



Singing the Joys of Christmas

Christians rejoice at Christmas as a celebration of the Incarnation—when Our Lord sent His only begotten son, Jesus, to us with the promise of eternal life in His heavenly kingdom. As Christians we are reminded of Jesus’s humble birth in a stable to Mary and her husband, Joseph, a carpenter. In His infinite wisdom, God chose Mary and Joseph to raise Jesus, knowing that Jesus would later suffer, die and be buried, only to rise again.

Our joy in celebrating baby Jesus’s birth leads us to sing songs about joy and awe, the coming of the faithful, the little town of Bethlehem where Jesus was born, the three wise men bearing gifts, and that peaceful and silent night by the manger. In this *Mindszenty Report* we take a break from current controversies to examine the interesting, little-known backstories of a number of popular carols.

Many of the songs we sing did not begin as Christmas carols. Others were controversial at the time of their composition. Whatever their origins, these songs were inspired by the birth of Jesus. They became standards of our Christmas carol repertoire, shared in family gatherings, hummed to while shopping or traveling, and sung in our churches on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. The songs capture our joy, our sense of peace, our love for our fellow man and our faith in a better world to come. God’s hand is found in these songs, many of which were composed in trying times. The carols mentioned in this essay reflect artistic contributions by various pre-20th-century Protestants and Catholics who lived in Great Britain, continental Europe or America.

‘Joy to the World’

‘Joy to the World’ is one of our most popular Christmas hymns, but one of the most unlikely songs to have become a standard carol. For one thing, it celebrates Christ’s second coming more than His birth. The hymn reflects the input of at least three people.

An English poet, Isaac Watts (1674-1748), wrote the text of the hymn, inspired by Psalm 98, not the Christian narrative in the Gospel of Luke. Watts, a dissenting clergyman, penned the lyrics for his collection *The Psalms of David, Imitated in the Language of the New Testament*, which appeared in print in 1719. In creating “Joy to the World,” he paraphrased the entire Psalm 98, taking liberties with the original verses found in the King James translation of Psalm 98:9, which concludes, “He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples with equity.”

In stanza three of his hymn, Watts departed from Psalm 98 to draw on Genesis 3:17, which describes God cursing Adam for eating the apple from the tree in the Garden of Eden. Watt’s third stanza read, “No more let sins and sorrows grow/Nor thorns infest the ground./He comes to make his blessings flow/Far as the curse is found.”

This stanza is often omitted in “Joy to the World,” because it refers to the total depravity of man, a key tenet in the classic Reformed theology and five-point Calvinism to which Watts adhered. In 1991, the United Reformed Church of the United Kingdom in its hymnal *Rejoice and Sing* changed this stanza to read, “No more let thorns infest the ground, or sins and sorrow grow./Wherever pain and death are found/He makes his blessings flow.” This revision offers a more optimistic view of mankind and God’s grace.

The tune we sing today in America was apparently loosely based on fragments of music from the German-born George Frederick Handel’s great Christian oratorio *Messiah*. The American hymnist Lowell Mason (1792-1872), who admired Handel, set Watts’s text to a musical arrangement in his book *Occasional Psalm and Hymn Tunes* (1836). In North America, this is the tune to which “Joy to the World” is sung, although the tune remains virtually unknown in Great Britain. Thus this Christmas hymn is the happy result of an Old Testament psalm about Adam’s curse, paraphrased by a British poet, set to musical fragments

from a German composer, and published as a unit by an American.

‘Hark! The Herald Angels Sing’

‘Hark! The Herald Angels Sing,’ another favorite carol, draws upon Luke: 2:14’s words “Glory in the highest, and on earth peace.” Its opening chorus elicits hope: “Hark! the herald angels sing/Glory to the new-born King./Peace on earth and mercy mild; God and sinners reconciled!”

The hymn was first composed by Charles Wesley in 1739, a year after his conversion to Christianity, using slow and solemn music. He is considered the founder of Methodism, a formation within the Church of England. Methodists rejected hard-line Calvinism.

In the original hymn, Wesley’s first line read, “Hark how all the welkin rings!” “Welkin” is an archaic English term meaning the celestial sphere of angels. George Whitefield, a leading English evangelist and a friend of Wesley, changed the first line to “Hark, the herald angels sing.” Wesley accepted this change because it highlights Jesus’s birth and the belief that Jesus’s coming gave all of humanity a second or new birth.

