

An Advent Journey through the Songs of Christmas

Joy to the World!



RAY PRITCHARD

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Christmas

By Ray Pritchard

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Singing Our Way to Christmas

Christmas and music go together.

Most of us can't imagine celebrating Christmas without singing "Silent Night" or "The First Noel" or "Away in a Manger." Each year we hear Christmas music in church, on the radio, and when we shop at the mall. When we hear these songs, we can't help but sing along.

This year we're going to take an Advent journey through the songs of Christmas. We'll start with "O Come, All Ye Faithful" and end with "Joy to the World." In between we'll look at a new song each day. In making my selection, I tried to include most of our familiar carols, but I intentionally included a few newer songs, including the unusual (but very enjoyable) "Matthew's Begats" because it shows that yes, you can turn a genealogy into a song.

I only have one request. *Please listen to each song.* I have included a link to a YouTube version of each day's carol. While it is important that you read the text and say the prayer, you'll miss the most important part if you don't listen to the music. I should also say a word about the selection. For some songs, I had only a few YouTube choices. In some

cases I had dozens. I tried to vary the singers and styles to keep things interesting.

In telling these stories, I have relied on several sources, including *The Complete Book of Hymns* by William J. Peterson and Ardythe Peterson, *Amazing Grace—366 Inspiring Hymn Stories for Daily Devotions* by Kenneth W. Osbeck, *The New Oxford Book of Carols* by Hugh Keyte and Andrew Parrott, and the most amazing repository of Christmas carols on the Internet: [Hymns and Carols of Christmas](#). I tried to be as accurate as possible, but the various sources don't always agree.

Thank you for joining us on this Advent journey through the songs of Christmas. May your faith be strengthened and your heart filled with joy as we celebrate our Savior's birth.

December 1

O Come, All Ye Faithful

“When the angels had left them and returned to heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let’s go straight to Bethlehem and see what has happened, which the Lord has made known to us’” (Luke 2:15).

“Let’s go straight to Bethlehem.”

That’s what the shepherds said to each other, and that’s good advice as we begin this musical journey through Advent. Whenever you start a long trip, you need to prepare yourself. What better way to start than by singing one of our most beloved Christmas carols?

Here’s what we know about “O Come, All Ye Faithful.” It started as a Latin hymn hundreds of years ago. It was used in Catholic churches first, then later by Protestants. It has been translated into more than 100 languages. Though its origin is obscure, traces of the song go back to the 13th century. Various authors have been proposed, including Saint Bonaventure and the Portuguese King John IV. We can, however, say with certainty that in 1743, John Francis Wade produced a standard Latin translation called “Adeste

Fidelis,”

The origin of the melody is likewise shrouded in mystery. Wade may have written it also, though we can't be sure. The definitive English translation dates to 1841 when Frederick Oakley translated Wade's four verses into English. Additional French verses were translated in 1885.

The first verse calls us to come to Bethlehem and worship:

*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.*

The second verse invites us to join the angels in singing praise to God:

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

The third verse directly addresses the Lord Jesus Christ:

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

Then the refrain calls us to respond in adoration to the Lord:

*O come, let us adore Him,
O come, let us adore Him,
O come, let us adore Him,
Christ the Lord.*

Older hymnals contain verses we rarely sing today. Here's one chock full of good theology:

*True God of true God, Light from Light Eternal,
Lo, He shuns not the Virgin's womb;
Son of the Father, begotten, not created;*

That verse teaches us Jesus was God incarnate even when he was in his mother's womb. He is begotten, not created, because he eternally existed with his Father in heaven.

During this Advent journey, I will link to a YouTube version of each day's song. I hope you'll take time to listen and sing along. Let's listen to a beautiful version of *O Come All Ye Faithful* [by Celtic Woman](#).

*Lord Jesus, as we begin this Advent journey,
we pray to know you better and love you
more each day. Amen.*

December 2

Silent Night

“While they were in Bethlehem, the time came for Mary to have the baby, and she gave birth to her first son” (Luke 2:6-7 NCV).

No matter what you've heard, a mouse had nothing to do with it.

