

Micah 5:2-5a
Luke 2:1-20

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OUR HERITAGE OF CHRISTMAS CAROLS

Back in the summer we had a “hymn Sunday” in which we looked together at the stories—often moving or instructive, frequently enlivening of faith—behind a handful of great hymns of the church. These stories were so well received that, when it came time to plan how the first of three services on Christmas Eve might take form, it was suggested by a few folk that we create a service around the birth of some of our great Christmas carols and how they came to be. So, here they are, a sampling from eight of the forty-odd carols in our hymnbook, offered in the hope that they will bring into the living present the shared faith of their authors and composers.

O Come, All Ye Faithful

In churches across the world—Catholic, Protestant, Pentecostal, Orthodox, few carols epitomize Christmas and especially the call of the faithful to worship, as does “O Come, All Ye Faithful.” So it gives us pause to discover that the man who wrote the carol in 1744, 250 years after the Protestant Reformation, did so while self-exiled from his native England, fearing for his life, because he was a devout Catholic layman.

John Francis Wade's meandering and tormented travels took him far from home, through Holland, France, Spain and Portugal, where he remained for many years, plying his trade along the way as a copyist, especially of fine documents, often involving the style of meticulous illuminated writing that characterized ancient liturgical manuscripts. And by all accounts he was very good at it. While copying a manuscript for the English Cathedral College in Lisbon, he added the Latin text of a hymn, including the tune, ADESTE FIDELES, which he also wrote. Forty years later it arrived among a passel of manuscripts at the Portuguese Chapel in London, where it was translated into English. The rest, as they say, is history. Sadly, John Wade died about the time of the carol's discovery by the worshipping community, and he never enjoyed its impact.

Wade captured in his text the spirit of the music of the best composer of his age, George Frederick Handel, himself an émigré from Germany to London. The words also resonate to the enduring theological language of the great Church councils of the fourth-century that struggled to convey the nature of God in Christ, especially in the phrases “True God of true God, light from light eternal,” and “Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing,” the essence of the meaning of the birth of Jesus, and the heart of the season.

I doubt that any other hymn writer ever made the official credits of no less than 19 major movies, including, “The Apartment,” “A Tree Grows in Brooklyn,” and the perennial Christmas favorite “It's a Wonderful Life.”

Because it's become the quintessential processional carol at Christmas, I'm tempted to have us all leave and process back in to . . . “O Come All Ye Faithful.”

O come, all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant,
O come ye, O come ye, to Bethlehem.
Come and behold Him, born the King of angels;
*O come, let us adore Him, O come, let us adore Him,
O come, let us adore Him, Christ the Lord.*

Sing, choirs of angels, sing in exultation;
O sing, all ye citizens of heaven above!
Glory to God, all glory in the highest; *Refrain*

Yea, Lord, we greet Thee, born this happy morning;
Jesus, to Thee be glory given;
Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing. *Refrain*

O Morning Star How Fair and Bright

One of the two documents of our Presbyterian Constitution is called the *Book of Confessions*, made up of eleven historic creeds and longer confessional statements. Each statement seeks to embody what we believe, and they are typically born of times of crisis or great transition for the church. Sometimes they emerge from a need to define or more

clearly state who Christ is, as in the creeds of Nicene and Chalcedon from the fourth and fifth centuries. Sometimes they are a retreat into tested Dogma, as in the historic Westminster Confession of 1647. Sometimes they seek to forge a new path for a new day, either out of persecution, as in the Barmen Declaration against fascist intrusions on the church of the 1930s, or in the midst of revolutionary social change—the Confession of 1967. In each of these the motivation to create the statement of faith is upheaval, change, often crisis.

