

The Stories of Christmas Carols

December 30, 2018

Held within each of our Christmas carols are stories. Hymns are living texts, with words we make alive each time we sing them. Through them, the hopes of those who wrote them reflect our own hopes - for heaven's righteousness, God's justice and peace to be ours.

O Come, O Come Emmanuel

The lyrics of our first Christmas carol stretches back through the ages of history, echoing prophetic themes of waiting and watching for the long-awaited Messiah. The title comes from Isaiah chapter 7, verse 14: *Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.* Within the verses the Messiah is given several titles. "The rod of Jesse" is mentioned in the first verse of Isaiah, chapter 11. Jesse was the father of David, the second king of Israel, the ancestor of Jesus. "You, the key of David" is found in Isaiah, chapter 22: *The key of the house of David will I lay upon his shoulder,* which in turn illuminates the meaning of Isaiah, chapter 9, verse 6: *For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

O Come, O Come Emmanuel is a translation of an ancient Latin hymn penned by a writer whose identity remains hidden in the mists of time. It's a prayer addressing the longing of human hearts for both the first and second comings of Christ. It takes us into the hearts and minds of old Israel, yearning for the first coming of the Messiah. In the weeks leading up to Christmas, this song links us to Zechariah and Elizabeth, the parents of John, to Simeon and Anna who greeted parents of infant Jesus, bringing him to the temple with a sacrifice of dedication.

When the Bethlehem babe arrives, we learn that our redemption from our brokenness has only begun. The child grows into the Savior who stretches out his arms upon the cross to show the breadth of his love for us. Forgiveness is secured, our adoption as God's children sealed. But the end is not yet. For death still snatches away, disease causes us misery, flesh still wars against the Spirit, we

groan inwardly as we wait for the full redemption of our bodies. (Romans 8:23). We wait for the final revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, for the hope of righteousness. Our longing continues.

The plaintive melody captures this mood of longing, aching, yearning, hoping. The life of faith oscillates between these two poles: the overflowing joy of the 'already' redeemed of Ephesians 1:7 and the tearful yearning of the 'not-yet' redeemed of Ephesians 4:30. As Brother Paul writes to the church in Corinth (2 Corinthians 6:10): We are 'sorrowful, yet always rejoicing.' It is wonderful that this Christmas carol expresses the real world of sorrowful joy as well as the real world of exuberant joy. **We join our voices to sing O Come Emmanuel, starting with verse 5 through 7...**

No Wind At the Window

The Iona Community began as a project in 1938 led by George MacLeod, a **minister** of the **Church of Scotland**, who sought to close a gap he perceived between the church and working people. Bringing together a group of ministers and working men, they rebuilt the ruined medieval Iona Abbey. Today, members of this community are committed to listening to scripture, in order to faithfully connect Jesus' message of Good News to the real world from a perspective of peace and justice. The Iona Community is a dispersed community, with members who work and live throughout the world. It is ecumenical, with members who are Presbyterians, Anglicans, Lutheran, Quakers and Roman Catholics.

This next carol we'll sing, while new to us, is well known to our Catholic brothers and sisters. The writer, John Bell began working in the 1980's to prepare young adults to work in inner-city communities. What emerged was the Wild Goose Worship Group, which produced a range of worship liturgies and songs that reflected the problems and preoccupations of the people of these neighborhoods. "No Wind at the Window" was published in 1992, based on an Irish folk tune. In this Christmas carol, Reverend Bell shows how he can approach biblical events from an unusual direction, as he imagines the conversation between the angel Gabriel and Mary.

Let's hear again this conversation in a reading from the gospel according to Luke, the first chapter. (Luke 1: 26-38)

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." ²⁹ But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰ The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³² He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³ He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." ³⁴ Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" ³⁵ The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. ³⁶ And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. ³⁷ For nothing will be impossible with God." ³⁸ Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

Let's sing together, *No Wind at the Window...* the words and music found in your bulletin.

