrote in verse 3:

***And ye, beneath life's crushing load, whose forms are bending low,
who toil along the climbing way with painful steps and slow,***

*look now! for glad and golden hours come swiftly on the wing.
O rest beside the weary road, and hear the angels sing!*³

CHRISTMAS HYMN #4 “It Came Upon the Midnight Clear”

No. 218

***1. It came upon the midnight clear, that glorious song of old,
from angels bending near the earth to touch their harps of gold:
“Peace on the earth, good will to men, from heaven’s all-gracious King.”
The world in solemn stillness lay, to hear the angels sing.***

***2. Still through the cloven skies they come with peaceful wings unfurled,
and still their heavenly music floats o’er all the weary world;
above its sad and lowly plains, they bend on hovering wing,
and ever o’er its Babel sounds the blessed angels sing.***

***3. And ye, beneath life’s crushing load, whose forms are bending low,
who toil along the climbing way with painful steps and slow,
look now! for glad and golden hours come swiftly on the wing.
O rest beside the weary road, and hear the angels sing!***

***4. For lo! the days are hastening on, by prophet seen of old,
when with the ever-circling years shall come the time foretold
when peace shall over all the earth its ancient splendors fling,
and the whole world send back the song which now the angels sing.***

O Little Town of Bethlehem

Turn to Hymn 230.

“O Little Town of Bethlehem” was written by one of America’s outstanding preachers of the 19th century. Phillips Brooks, who was called the Prince of the Pulpit, was an American Episcopal clergyman of the 19th century, and is estimated to deliver his sermons at the rate of 250 words per minute. My rate is somewhere between 100-150 words a minute.

Though a bachelor, Brooks loved children. It is said he kept a supply of toys, dolls, and other objects of interest for children in his study so that youngsters would be encouraged to stop in and chat with him. A familiar sight was this 6’6” giant and important man of the pulpit sitting on the floor of his study sharing a fun time with a group of youngsters. The story goes of a five-year-old girl who was upset because she hadn’t seen her preacher friend for several days. When told by her mother that Brooks had died suddenly at the age of fifty-eight, the child exclaimed, “Oh, Mama, how happy the angels will be.

The carol was written in 1868, several years after Brooks had returned from a trip to the Holy Land. The experience of spending Christmas Eve in Bethlehem and worshipping in the Church of the Nativity made an indelible impression upon the young preacher. Three years later, while pastor at the Holy Trinity Church in Philadelphia, he was searching for a new carol for his children to sing in their Sunday School Christmas program. The still vivid memory of his Holy Land visit inspired Brooks to write the text.

³ “It Came Upon the Midnight Clear” verse 3

He gave a copy to his organist and Sunday School superintendent Lewis Redner and asked him to compose a simple melody that children could easily sing. Redner was well known in Philadelphia for his faith and interest in church music. He struggled with the assignment until the evening before the program, when he suddenly awakened from sleep and quickly composed the present melody. He always insisted the tune was a gift from heaven, and it immediately became a favorite of children

CHRISTMAS HYMN #5 “O Little Town of Bethlehem”

No. 230

***1. O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie;
above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by.
Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light;
the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.***

***2. For Christ is born of Mary, and gathered all above,
while mortals sleep, the angels keep their watch of wondering love.
O morning stars together, proclaim the holy birth,
and praises sing to God the king, and peace to all on earth!***

***3. How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given;
so God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven.
No ear may hear his coming, but in this world of sin,
where meek souls will receive him, still the dear Christ enters in.***

***4. O holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray;
cast out our sin, and enter in, be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell;
o come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel!***

Silent Night

Turn to Hymn 239.

Many of you know the story of the writing of “Silent Night.”

The words were written by Joseph Mohr. In 1815, he was ordained to the priesthood of the Catholic Church and served several parishes in the Salzburg, Austria area. It was when he was the assistant priest of the newly erected Church of St. Nicholas in Obernorf, high in the beautiful Alps, that in 1818, he wrote the text. That Christmas, he learned that the organ would not work for Christmas Eve, so he decided to write the perfect Christmas hymn.

He gave the text to his friend and organist Franz Gruber, who wrote the tune and played it on his guitar. The hymn made a deep impact upon the parishioners.

Mohr and Gruber never intended their hymn would be used outside their little mountain village area. But a few days after Christmas, when the organ repairman came, he obtained a copy. A well-known organ builder, he shared the carol with many others.

It was first published in 1839, then first heard in the United States a year later, and soon translated into English.

Over the years, because the original manuscript had been lost, Mohr's name was forgotten and although Gruber was known to be the composer, many people assumed

the melody was composed by a famous composer, and it was variously attributed to Haydn, Mozart, or Beethoven. However, a manuscript was discovered in 1995 in Mohr's handwriting and dated by researchers from 1820.

CHRISTMAS HYMN #6 "Silent Night, Holy Night"

No. 239

- 1. Silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright
round yon virgin mother and child. Holy infant, so tender and mild,
sleep in heavenly peace, sleep in heavenly peace.***
- 2. Silent night, holy night, shepherds quake at the sight;
glories stream from heaven afar, heavenly hosts sing Alleluia!
Christ the Savior is born, Christ the Savior is born!***
- 3. Silent night, holy night, Son of God, love's pure light;
radiant beams from thy holy face with the dawn of redeeming grace,
Jesus, Lord, at thy birth, Jesus, Lord, at thy birth.***
- 4. Silent night, holy night, wondrous star, lend thy light;
with the angels let us sing, Alleluia to our King;
Christ the Savior is born, Christ the Savior is born!***

Joy to the World

Turn to Hymn 246.

And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people."⁴

Since the 20th century, "Joy to the World" has been the most-published Christmas hymn in North America

Written by the famous Isaac Watts, English Congregational minister, theologian, philosophic thinker, and practitioner. He displayed literary genius and an aptitude for study. Born in 1674, at the age of five, he was learning Latin; at nine, Greek; at eleven, French; and at thirteen, Hebrew. As a seven-year-old, he wrote an acrostic, spelling out the letters of his name, with brilliant theology:

- I – I am a vile, polluted lump of earth.
 - S – So I've continued ever since my birth.
 - A – Although Jehovah, grace doth daily give me.
 - A – As sure this monster, Satan, will deceive me.
 - C – Come therefore, Lord, from Satan's claws relieve me.
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- W – Wash me in Thy blood, O Christ.
 - A – And grace divine impart.
 - T – Then search and try the corners of my heart.
 - T – That I in all things may be fit to do.
 - S – Service to Thee, and Thy praise too.

⁴ Luke 2:10 (ESV)