The story goes like this. In 1816 Joseph Mohr wrote “Stille Nacht” as a poem in Mariapfarr, Austria. Two years later Mohr had become the assistant pastor at the Church of Saint Nicholas in Oberndorf. According to legend, the church organ broke down on Christmas Eve. Desperate for music for the service that night, he gave his two-year-old poem to his friend and local schoolteacher Franz Gruber, who composed a melody for guitar (since the organ was broken). Remarkably, he completed the music in time for the Christmas Eve service.

Now that's the basic story, and it may be true. The part about the broken organ was added later. And someone embellished the story by adding the detail that a mouse got inside the organ and ate the bellows.

Here's what we know. Mohr wrote the words and Gruber composed the melody. And we do know it was written first for guitar, not for the organ. As the story goes, the hymn would have remained obscure except for the organ repairman who heard "Silent Night" and began to spread the word about this new Christmas carol. The song gained popularity when a singing family called the Strassers performed 'Stille Nacht' at a Leipzig concert in 1832. It came to America when the Rainer family first performed the carol outside Trinity Church in New York City in 1839. It has been translated into 300 languages and dialects. Today it is regarded as the most popular Christmas carol in the world. Its peaceful tones can be heard in outdoor candlelight services, house churches in China, and in magnificent cathedrals.

Mohr and Gruber had no idea a song written for a small parish church would spread across the world. In contrast to "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing" and "Joy to the World," "Silent Night" evokes the quiet intimacy of a young couple with their sleeping baby. Yet this is not just any baby. He is the "holy infant" whose birth brings "the dawn of redeeming grace." Even in the manger, he is "Christ the Savior" and "Jesus, Lord at thy birth."

The first verse sets the tone:

*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*

In 1859, the Episcopal priest John Freeman Young, then serving Trinity Church in New York City, produced the translation we use today. In 1914, during the Christmas Truce of World War 1, German and English troops joined in singing “Silent Night” on the battlefield because it was the one carol soldiers on both sides knew.

Let’s listen to this beautiful version by the [all-boy English group Libera](#).

*Lord, in these busy days, may I never be too
busy for you. I pray that I may walk in
“love’s pure light” so that others may see
Jesus in me. Amen.*

December 3

I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day

“To guide our feet into the way of peace” (Luke 1:79).

This song was born out of one man’s broken heart.

We know Henry Wadsworth Longfellow as one of America’s greatest poets. We don’t think of him as the writer of a familiar Christmas carol. The story begins in 1861, in the early days of the Civil War. Tragedy struck that year when Fanny Longfellow, Henry’s wife, was fatally burned in an accident at home on July 9th. She died the next day. The first Christmas after her death, Longfellow wrote, “How inexpressibly sad are all holidays.” A year after the incident, he wrote, “I can make no record of these days. Better leave them wrapped in silence. Perhaps someday God will give me peace.”

Let’s shift the scene to December 1864. After four bloody years, the Civil War is slowly drawing to close. Already 500,000 soldiers have died. *Many more would die before the war would end.* On Christmas Day, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow penned a poem that became a beloved Christmas

carol. It starts with these hopeful words:

*I heard the bells on Christmas Day
Their old, familiar carols play,
And wild and sweet
The words repeat
Of peace on earth, good will to men!*

Out of his sadness and in response to the carnage of war, he wrote this pessimistic verse:

*And in despair I bowed my head;
“There is no peace on earth,” I said;
“For hate is strong,
And mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!”*

Lately those words have seemed all too true. *Hate is strong*. Where is our hope at Christmastime? That leads us to this answer:

*Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
‘God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;
The wrong shall fail, the right prevail
With peace on earth, good will to men.’*

If Christmas means anything, it is this: *God wins in the end*. At Bethlehem he launched a mighty counteroffensive that

continues to this very day. It all started with a tiny baby boy named Jesus, born in a scandalous way, in a barn, to unmarried teenagers who were homeless and alone. The world knew nothing about what was happening in Bethlehem. Only in retrospect do we understand.

At Bethlehem God struck a blow to liberate the world from sin and death. And his front line soldier was a tiny baby boy.

Don't take him for granted. In this little baby there is all the strength of Deity. The power of God is in those tiny fists. He has divine strength. Whatever he desires, he can do.

He leads the armies of heaven.
Longfellow was right.

*“The wrong shall fail, the right prevail.
With peace on earth, good will to men.”*

I found a version of [I Heard the Bells performed to a background of Civil War scenes](#). Let's listen to it together.