Other changes to the lyrics occurred over the following century, but Whitefield’s change proved to be the most important. Later, in the 19th century, the English musician and singer William H. Cummings adapted a tune from a cantata by the German composer Felix Mendelssohn to give us the carol sung today.

The hymn invites us in this Christmas season to join the angels in cosmic verse: “With the angelic host proclaim, ‘Christ is born in Bethlehem!’ Hark! The herald angels sing, ‘Glory to the new-born King.’”

‘O Holy Night’: A French Debate

‘O Holy Night,’ widely considered the most thrilling Christmas carol, proved controversial when it first appeared. An 1843 poem, “Minuit, Chrétien” (Midnight, Christians) by Placide Cappeau, a Jesuit-educated left-wing wine merchant from a small town in southern France, was set to music shortly afterwards by Adolphe Adam, a socialist and a respected composer of operas and ballets. The rousing song became popular during the 1848 French Revolution. It was widely sung by French workers, leading some to call it a “religious

Marseillaise.” A false rumor circulated that Adam was Jewish, adding to the controversy about the song. The song became associated more with revolution than with Christ’s birth. French Catholic authorities considered the French lyrics theologically irregular.

One leading French Catholic academic music journal warned that “Minuit, Chrétien” was being performed so often at midnight Masses that “it might be a good thing to discard this piece whose popularity is becoming unhealthy. It is sung in streets, social gatherings, and at bars with live entertainment. . . . The best would be to let it go its own way, far from houses of religion, which can do very well without it.” Other church officials denounced the song’s militant tone. French Catholic criticism of the song (also known as the *Cantique de Noël*) continued even into the late 20th century.

Yet the song proved enduringly popular. After being imported to Quebec in the 1850s, it was translated into English by an American clergyman, the Unitarian John Sullivan Dwight. The song became a favorite among American abolitionists, who especially liked lines such as “Chains shall He break, for the slave is our brother; And in His name all oppression shall cease.” The abolitionists saw the song as a call for the end of black slavery.

Of course, Jesus’s birth offered liberation and salvation beyond this world, but abolitionists understood the power of the song and kept it alive. Today it is the carol of choice for a classically trained vocal soloist, and it rarely fails to inspire awe in the listener.

‘O Come, All Ye Faithful’

This carol is based on a Latin hymn, “Adeste Fideles” or “Venite, Adoremus.” The Latin version was probably written by John Francis Wade (1711-1786), a lay musician who joined a Catholic college in exile in France following a failed attempt to restore a Catholic monarch, Charles Edward Stuart (a.k.a. Bonnie Prince Charlie), to the throne in England. Some musicologists claimed that the hymn was a secret call for faithful followers of Bonnie Prince Charlie to return to England, but this theory has been discredited because the Latin words are familiar in the liturgies for Advent, Christmas and Epiphany.

Wade composed both the Latin words and the music for the song. The English translation of the first stanzas was undertaken in the early 19th century by Frederick Oakeley, a close friend of the English Cardinal (now St.) John Henry

Newman. Oakeley converted to Roman Catholicism, following the path of Newman, and began a ministry to the poor at Westminster Abbey in London. He penned his translation in 1841, and it appeared later in print.

Especially vivid is the second stanza, which draws heavily on the Nicene Creed: "True God, of True God, Light from Light Eternal, lo, he shuns not the Virgin's womb; Son of the Father, begotten, not created."

Originally titled, "Ye Faithful, Approach Ye," Oakley's text read "Joyfully triumphant" but was soon sung as "Joyful and triumphant." Over the years other words were changed as well. Unlike some carols, this hymn was accessible to amateur singers and found wide popularity.

'It Came Upon a Midnight Clear'

Edmond H. Sears, the pastor of a Unitarian congregation in Wayland, Massachusetts, wrote this carol in 1849 to evoke a celestial anthem sung over Bethlehem. His stanza depicts angels singing: "It came upon a 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."

This is one of the few Christmas carols that does not mention Christ. It focuses on Luke 2:14, "Peace on earth, good will to men." Sears, after earning his degree at Harvard Divinity School, wrote the song to contrast the scourge of war with an angels' song of peace on earth. Although a Unitarian, Sears called himself a Christian and proclaimed, "I believe and preach the Divinity of Christ." He became the author of many popular books in his day, including *The Fourth Gospel*, *the Heart of Christ* (1872).