Seldom was crisis more at the heart of Christian life than in the terrible religious wars in Europe in the 16th – 17th centuries. Philip Nicolai, a Lutheran pastor in the late 1500s during those wars, experienced death and destruction on a horrifying scale as war often led to disease and frequently plague. In 1597, in the town of Unna, in what is now Germany, a plague of cholera took the lives of 1,300, 130 in a single day. Out of this time of apocalyptic conflict Pastor Nicolai clung, for himself and his people, to a fervent hope in Christ that would bless the faithful beyond the present. His driving text was Revelation 22:16, in which Jesus, after a time of terrible conflagration, speaks of himself as “the root and descendant of David, the bright morning star,” the one who, with the faithful, endures to the end.

Most surprising, perhaps, this hymn was not written as a Christmas carol, though it was adopted as such, and rightly so. Most often, it is used as a wedding hymn, especially at Lutheran weddings. It offers enduring assurance in time of stress, and offers thanksgiving for Christ’s faithfulness. And so we use it here as our *statement of faith* together.

O Morning Star how fair and bright thou beamest forth in truth and light,
O Sovereign meek and lowly.
Thou Root of Jesse, David’s Son, my Lord and Master,
Thou hast won my heart to serve thee solely!
Thou art holy, fair and glorious, all victorious, rich in blessing,
Rule and might o’er all possessing.

O Little Town of Bethlehem

Phillips Brooks was 6’ 6” tall, a giant in his day. He failed as a teacher of Latin, and was drawn instead to the ministry, becoming, in time, one of the most beloved pastors and celebrated preachers in 19th century North America.

He remained a bachelor, while cultivating a lifelong love of children. On one occasion, noticing a small boy on the front stoop of a brownstone, trying desperately to ring the doorbell, he bounded up the steps. “Let me give you a hand,” he offered, lifting the boy within reach of his goal. The boy pressed the bell, then, still suspended, turned to the beaming pastor as said, “Thanks, mister. Now run like the devil!” It was April 1st.

When Phillips Brooks, the longtime beloved pastor of Trinity Episcopal Church on Rittenhouse Square in Philadelphia died, one little girl, on hearing the news, exclaimed to her mother, “O, how happy the angels will be!”

In 1865 the congregation sent Dr. Brooks on a sabbatical to the Holy Land. On Christmas Eve he attended a night vigil in the ancient basilica known as the Church of the Nativity, in Bethlehem. It was built by Emperor Constantine for his mother in 326 A.D. over the traditional site of the nativity. The service turned out to be a five hour service, starting at 10 p.m. and concluding at 3 a.m! Pastor Brooks was deeply moved by the liturgy, and walking back to his lodging through empty lightless streets with only starlight to guide him in the deep of night, the words of a carol seeped into his mind.

O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie.
Above the dark 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.

The stars, in his imagination, were the host of hovering angels at the birth’s announcement.

The tune was written by Louis Redner, the organist and director of children’s ministry at Trinity Church. Brooks had asked his friend some time before the following Christmas to compose a tune, but nothing came to his imagination for the longest time. Then, on the Saturday night before Christmas Sunday Redner awoke in the middle of the night with the tune perfectly formed in his mind. For over twenty years it remained silent to the world, until it first appeared in a hymnal, shortly before Phillips Brooks death. Thereafter it swept rapidly around the world as few hymns have.

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.

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.

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!

'Twas in the Moon of Wintertime

In the early 1600s on the North American continent, the Huron Indian tribe, part of the Iroquois nation, populated much of what we know as central Ontario. In what came to be all too common a feature of history, over the next two centuries, as European settlers came to these shores, the Huron were driven from the land and divided into two groups. Some settled in Quebec, many in Ohio where the Huron were known as the Wyandot.

Always a very spiritual people who believed in a supreme deity, when they were won to Christianity by Franciscan and Jesuit missionaries, they gave that deity a new name, Christ the son of God. Their system of justice was remarkably similar to biblical law, and the Old Testament and Gospel message had an immediate affinity to them.

This lovely Christian hymn, which dates from the early 1600s, cultivates a sense of Jesus' nativity not as an ancient thing, but an immediate event with a real local presence. And it does this by transposing images from ancient Palestine to Huron everyday life. So the soothing rabbit pelt replaces the strips of swaddling cloth, and their gifts were treasured fox and beaver pelt. These lovely images bring the incarnation, "God-with-us," into the present, so capturing in précis the enduring intention of the nativity, the story of the everlasting rebirth—in us.