Our Father, how desperately this broken world needs peace. Hate is so strong. We thank you for Jesus, the Prince of Peace. Grant that we might be peacemakers and not

peace-breakers. In Jesus' name, Amen.

December 4

Angels from the Realms of Glory

“Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified” (Luke 2:9).

In his day, James Montgomery was quite a rabble-rouser.

On one hand, his friends knew him to be a deeply devoted Christian who stood up for what he believed. But because of certain political views, he was considered by some to be extreme and by others to be dangerous. When he was six years old, his parents put him in boarding school while they left to be missionaries in the West Indies. Shuttled from home to home, he never seemed to find his place.

He failed at school.

He failed as a baker’s apprentice.

But he knew how to write poetry.

Eventually he found success as the owner of a newspaper called “The Iris.” Twice he was imprisoned because of his politics, especially his call for the abolition of slavery.

In 1816, when he was 45 years old, he wrote “Angels from

the Realms of Glory.” It is considered one of the finest hymns ever composed in English. During his lifetime, Montgomery wrote over 400 hymns. Only Charles Wesley and Isaac Watts surpass him in the number of hymns still sung today. It is sung most often to the tune “Regent Square,” written by the blind composer Henry Smart (who also built some of England’s finest organs).

In successive verses, this carol tells the Christmas story, starting with the angels, then the shepherds, then the wise men (“sages”), and ending with a call to Christians everywhere. “Angels from the Realms of Glory” first appeared in Montgomery’s paper on Christmas Eve 1816.

Here are the four verses found in most hymnals:

*Angels from the realms of glory
Wing your flight o’er all the earth
Ye, who sang creation’s story
Now proclaim Messiah’s birth
Come and worship, come and worship
Worship Christ the newborn King*

*Shepherds in the fields abiding
Watching o’er your flocks by night
God with man is now residing
Yonder shines the Infant light
Come and worship, come and worship*

Worship Christ the newborn King

Sages leave your contemplations

Brighter visions beam afar

Seek the great Desire of nations

Ye have seen His natal star

Come and worship, come and worship

Worship Christ the newborn King

Saints before the altar bending

Watching long in hope and fear

Suddenly the Lord, descending,

In His temple shall appear

Come and worship, come and worship

Worship Christ the newborn King

James Montgomery had a good grasp of theology. He mentions Jesus' Old Testament title ("Messiah's birth), his deity ("God with man is now residing"), his universal appeal ("Desire of nations"), and even his second coming ("Suddenly, the Lord descending"). The refrain calls on everyone to respond in faith ("Come and worship").

I found a short instrumental version by the [Percy Faith Orchestra](#). I hope you will listen and sing along.

Sovereign Lord, with the angels, we proclaim

*your greatness. With the shepherds, we seek
your face. With the Wise Men, we offer our
gifts. With all the saints, we worship as we
await your return. Amen.*

December 5

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel

“They shall call his name Immanuel” (which means, God with us)” (Matthew 1:23 ESV).

This is perhaps our oldest Christmas carol.

Historians say its roots go back to the 8th century. In its earliest form, it was a “plain song” or a chant and the monks sang it a cappella. It was sung or chanted in Latin during the seven days leading up to Christmas. Translated into English by John Mason Neale in 1851, we sing it to the tune “Veni, Emmanuel,” a 15th-century melody.

Many churches sing it early in the Advent season because of its plaintive tone of expectant waiting. Traditionally Advent centers on the Old Testament preparation for the coming of the Messiah who will establish his kingdom on the earth. When the words form a prayer that Christ will come and “ransom captive Israel,” we ought to remember the long years of Babylonian captivity.

Each verse of this carol features a different Old Testament name or title of the coming Messiah:

“O come, O come, Emmanuel.”

“O come, Thou Wisdom from on high.”

“O come, Thou Rod of Jesse.”

“O come, Thou Day-spring.”

“O come, Thou Key of David.”

“O come, Thou Lord of Might.”

“O come, Desire of Nations.”

This carol assumes a high level of biblical literacy. That fact might argue against singing it today because so many churchgoers don't have any idea what “Day-spring” means or they think Jesse refers to a wrestler or maybe to a reality TV star. But that argument works both ways. We ought to sing this carol *and* we ought to use it as a teaching tool. Sing it—and explain it!