Love Has Come

Our next Christmas carol found in our hymnal was written by Ken Bible, who studied music composition at the University of Cincinnati's conservatory. A student of the scriptures in Hebrew and Greek, he held a life-long passion for studying and communicating the Bible. For 34 years he worked for a major church publisher, Lillenas Publishing in a variety of roles, one being the editor of "Sing to the Lord," the hymnal for the Church of the Nazarene. In retirement, he has focused on writing hymns and devotional material. His website provides over 450 of his hymns. Listen as I read to you his thoughts on what happens when we sing. He writes:

I love singing hymns – songs of all types and styles. Singing is a way of expressing the Word that Christ has planted in us. As we sing, we share that Word with each other. We affirm it, together. And we lift it in praise to God and our Savior. Singing involves the entire being. It starts from the heart and catches up the mind

and body as well. When we sing, we embrace God's Word physically, mentally, and emotionally. It becomes a prayer, rising from our whole selves. As we trust the Word that God speaks to us, joy overflows, and singing is one spillway for the joy. Singing is the music of faith. I've long felt that if we have the truth, saying it is not enough. The truth longs to come to life. It cries out for full expression. It yearns to sing and dance, to celebrate with life and feeling and physical joy. Singing does that. Singing sets the truth free. Singing unites us. In singing, we unite with each other and with God. Hymns are a feast for the body, mind and spirit. The most life-changing songs are not the ones we hear, but the ones we sing. So sing! Sing from your heart! Sing to God!

Our next Christmas carol written by Ken Bible is number 292, in our hymnals. It expresses the truth found in the gospel according to John 3:16-17 - For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. **Let's lift our voices to sing "Love Has Come..."**

Good Christian Friends Rejoice

We turn now to one of the older of our Christmas carols, Good Christian Friends Rejoice. This song remains with us today because of two priests who were exiles in their times and too radical for their contemporaries.

Heinrich Suso was a German nobleman who became a priest in the 14th century. A Dominican monk, his mystic beliefs brought him in conflict with the Catholic church. He longed to help common folk understand more about God. After writing several papers that were influenced by the teachings of Meister Eckhart, who'd been condemned as a heretic, Father Suso was exiled from Germany to Switzerland. One night he experienced a vivid dream where he saw countless angels not only singing, but dancing. Listening, he joined them. When he awoke, recalling the words and music, he picked up his quill pen to record "Good Christian Men, Rejoice" to paper. This hymn was a radical as was Father Suso's thinking. Christian music of the era was solemn, based on scripture, and never written in the common language. He had broken all three of these rules with a song that embraced the joy of a believer, with a meaning that could be understood by even a child. The German people quickly and enthusiastically took

the song to heart, believing that just as Father Suso had been a priest to the common people, his song as a song for them as well.

The translator of this hymn from German into English was John Mason Neale, an Anglican priest. He was ridiculed by the leadership of his denomination for beliefs they felt to be too Catholic. In a radical move for a priest in the Church of England, and over the objections of his superiors, he began an order of women, the Sisterhood of St. Margaret, to feed the poor, care for orphaned children, and minister to prostitutes. Though this group would touch tens of thousands, it brought death threats to Father Neale and the Anglican women who served in the Sisterhood. Even so, in 1853, an English publisher released this translation of 'Good Christian Men, Rejoice' in a hymnal that paved the way for the song to be taken to the world.

The words from the psalmist urge our rejoicing. A reading from Psalm 105:

- ¹ O give thanks to the LORD, call on his name,
make known his deeds among the peoples.
- ² Sing to him, sing praises to him;
tell of all his wonderful works.
- ³ Glory in his holy name;
let the hearts of those who seek the LORD rejoice.
- ⁴ Seek the LORD and his strength;
seek his presence continually.
- ⁵ Remember the wonderful works he has done,
his miracles, and the judgments he has uttered.

We sing together with the angels, "Good Christian Friends, Rejoice..."

Of the Father's Love Begotten

Aurelius Clemens Prudentius was born in Spain, in the 4th century, at a time of cultural transition. Just 35 years before his birth, Christianity had been granted full toleration under the Edict of Milan. With the conversion of emperor Constantine, Christianity became the favored religion of the Roman Empire, which came as a welcome relief and answer to prayer for the persecuted saints of the previous age. Aurelius was trained as a lawyer and rose to high office, serving as a powerful judge. He finished his civic career as a court official for the Christian

Emperor Theodosius. But at the age of 57, at the height of his power and prestige, he grew weary of civic life and considered his life to that point to have been a waste. Given this crisis of faith, he retired to write hymns and poetry. For the last decade of his life, before his death around 413, Aurelius wrote some of the most beautiful hymns of his day.

Inspiration for his lyrics are found in a reading from Rev. 21:3-7:

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

“See, the home of God is among mortals.

He will dwell with them;

they will be his peoples

and God himself will be with them;

he will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Death will be no more;

mourning and crying and pain will be no more,

for the first things have passed away.”

And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.” Then he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life. Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my children.

Together we sing this most ancient Christmas carol, set to a medieval plainsong melody, “Of the Father’s Love Begotten...”