Tw'as in the moon of wintertime, when all the birds had fled,
That mighty Gitche Manitou sent angel choirs instead;
Before their light the stars grew dim, and wondering hunters heard the hymn:
Refrain: Jesus your King is born, Jesus is born, In excelsis gloria.

Within a lodge of broken bark the tender babe was found,
A ragged robe of rabbit skin enwrapped His beauty round;
But as the hunter braves drew nigh, the angel song rang loud and high: *Refrain*

The earliest moon of wintertime is not so round and fair
As was the ring of glory on the helpless Infant there.
The chiefs from far before Him knelt with gifts of fox and beaver pelt: *Refrain*

It Came Upon a Midnight Clear

Edmund Sears had ancestral roots among the European settlers at Plymouth Rock in 1630. Sears started adult life as a lawyer, but swapped his training for that of a minister, graduating from Harvard Divinity School as a Unitarian pastor, though unlike many of his companions he believed and preached the divinity of Christ through his life. His training gave Sears a background on social consciousness that was not common in his day, such that "It came upon a Midnight Clear" was among the first Christian hymns to recognize the societal implications of the angel's announcement. For the carol, upon examination, does not even mention Jesus or his birth, but concentrates on the angel's message and call to the whole world for "peace on earth." It was written in 1849 as the conflict between the states was brewing toward its ultimate ferment in the civil war a decade later.

The carol's message is one that bears reading before singing; a message as contemporary today as it was 160 years ago. Most hymnals printed today carry only four of the five original verses, yet perhaps the one omitted (the original third) is the most telling.

*Yet with the woes of sin and strife the world has suffered long;
Beneath the angel-strain have rolled two thousand years of wrong;
And man, at war with man, hears not the love song which they bring;
O hush the noise, ye men of strife, and hear the angels sing.*

And this ten years before the American Civil War!

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 all, from Heaven’s all gracious King.”

The world in solemn stillness lay, to hear the angels sing.

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 over its Babel sounds the blessed angels sing.

For lo! the days are hastening on, by prophet-bards foretold,
When with the ever circling years comes round the age of gold;
When peace shall over all the earth its ancient splendors fling,
And the whole world send back the song which now the angels sing.

Angels from the Realms of Glory (as Doxology)

James Montgomery, who wrote “Angels from the Realms of Glory” in 1816, was among the greatest of Moravian hymn writers, a venerable music tradition. His father, John, the only Moravian pastor in Scotland, with James’ mother, felt a compelling call to be missionaries to Barbados in the West Indies, and they tearfully placed James in a Moravian boarding school in Yorkshire, England. James never saw them again.

The young boy did poorly in school and flunked out. He tried his hand as a Baker’s assistant, but fared no better, and at sixteen just took off on the open road. His first night he sold a poem to a gentleman for a guinea (about \$2), which kept him going for a while. But in London life did not fair too well.

Back in Sheffield, a Yorkshire steel town at the heart of England’s industrial revolution, he went to work for a radical newspaper. After some years, when the owner fled the country for fear of jail for his radical pieces opposing the government’s military policy, James took over the running of the newspaper, which he continued to lead for thirty years. His own strong social conscience frequently got him in trouble, and often in jail. But when in jail he would set his mind to writing poetry and many hymns. Over his lifetime he wrote over 400. Today, James Montgomery has 12 hymns in common use in our hymnbooks, third only to the two deans of hymn writing, Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley.

As the leader of the courageous Sheffield Register newspaper, Montgomery was a fearless advocate of human rights, working to abolish the slave trade, of which Great Britain was a principle benefactor. He gave up all use of sugar in protest of the injustice of slavery on sugar cane plantations—to which population, ironically, his parents had gone.

His hymn, “Angels from the Realms of Glory” tells the good news, not just to Bethlehem, but to the whole world as the angels wing their flight “o’er all the earth,” bringing the announcement of one who alone could rightly fulfill the “desire of nations.”