We can see the Jewish roots of this carol in the refrain:

Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel

Shall come to thee, O Israel.

But Israel's Messiah is also our Savior and Lord. What Israel was waiting for turns out to be the long-expected Jesus. So this carol rightly belongs to us as well. The first verse suggests the longing of the Jewish people waiting for Messiah to come:

O come, O come, Emmanuel

*And ransom captive Israel
That mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God appears*

The second verse pictures Christ redeeming us from hell and death:

*O come, Thou Rod of Jesse, free
Thine own from Satan's tyranny
From depths of Hell Thy people save
And give them victory o'er the grave*

This verse reminds us only Christ can take us home to heaven:

*O come, Thou Key of David, come,
And open wide our heavenly home;
Make safe the way that leads on high,
And close the path to misery.*

*Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.*

Let's listen as [Selah captures the Jewish flavor](#) of this carol.

*Lord, we pray today for all those lost in the
darkness of sin. We pray for those who feel*

*there is no hope. May the light of Jesus shine
in their hearts today. Amen.*

December 6

Sweet Little Jesus Boy

“None of the rulers of this age knew this wisdom, for if they had known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory” (1 Corinthians 2:8).

Let that thought hang in the air for just a moment. “They would not have crucified the Lord of glory.”

If they had known . . . If they had understood . . . But they didn't!

This means Pilate didn't know who Jesus was. Yes, he had heard the stories, the wild rumors about healings and miracles and people brought back from the dead. You could hardly keep that private. The news had spread like wildfire. When you read the gospels, Pontius Pilate appears as a kind of tortured soul—a man caught between the demands of his job and a genuine curiosity about Jesus. “What is truth?” he asked. It was not an idle question. He wanted to know the truth. I do not doubt he wanted the crowd to choose Barabbas over Jesus. When he washed his hands with water, he was trying to say, “I did the best I could to save this man, but I couldn't. His blood is now on your hands.” It didn't work; it

could never have worked.

Pilate stands guilty of a terrible crime—crucifying the Lord of glory. Only he didn't know he was the Lord of glory. Exactly who he thought Jesus was, we cannot say for certain. But this much we know—he didn't know, didn't understand, and so he ordered him crucified.

The world didn't understand Jesus when he walked on the earth, and the world still doesn't understand him today. That fact ought to give us patience when we talk to unbelievers. Sometimes when lost people say foolish and hurtful things, we may be tempted to retaliate with unkind words of our own. That's almost always a bad idea. It's like cursing a blind man because he can't see the color green.

That brings us to our song for today. Most people think of "Sweet Little Jesus Boy" as a spiritual written in the 1800s, but Robert MacGimsey composed it in 1934. The haunting lyrics remind us the world misunderstood Jesus when he came as a baby, and for the most part, the world still misunderstands him today.

One line in particular focuses on how wrong the world was: "They made you be born in a manger." There was no room for Jesus 2000 years ago, and sadly, there is no room for him in many hearts today.

*Sweet little Jesus Boy,
They made you be born in a manger.
Sweet little Holy Child,
Didn't know who You was.*

*Didn't know you'd come to save us, Lord;
To take our sins away.
Our eyes was blind, we couldn't see,
We didn't know who You was.*

Do you know Jesus as Lord and Savior? If so, you know it because God has revealed it to you by his Spirit.

There is no room for boasting, and no need for it either . If you are among those who can see and hear and understand the truth, do not take any credit for it. Get down on your knees and thank God for opening your eyes. Thank God for rescuing you from the pit of despair. Thank God for turning your life around. Thank God for giving you eyes to see, ears to hear, and a heart to understand his truth.

Let's listen together as [Babbie Mason sings this Christmas spiritual.](#)

*Lord Jesus, if you had not opened our eyes,
we wouldn't have seen you either. We thank
you now and forever for your saving grace.*

Amen.

December 7

What Child is This?

“He will be named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6).

Here’s a case where the tune has been around much longer than the words. When William C. Dix, an Anglican layman from Bristol, England, wrote a poem called “The Manger Throne,” he put the words to a tune called “Greensleeves,” a traditional English folk song that dates to the time of Shakespeare.

