

Christmas Carol Stories

December 25, 2022 Research by Stephen Portner

Luke 2:1-20

² In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. ² (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) ³ And everyone went to their own town to register.

⁴ So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. ⁵ He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. ⁶ While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, ⁷ and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

⁸ And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. ⁹ An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

¹³ Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

*¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."*

¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

¹⁶ So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

For this worship service that takes place on Christmas morning, I wanted to try something different than the usual. Everyone likes to sing Christmas carols, so we will do a number of those today. I also wanted to share with you some of the background stories of some of our most well-known Christmas carols. I pray that the combination of history and music will provide a good grounding for your faith as we celebrate this Christmas day together.

Our first hymn is “**Hark! the Herald Angels Sing (UMH 240).**” This is a hymn written by Charles Wesley and George Whitefield. It was almost one hundred years later that the lyrics were put to a sprightly tune by Felix Mendelssohn, which he never intended to be sung to a sacred text.¹ “Christmas carols as we know them now were abolished by the English Puritan parliament in 1627 because they were part of a “worldly festival,” which they considered the celebration of Christmas to be. As a result, there was a scarcity of Christmas hymns and carols in the 17th and early 18th centuries. [This hymn] was one of the few written during that period.”² Interestingly enough, the original title of the carol was “Hymn for Christmas-Day.”³

Sing “**Hark! the Herald Angels Sing (UMH 240).**”

Our next hymn is “**Joy to the World (UMH 246).**” This is a hymn written by Isaac Watts. “The music for this popular carol is thought to have been adapted by Lowell Mason, an American church musician, from some of the phrases used in parts of George Frederick Handel’s beloved oratorio, *The Messiah*, first performed in 1742.”⁴ “Joy to the World” is a paraphrase of the last part of Psalm 98 (verse 4-9, KJV):

⁴ Make a joyful noise unto the LORD, all the earth: make a loud noise, and rejoice, and sing praise. ⁵ Sing unto the LORD with the harp; with the harp, and the voice of a psalm. ⁶ With trumpets and sound of cornet make a joyful noise before the LORD, the King. ⁷ Let the sea roar, and the fulness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein. ⁸ Let the floods clap their hands: let the hills be joyful together ⁹ Before the LORD; for he cometh to judge the earth: with righteousness shall he judge the world, and the people with equity.

Sing “**Joy to the World (UMH 246)**”

Our third hymn is “**What Child Is This (UMH 219).**” “This thoughtful text was written by William Dix, one of our finest lay hymn writers. While a successful insurance salesman in Glasgow, Scotland, he was stricken with a sudden serious illness at the age of 29. Dix was confined to bed for an extended period and suffered deep depression until he

¹ The Hymns of the United Methodist Hymnal, Diane Sanchez, Volume editor, p. 93.

² Amazing Grace: 366 Inspiring Hymn Stories for Daily Devotions, by Kenneth W. Osbeck, p. 374.

³ Sanchez, p. 93.

⁴ Osbeck., p. 368.

called out to God and “met him in a new and real way.” Out of this spiritual experience came many artistic and distinctive hymns, including this delightful carol. It was taken from a longer Christmas poem, “The Manger Throne,” written by William Dix about 1865.”⁵

Sing “**What Child Is This (UMH 219).**

Our fourth hymn is “**O Little Town of Bethlehem**” (UMH 230).” “During a trip to the Holy Land in 1865, [writer Phillips] Brooks went to the Church of the Nativity on Christmas Eve and worshiped there. He was deeply moved by the experience. Three years later, while pastoring the Holy Trinity Church in Philadelphia, Brooks desired to have a special carol for the children to sing in their Sunday school Christmas program. Recalling the peaceful scene in the little town of Bethlehem, Brooks completed the writing of the text in just one evening. He gave a copy of the words to his organist, Lewis R. Redner, and requested him to compose a melody that would be easy for the children to sing. On the evening just before the program was to be given, Redner awakened suddenly from his sleep with the present melody in mind—and he quickly wrote it out.”⁶

Commentator William Barclay wrote this about the Church of the Nativity which Brooks had visited:

To this day such a cave is shown in Bethlehem as the birthplace of Jesus and above it the Church of the Nativity has been built. For very long that cave has been shown as the birthplace of Jesus. It was so in the days of the Roman Emperor, Hadrian, for Hadrian, in a deliberate attempt to desecrate the place, erected a shrine to the heathen god Adonis above it. When the Roman Empire became Christian, early in the fourth century, the first Christian Emperor, Constantine, built a great church there, and that church, much altered and often restored, still stands.

H. V. Morton tells how he visited the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. He came to a great wall, and in the wall there was a door so low that he had to stoop to enter it; and through the door, and on the other side of the wall, there was the church. Beneath the high altar of the church is the eave, and when the pilgrim descends into it he finds a little cavern about fourteen yards long and four yards wide, lit by silver lamps. In the floor there is a star, and round it a Latin inscription: "Here Jesus Christ was born of the Virgin Mary."