The tune was written by Henry Smart, a blind composer who had no need of help finding a great melody.

All creation, join in praising God, the Father, Spirit, Son,

Evermore your voices raising to th’eternal Three in One.

Come and worship, come and worship, worship Christ, the newborn King.

Silent Night

The Rev. Joseph Mohr was born in Salzburg, Austria in 1792, the illegitimate son of a knitter and an army deserter. As a child Mohr came under the tutelage of a vicar who recognized his musical talent and saw to his education, and eventually to his ordination to the priesthood.

Mohr became ill, and after a time in a Salzburg hospital, as part of his convalescence he was assigned as assistant pastor in the small village of Obendorf. It was there that he met Franz Gruber, the composer of the tune to “Silent Night.” They shared very similar stories, being born into poverty and showing early promise in music. Gruber was assistant organist/choir director, a challenging position insofar as the organ of the little chapel had been in disrepair for years. (The widespread story of the composition happening on Christmas Eve after the organ died, is an entertaining myth!).

On one occasion Pastor Mohr was invited by a ship owner living in the area, to a play being given in his home. It was a lovely evening, and the young pastor was so appreciative of the unexpected hospitality and the simple, touching play, that after the performance he climbed the small mountain overlooking the village, and seated on the hillside under the canopy of heaven, composed the words to “Silent Night.” Not until two years later, on December 24, did he give the six verses to his friend Franz Gruber, asking that he compose a melody for guitar, two solo voices, and choir. The first performance was that Christmas night.

This is not a hymn of social protest or international mission. It’s message is enduringly intimate and simple. It speaks to the quiet fellowship of the manger scene to which the soul is drawn in awesome stillness in that magical and mysterious moment. The sense is something upon which all history hinges, and the only proper response is simple awe and quiet adoration.

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

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

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.

Hark! The Herald Angels Sing

Charles Wesley, with Isaac Watts one of the two greatest hymn writers in the English language, was certainly the most prolific, writing over 4,000 hymns in his lifetime. Often writing on horseback in small notebooks with penciled shorthand, he would arrive at a house, frequently rushing in shouting, "Pen and ink! Pen and ink!" then writing furiously. When done, he would salute the gathered company, greeting them, as one observer put it, with such affectionate warmth "putting them in mind of all eternity."

His carol, "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing," was written in 1739, when Handel and the Scottish philosopher David Hume were in their prime, American independence was still a distant pipedream, and Charles, with his preacher brother John, had just returned to England from their disastrous evangelical campaign in swamp ridden Georgia.

For 120 years the carol took lodging in a multitude of hymn tunes, none completely satisfying. Meanwhile, in 1840 the brilliant romantic composer Felix Mendelssohn had written a piece to celebrate the anniversary of Guttenberg's first printing, commenting in the process that the score would likely lend itself well to singers and hearers, but that it would never do to attach it to sacred music. What a lovely irony, then, that when someone had the idea to attach it to Charles Wesley's Christmas hymn, it fit like a hand in a well tailored glove.

The ten stanzas in the original take us through God's persistent desire in a long salvation history to reclaim a recalcitrant humanity, journeying from Adam at creation to the "new Adam" (Christ), and to giving us in Christ "a second birth."

"Hark! The Herald Angels Sing" is clearly one of the great achievements in Christians' celebration of the birth of Christ, without which no Christmas would be complete.

Hark! the herald angels sing, "Glory to the newborn King!
Peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled!"
Joyful, all ye nations rise, join the triumph of the skies;
With the angelic host proclaim, "Christ is born in Bethlehem!"
Refrain: Hark! The herald angels sing, "Glory to the newborn King!"

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 the incarnate Deity,
Pleased as man with us to dwell, Jesus, our Emmanuel. *Refrain*

Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace! Hail the Son of Righteousness!
Light and life to all he brings, risen with healing in His wings.
Mild He lays His glory by, born that man no more may die,
Born to raise us from the earth, born to give us second birth. *Refrain*