Although he was an insurance salesman, we remember him today for writing “What Child is This?” History records that he was sick at the time and that while recovering he had a deep spiritual awakening. As it happens, this carol is more popular in the United States than in its country of origin.

The song consists of three stanzas. The first verse asks a question and then answers it:

*What child is this, who laid to rest,
On Mary’s lap is sleeping?
Whom angels greet with anthems sweet,*

*While shepherds watch are keeping?
This, this is Christ the King,
Whom shepherds guard and angels sing:
Haste, haste to bring Him laud,
The babe, the son of Mary.*

The second verse joins the coming of Christ with his death on the cross:

*Why lies He in such mean estate,
Where ox and ass are feeding?
Good Christians, fear, for sinners here
The silent Word is pleading.
Nails, spears shall pierce him through,
The cross he bore for me, for you.
Hail, hail the Word made flesh,
The Babe, the Son of Mary.*

The third verse calls the hearer to respond in saving faith:

*So bring him incense, gold, and myrrh,
Come, peasant, king, to own him.
The King of kings salvation brings,
Let loving hearts enthrone him.
Raise, raise a song on high,
The virgin sings her lullaby
Joy, joy for Christ is born,
The babe, the Son of Mary.*

You never know what may happen in the world because a baby was born. No doubt the Innkeeper didn't know who he was turning away. Even Mary couldn't fully imagine what it all meant that night. But that baby born in Bethlehem has become the centerpiece of history.

What child is this? We all have to answer that question sooner or later. The song says, "This, this is Christ the King." What do you say?

Let's listen as [Carrie Underwood sings this carol.](#)

*Lord Jesus, you came for us! We gladly
enthroned you as King and Lord and Savior.
Amen.*

December 8

Away in a Manger

“She gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn” (Luke 2:7 ESV).

You may have heard Martin Luther wrote this carol.
Don't believe everything you hear.

Over a century ago, a rumor started that Luther wrote this beautiful song. We know he wrote many songs, so the thought is not impossible. His name even appears in some older hymnals as the author of “Away in a Manger.” It was even called “Luther's Cradle Hymn.” But it is not true. Luther lived in the 1500s. The first two verses appeared in print in 1885. An unknown author added the third verse in 1892. Historians tell us over 40 different tunes have been used for this carol, but only two have gained widespread acceptance. In America we traditionally use a tune by William Kirkpatrick; James Murray composed the tune most often used in Britain.

Authorship aside, this carol is justly beloved as perhaps the

greatest of all the Christmas hymns written for children. Using simple words, the song paints a picture of Jesus' birth as a child might describe it.

*Away in a manger, no crib for a bed,
The little Lord Jesus laid down his sweet head.
The stars in the sky looked down where he lay,
The little Lord Jesus asleep in the hay.*

The second verse becomes a prayer for Jesus' protection for all the little children:

*The cattle are lowing, the baby awakes,
But little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes;
I love thee, Lord Jesus, look down from the sky
And stay by my cradle till morning is nigh.*

Here's the third verse that was added later:

*Be near me, Lord Jesus, I ask thee to stay
Close by me forever, and love me, I pray;
Bless all the dear children in thy tender care,
And fit us for heaven to live with thee there.*

Some people have wondered about the line in the second stanza that says of the infant Jesus, "No crying he makes," because the Bible doesn't say Jesus never cried as a child. Since we know he shed tears as an adult, and since crying is

part of the human experience, we may safely assume Jesus cried as a baby. But the carol isn't suggesting Jesus never cried as a baby. The writer is using poetic license to describe a peaceful scene amid the difficult circumstances of Jesus' birth. At that moment, Jesus felt safe with Mary and Joseph even though he was resting in a manger, a feeding-trough. Though there was no room for them in the inn, Jesus was exactly where he was supposed to be.

Many adults fondly remember "Away in the Manger" as the first carol they learned. Its gentle lyrics and simple words stay in the memory long after other songs are forgotten. We remember it because in some sense we never really grow up. Or I should say we never grow beyond this profound prayer:

*Be near me, Lord Jesus, I ask thee to stay
Close by me forever, and love me, I pray.*

Jesus never turns away anyone who comes to him in prayer because he knows how much we need him. Which is why this song still speaks to us even when we are children no more.

As you might expect, there are many different recordings of this carol. Let's listen as [Susan Boyle sings Away in the Manger](#).

