

Sunday - December 27, 2009
Pastor - Rev. Paula P. Werner
Sermon - **Stories Behind the Carols that Tell the Story**

Scripture Luke 2:39-55. *“May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be formed by your grace for you are our Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen”*

We can probably surmise that the first Christmas carol was sung by the angels announcing the birth of the Christ Child.

- That these carols were started to give some variety to the often joyless music used in the church that was often only sung by the priests and clerics, and that the church was slow to accept them
- That wandering minstrels often brought these carols from place to place
- That groups of watchmen called “bands of waits” patrolled the streets of the old walled cities, keeping guard against fire and singing to while away the night hours. During the holiday season, the waits would include carols in their repertoires. Many townspeople were not happy with this, declaring they would rather get a good night’s sleep than have somebody singing under their windows. In cities wandered about the streets at night to give warnings of fires and such, but during Christmas also sang carols
- That, since many people could neither read or write, these carols helped teach them the basics of the Christmas story
- That some of our most popular ones today were actually poems written by one person and later put to music by others.
- The word “carol” comes from a Greek dance called a choraulein, which was accompanied by flute music. The dance later spread throughout Europe and became particularly popular by the French, who replaced the flute music with singing.

May the wonder, mystery, peace and joy of Christmas come into your hearts as you sing and hear these much-loved carols.

1. The First Noel p. 245

This carol first appeared in print in 1833 but probably had been used since the 1500s, making it one of the oldest carols still sung. We do not know who wrote it or the music, or where it originated, although a good guess is England or France.

It may well have been written at a time when Bibles were not in circulation, for the writer doesn’t get the biblical story quite right. In other words, there are some inaccuracies that most of us maybe have never

noticed. For example, it depicts the shepherds rather than the wise men seeing and following the star to Bethlehem.

In England this carol was one of the main songs used by families when the first Yule log was burned – their way of beginning the Christmas season. The custom of burning the yule log began in the Middle Ages and was adopted from a custom the Vikings had. This custom involved the family going out into the woods, cutting down a huge tree, dragging it back home, cutting off the branches and hollowing it out. The hollow was filled with spices, oils, and other sweet smelling ingredients and set afire in the fireplace. The wife or daughter would light the log with a portion of last year's yule log. They believed that good luck would follow them all year if they did this. This carol was sung while they did this.

2. Angels From the Realms of Glory

James Montgomery is the author of this carol. When James was only 6 years old, his mother and father felt God's call to be missionaries to the island of Barbados. They left James in their home area of Ireland and sailed to Barbados where they died. James never saw them again. He was left with nothing. He was enrolled in a school in England, but he did not do well was apprenticed by school authorities to a baker. Baking didn't suit James well, either and he ran away and spent his teenage years drifting from one thing and place to another.

By his 20s he began working for the local newspaper and loved writing. The paper was the Sheffield Register and it was a politically active newspaper. The owner had to suddenly flee the country to avoid persecution and imprisonment and sold the paper to James. James also was unpopular with local officials because of his editorials, and twice he was thrown into jail.

James was a devoted Christian, he supported foreign missions and the British Bible Society.

On Christmas Eve 1816, James read Luke 2 and began writing his new Christmas poem..... which we now sing as: Angels from the Realms of Glory.

3. Hark, the Herald Angels Sing p. 240

Charles Wesley, younger brother of our Methodist founder, John Wesley wrote hymns constantly. While riding on horseback, new wording would come to him and he'd get off his horse at stop in at houses along the road and run in asking for "pen and ink," so he might write down his latest poem.

Charles Wesley did not like other people tinkering or changing his hymns—he even wrote a note on his hymns asking that the wording be left alone, so as he put it, “he would not have to be accountable for other men’s “nonsense or doggerel”.

Well,. That didn’t happen with one hymn, and frankly, I’m just as glad. You see, when Charles Wesley was 32, he wrote a Christmas hymn that began: “Hark, how all the welkin rings, glory to the King of Kings”. “Welkin” was an old English word for “the vault of heaven”. Charles’ good friend, George Whitefield, published this carol and changed the words to one we Americans better understand, “Hark the Herald Angels Sing, glory to the newborn king.”

4. It Came Upon the Midnight Clear p. 218

Edmund Hamilton Sears, was from Massachusetts. He attended Harvard Divinity School and served churches in little towns so he could have time to study, think, and write. This carol is an unusual one since there is no mention of Christ, of the newborn Babe, or of the Savior’s Mission. Sears was a Unitarian. The author’s only focus is the angelic request for peace on earth.

This carol was written as the clouds of civil strife were darkening the United States, just before the Civil War. Hear one of the stanzas of this carol, which is usually omitted now from most hymnals:

Yet with the woes of sin and strife, the world hath 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!

5. Angels We Have Heard on High p. 238

We do not know who wrote the words to our next carol – in your hymnal it is listed as a traditional French carol. We also do not know who wrote the music, it’s also listed as a French carol melody. Most hymns have about 12 notes – an octave and a half. This carol is unusual in that it only uses 6 notes.

6. O Little Town of Bethlehem

p. 230

This carol was inspired by a visit to the Holy Land on Dec. 24, 1865. The visitor was an Episcopal minister named Phillips Brooks who was there as a way of trying to get some rest and spiritual renewal. You see, back at home he had dealt with all the horrors of the Civil War and he was the one asked to preach at the funeral of Abraham Lincoln. This took a real toll on him and he needed to get away.

That Christmas Eve in 1865 he left Jerusalem by horseback to a small village just 6 miles away. In the hills that night he experienced the spiritual renewal he was seeking. A sense of awe overtook him and there was a singing in his soul. It would be three years before he was able to translate that experience into words. He wrote them, shared them with the organist in his church named Lewis Redner. The carol was first used Christmas morning in the Sunday School of Holy Trinity Church in Philadelphia in 1868.

7. Silent Night

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Probably the most beloved of Christmas carols. It came about because a young Anglican priest was preparing for Christmas Eve service in 1818 and discovered that the organ in his little church was not working. Joseph Mohr loved music and knew that the service would be ruined without music. He remembered a poem he had written two years earlier, he found it, took it to the church organist and asked if he could compose a tune for it using a guitar. That was the only instrument they had. It was played and sung for the first time at midnight on Christmas Day, 1818. Joseph Mohr died penniless in 1848, never knowing that his carol would be found and shared and loved across the world.