When the Lord of Glory came to this earth, he was born in a cave where men sheltered the beasts. The cave in the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem may be that same cave, or it may not be. That we will never know for certain. But there is something beautiful in the symbolism that the church where the cave is has a door so low that all must stoop to

⁵ Osbeck, p. 369.

⁶ Osbeck, p. 370.

enter. It is supremely fitting that every man should approach the infant Jesus upon his knees.⁷

Sing “O Little Town of Bethlehem” (UMH 230)

Our fifth hymn is “**Away in a Manger**” (UMH 217). No one knows who wrote the first two stanzas of this hymn. Legend had it that it was written by Martin Luther for his own children and then passed on to others, but that has since been disproved. “The third verse was written by a Methodist minister, Dr. John T. MacFarland, in the early 1900’s when an additional stanza for this carol was desired for use at a church children’s day program.”⁸

Sing “**Away in a Manger**” (UMH 217).

The sixth hymn is “**It Came Upon the Midnight Clear**” (UMH 218) by a Unitarian pastor, Edmund H. Sears, who believed in the divinity of Christ.⁹ “This message of reconciliation involves us on three different levels: Peace with God, peace with our fellowmen, and peace within ourselves. ...In the second stanza Sears stressed the social aspects of the angels’ message—the hope of Christians spreading peace and good will to others who are burdened and painfully toiling. The hymn was written in 1849, a time preceding the Civil War when there was much tension over the question of slavery, the industrial revolution in the North and the frantic gold rush in California. The final verse looks forward optimistically to a time when all people will enjoy the peace of which the angels sang.”¹⁰

Sing “**It Came Upon the Midnight Clear**” (UMH 218)

The seventh hymn is “**While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks**” (UMH 236). “In the spring of the year, the lambing season, shepherds in ancient times would sit all night beside their flocks, watching for wolves or other dangers and even feeding their orphan lambs with milk on a soaked rag. No doubt this is why these shepherds were seated on the ground the night Jesus was born, for biblical scholars believe the event was actually some time in April. It would be natural for these humble men to be fearful, not only for themselves but also for their flock, when the brilliant light and the voices of the angels pierced the silent night. Are we surprised that they forgot their duty to their flocks and hastened joyfully, though perhaps doubtfully, to see the Holy Babe in the manger with their own eyes?

“This clearly written, colorful narrative of the angels’ announcement to the shepherds was written by Nahum Tate, the son of an Irish clergyman. After education at Trinity College, Dublin, he was appointed Poet Laureate of England during the reign of William and Mary. His life as a drunkard and a spendthrift resulted in degradation, however, and

⁷ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Volume 1, pp. 24-25.

⁸ Osbeck, p. 371.

⁹ Sanchez, p. 86.

¹⁰ Osbeck, p. 376.

he died at the age of 63 in a debtor's refuge in London, England."¹¹

Even someone so gifted with words still had a struggle with sin. One can only hope that, through God's grace, he found peace with the Lord he had written about and was welcomed with the peace in heaven he could not find on earth.

Sing **"While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks" (UMH 236).**

And, of course, we cannot close without a story of many a person's favorite Christmas carol, **"Silent Night, Holy Night" (UMH 239)**. "When this beloved hymn was written by two church leaders for their own mountain village parishioners, little did they realize how universal its influence would eventually be.

"Joseph Mohr, assistant priest in the Church of St. Nicholas in the region of Tyrol, high in the beautiful Alps, and Franz Gruber, the village schoolmaster and church organist, had often talked about the fact that the perfect Christmas hymn had never been written. So Father Mohr had this goal in mind when he received word that the church organ would not function. He decided that he must write his own Christmas hymn immediately in order to have music for the special Christmas Eve mass. ...Soon [church organist] Gruber completed his task of composing an appropriate tune for the new text. ...The carol was completed in time for the Christmas Eve mass, and Father Mohr and Franz Gruber sang their new hymn to the accompaniment of Gruber's guitar. ...When the organ repairman came to the little village church, he was impressed by a copy of the Christmas carol and decided to spread it all around the region of Tyrol. Today it is sung in all major languages of the world and is a favorite wherever songs of the Christmas message are enjoyed."¹²

Sing **"Silent Night, Holy Night" (UMH 239).**

Well, we obviously don't have the time to tell the stories of all our favorite Christmas carols, but I have to say that I had fun doing the research for the ones we did sing today. I hope it was as fun, meaningful and inspirational to you as well. The stories of the hymns reminds us that they were composed by real people, just like you and me, some of whom had disaster fall their way or had a sin they could not overcome or had an "interruption" to their usual routine that made way for something special. We are reminded that Jesus came to save us all, for all of us are sinners who fall short of the glory of God. It is only through the gift of God's saving act through the birth, death, and resurrection of our Lord, Jesus Christ, that we are able to stand before our Lord today as forgiven and blessed people. We are blessed to be a blessing onto others through Christ who saves. And that, that is what Christmas is all about!

¹¹ Osbeck, p. 379.

¹² Osbeck, p. 383.