Lord Jesus, we need you now more than ever.

*Show us your love so when this day is over,
we may sleep well knowing you are always
with us. Amen.*

December 9

The First Noel

“We saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him” (Matthew 2:2).

No one knows who wrote this carol.

The scholars say “The First Noel” is of Cornish origin, which means it comes from the region of Great Britain in the far southwest that juts out into the Celtic Sea. The word “Noel” started as a Latin word, then became French, and finally showed up in early English as a synonym for Christmas. Wandering troubadours may have brought the song across the English Channel. The version we know was first published in 1823 in “Carols Ancient and Modern,” but its origins may go back to the 13th century.

In one sense Noel refers to the birth of Christ, but in a larger sense it refers to all the events of Christmas, including the star of Bethlehem and the coming of the Wise Men. Thus the first verse focuses on the shepherds who heard the angels proclaim Jesus’ birth:

The first Noel the angels did say

*Was to certain poor shepherds in fields as they lay;
In fields where they lay, keeping their sheep,
On a cold winter's night that was so deep.*

The second verse mentions the star that guided the wise men, and the third verse tells of their intent to follow the star:

*And by the light of that same Star
Three Wise Men came from country far,
To seek for a King was their intent,
And to follow the Star wherever it went.*

The final verse gives us the gospel promise:

*Then let us all with one accord
Sing praises to our heavenly Lord;
That hath made heaven and earth of naught,
And with his blood mankind hath bought.*

The carol contains a noteworthy progression of thought. In the first verse, the angel announces good news of Christ's birth to "certain poor shepherds," but in the last verse, we discover that the promise of his coming includes everyone:

*"Then let us all with one accord
Sing praises to our heavenly Lord."*

We also discover that Christ is both divine and human. He is

the creator of the earth and heaven who also redeemed mankind with his own blood.

No wonder we say, “Noel, Noel. Born is the King of Israel.” His coming means good news for the whole world.

Don't keep it to yourself!

Let's listen as [Lady Antebellum sings this carol](#).

Gracious Lord, you were the King in the cradle, the Creator in swaddling cloth, the Eternal Lord sleeping in a manger. As you entered the dark world of your day, we pray you will enter our world and shine the light of your love. Amen.

December 10

O Little Town of Bethlehem

“‘Where will the Messiah be born?’ ‘In the town of Bethlehem in Judea,’ they answered” (Matthew 4:4-5 GNT).

In a strange way, John Wilkes Booth had something to do with this Christmas carol.

A young Philadelphia minister named Phillips Brooks greatly admired Abraham Lincoln. When Booth assassinated Mr. Lincoln in April 1865, Rev. Brooks felt the loss deeply. When the slain president's body lay in state in Independence Hall in Philadelphia, on its way to back home to Springfield, IL for eventual burial, the young Episcopal clergyman preached a sermon on the life and death of America's Civil War president.

A few months later, still grief-stricken, Phillips Brooks traveled to the Holy Land. The itinerary including a horseback ride from Jerusalem to Bethlehem on Christmas Eve. Back then it truly was a small village, far removed from the bustling city it would later become. By nightfall he was in the field where, according to tradition, the shepherds heard

the angelic announcement. Then he attended the Christmas Eve service at the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem.

Something about the beauty and simplicity of that visit stayed with Phillips Brooks when he returned to America. Three years later he needed a Christmas poem for the children's service at Holy Trinity Church in Philadelphia. Remembering his visit to Bethlehem, he decided to write the poem himself. He then gave it to Lewis Redner, the church organist, who composed the music in time for the children to sing it in the service. "O Little of Bethlehem" quickly became a favorite after it was published in 1874.

Writing to the children of his congregation, he recalled that first visit:

"I remember especially on Christmas Eve, when I was standing in the old church in Bethlehem, close to the spot where Jesus was born, when the whole church was ringing hour after hour with the splendid hymns of praise to God, how again and again it seemed as if I could hear voices I knew well, telling each other of the "wonderful night" of the Savior's birth."