Sears sent the hymn to the influential *Christian Register* in December 1849 and it received immediate praise from the editor. The editor, a pastor himself, reported that he gave it to his congregation in Quincy and observed, "I always feel that, however poor my Christmas sermon may be, the reading and the singing of this hymn are enough to make up for deficiencies."

'O Little Town of Bethlehem'

Christmas is a time for children. "O Little Town of Bethlehem" was written especially for children. The hymn evokes the tranquility of the newborn Jesus as

he slept in a stable in the small town of Bethlehem: "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." The sleeping baby Jesus is portrayed as casting a light upon the world.

Philip Brooks (1835-1893) wrote this poem for Sunday school children in his Philadelphia parish, Holy Trinity Church. Brooks had just returned from a year-long pilgrimage to Bethlehem in 1865. He had traveled on horseback between Jerusalem and Bethlehem on Christmas Eve.

Brooks, then a recently ordained Episcopalian priest, had risen to prominence with his forceful preaching against slavery during the Civil War, when he extended his ministry to African-American troops in nearby training camps. He wrote his poem for the children of the parish to convey how he felt visiting Bethlehem on Christmas Eve.

The poem was turned into a hymn by Louis H. Redner, a wealthy real estate broker who served as church organist for Holy Trinity. Redner recalled that "the simple music was written in great haste and under great pressure almost on the Eve of Christmas. It was after midnight that an angel whispered the strain in my ears and I roused myself and jotted it down as you have it."

'Silent Night': A Carol of Peace

Sung in more than 300 languages throughout the world during the Christmas season, "Silent Night" expresses the world's longing for peace. The words were written by the young Austrian priest Joseph Mohr in 1816 after the brutal Napoleonic Wars, which had devastated the countryside. A volcanic eruption of Mount Tambora in Indonesia the year before had caused global climate change as ash filled the earth's atmosphere. Europe experienced continual storms, including summer snow, causing crop failure and general misery.

Throughout the summer of 1816 Fr. Mohr's small congregation in Mariapfarr was stricken by poverty. Fr. Mohr crafted six poetic stanzas to offer hope to his parishioners and to share his faith that "Jesus as brother embraces the peoples of the world," as the original German version of the song states.

In 1817, Fr. Mohr was transferred to a parish located in the town of Oberndorf, just south of Salzburg. There he asked a local schoolteacher and organist, Franz Xaver Gruber, to set his six verses to music. On Christmas Eve, 1818, the two friends sang "Silent Night" ("Stille Nacht" in German) to Fr. Mohr's congregation. The song soon spread throughout Austria and Europe, reaching America in 1839.

The 1914 Christmas Eve Truce

Jesus's message of peace and brotherhood found dramatic expression when on Christmas Eve 1914 in the midst of the First World War, British and German troops on the front lines in Flanders called a truce and sang "Silent Night", as well as "The First Noel", "Adeste Fideles", "Minuit, Chrétiens" and "Angels We Have Heard On High" to one another. An estimated two-thirds of the troops, about 100,000 men, joined in the truce in spite of their officers' disapproval.

For one brief interlude, peace came to the world on that Christmas Eve in 1914. The next day, the slaughter resumed. But in that moment, in the throes of a bloody global war, Christ's message of peace and brotherhood resonated, as it continues to resonate today when we sing in celebration of Christ's coming and the message He brought to the world.

The word "carol" means a song of joy, according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary. It is derived from the old French word "carole," a song to accompany dancing or a festive procession. We at the Cardinal Mindszenty Foundation wish you a blessed and peaceful Christmas filled with the sounds of the aforementioned carols and many others.

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Dear Readers: In a time of serious political strife, we at the Cardinal Mindszenty Foundation continue to bring you a timely monthly essay consistent with our educational mission as a Catholic organization devoted to the memory of Venerable Joseph Cardinal Mindszenty and his heroic stand against communism. The *Mindszenty Report* offers readers a break from daily screeching headlines and exhausting videos. You may rely on it for in-depth, well-researched, thoughtful examination of a variety of topics from a longer perspective. The folded newsletter format is easy to hold and read in a comfortable chair.

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We never expected that the siren songs of communism and socialism would still lure people and nations in 2022, but here we are: Our mission is more necessary than ever. Younger generations are especially vulnerable to the destructive appeals of the radical left against family, religion, free enterprise, meritocracy, law and order, and life itself. Help us spread the word by giving gift subscriptions to the *Mindszenty Report* to younger friends and relatives, and by ordering reprints to share at your church or club. May the peace of the Christmas season be with you and yours.

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