The first line of the first verse gives us a poetic picture of Bethlehem as Phillips Brooks saw it:

*O little town of Bethlehem
How still we see thee lie*

But the end of the first verse reminds us Bethlehem was more than a picturesque by-way in the Holy Land:

*The hopes and fears of all the years
Are met in thee tonight.*

As we come to the end of this year, we certainly have had our share of “hopes and fears.” In some ways, it seems like we end the year on a somber note, given the shaky state of the world. But God’s answer to our anxiety can be found in a manger in Bethlehem. There we find the baby who will bring us peace now and one day will bring peace to the whole world.

The familiar words of the third verse offer us this wonderful invitation:

*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.*

So he does! May that be your experience this Christmas

season.

Let's listen together as [Sarah McLachlan sings this lovely carol.](#)

*O God, lead us again to the place where
Mary laid her child so we may know that you
choose the weak things of the world to
confound the mighty. Amen.*

December 11

Once in Royal David's City

“Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David” (Luke 2:4 ESV).

We don't think of this as a children's carol, but that's how it started. Cecil Frances Alexander published it in 1848 as part of “Hymns for Little Children.” A writer of many hymns and poems for children, she was the wife of the Bishop of Derry in Northern Ireland. She took her position very seriously, traveling with her husband as he visited different churches, always spending time with the children. History records her love for those on the margins of society. Money from her early publications went to establish an institute for the deaf. She was also a noted supporter of the Derry Home for Fallen Women. She loved to visit the poor and the sick. Several of her other hymns are known the world over, including “All Things Bright and Beautiful” and “There is a Green Hill Far Away.”

She wrote a series of hymns for children to illustrate the Apostles Creed. “Once in Royal David's City” illuminates

the phrase “conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary.” The phrase “Royal David’s City” refers to Bethlehem and harkens back to 1 Samuel 16 where Samuel was sent by the Lord to anoint one of the sons of Jesse to be the king who would replace Saul. After passing over the older sons, Samuel asked, “Are all your sons here?” The answer was no, the youngest one, David, was tending the sheep. Surely the Lord would not pass over the seven older brothers, would he? But that’s exactly what the Lord did, teaching us that while man looks on the outside, God looks at the heart. The Lord knew the young shepherd boy had a heart like his. So Samuel anointed David who would become Israel’s greatest king.

Mrs. Alexander had a knack for expressing biblical truth in language children would easily understand. We can see her gift in the first two verses:

*Once in royal David’s city
Stood a lowly cattle shed,
Where a mother laid her Baby
In a manger for His bed:
Mary was that mother mild,
Jesus Christ her little Child.*

*He came down to earth from heaven,
Who is God and Lord of all,
And His shelter was a stable,*

*And His cradle was a stall;
With the poor, and mean, and lowly,
Lived on earth our Savior holy.*

If you doubt she wrote this for children, read the third verse:

*And through all His wondrous childhood
He would honor and obey,
Love and watch the lowly maiden,
In whose gentle arms He lay:
Christian children all must be
Mild, obedient, good as He.*

Near the end, she included a verse about our hope of heaven:

*And our eyes at last shall see Him,
Through His own redeeming love;
For that Child so dear and gentle
Is our Lord in heaven above,
And He leads His children on
To the place where He is gone.*

If you read the verses carefully, you can see this is truly a children's song from first to last. But over time it has passed into a wider realm and is now a beloved carol sung by all ages. Since 1918, this carol has been the processional hymn during the *Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols* on Christmas Eve at King's College, Cambridge, England.

Let's listen to a [beautiful version in folk music style](#) by Sufjan Stevens.

*Lord Jesus, we pray for childlike faith to trust
in you. Amen.*

December 12

Hark! The Herald Angels Sing

“Suddenly there was a multitude of the heavenly host with the angel, praising God and saying: ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth’” (Luke 2:13-14).

Charles Wesley wrote more than 8000 hymns.

That would be a lot for anyone, but it is amazing when you consider he lived in the 1700s and wrote without the benefit of typewriters or computers or the Internet. Besides being a famous hymn writer, he was also the brother of John Wesley. God used the labors of these two men to bring a vast spiritual awakening to England and America, and to bring forth the Wesleyan movement that emphasized practical Christianity, personal discipline, and warmhearted love for God.

When Charles Wesley wrote this carol in 1739, he had no idea it would become famous. He first named it “Hark, how all the welkin ring,” welkin being an archaic English term for the heavens. When George Whitefield published it in 1753, he changed the first line to read, “Hark! The herald angels sing,” and so it has remained that way ever since.

For the first 120 years, the words were sung to various tunes. But that changed in 1856 when William Cummings joined the lyrics with a tune written by Felix Mendelssohn for the Gutenberg Festival in 1840 to celebrate the introduction of printing. Mendelssohn would be surprised by that because he had written that his tune would be welcomed by singers and hearers, “but it will never do to sacred words.”

But even the greatest composers can sometimes be wrong. The music and the lyrics seem made for each other.

Charles Wesley’s hymn offers us a good survey of theology. It mentions many of the names and titles of Christ: King, Lord, Prince of Peace, Sun of Righteousness, Everlasting Lord, Desire of Nations, Incarnate Deity, and Emmanuel. After the first stanza’s call to praise “the new-born King,” the following stanzas celebrate the virgin birth, the deity of Christ, the resurrection of the body, and the truth of the new birth. Two phrases in particular deserve comment: “Mild he lays his glory by” refers to Christ’s willingness to lay aside the glory of heaven to take on human nature and become one of us. “Late in time behold him come” reminds us of Hebrews 1:2 where we are told “in these last days” God has spoken to us through his Son.

For more than 250 years Christians around the world have been blessed by this Christmas carol that reminds us of God’s great gift to us. I invite you to ponder these words so

rich in biblical truth:

*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 man to dwell
Jesus, our Emmanuel*

*Hark! The herald angels sing
Glory to the newborn King.*

There are many beautiful recordings of this beloved Christmas carol. Let's listen to [this version by the Discovery Singers](#).

*Lord Jesus, you did not refuse us when we
needed you most, but you were pleased to
dwell among us. Thank you for making us
part of your forever family. Amen.*

December 13

Matthew's Begats

“Abraham begat Isaac; and Isaac begat Jacob; and Jacob begat Judas and his brethren” (Matthew 1:2 KJV).

First of all, this isn't a carol or a hymn.

It's not a congregational song.

It's not even in the category of “special music” before the sermon.

So I need to do a little explaining here. A few years ago Andrew Peterson decided to make a song out of the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew 1. You know that chapter, I'm sure. It's the first chapter of the New Testament, the one with the long list of unpronounceable names. In the King James Version, Matthew 1 contains the word “begat” 39 times in 16 verses. The word means “to father” as in a literal father-son relationship, or it can mean “to be the ancestor of,” perhaps as a grandfather or a great-grandfather.

Most of us don't know what to do with that long genealogy. We tend to read the first verse about Jesus, David and Abraham, and then we skip down to verse 18, “Now the birth

of Jesus Christ took place in this way.” I certainly understand that. After all, what are we supposed to do with names like Azor, Joram and Abiud? How do you even pronounce that last one? Who are these people anyway?

In 2004 Andrew Peterson sat down and put the genealogy of Matthew 1 to music. He did it quite literally. He found a way to sing that long list of names and make it fun to listen to. It's the Bible set to music.

But why include “Matthew's Begats” with classic carols like “Hark, the Herald Angels Sing” and “O Come, All Ye Faithful”? My answer is simple. Because the New Testament begins with “Matthews's Begats.” We might call this “the forgotten chapter of the Christmas story.” We routinely skip it to get to the “good stuff.” But the Jews of the first century would be quite surprised by our attitude. To them, the genealogy would have been an essential setting for the story of Jesus' birth.

The long list of names in Matthew 1 tells us Jesus had roots. He had a family tree. He didn't just drop out of heaven, he didn't appear magically on the scene, but at the perfect moment of history, Jesus was born in Bethlehem. He's not some fictional character—like the gods on Mount Olympus. No, he was a real person born into a real family.

I hope you won't skip Matthew 1 in your Bible reading. This

unlikely list of unlikely people may be the greatest chapter on the grace of God in all the Bible. In these forgotten names from the past God turns the spotlight of his holy grace on fallen men and women, and through their lives, we see what the grace of God can do.

With that as background, get your Bible (I recommend the King James Version because it contains the text of this song, but any version will do), and let's listen to Andrew Peterson's [bluegrass rendition of Matthew's Begats](#).

Lord Jesus, when you were born, you joined a human family with a history. May I never be ashamed of you because you were not ashamed to come for me. Amen.

December 14

Rise Up, Shepherd, and Follow

“They hurried off and found both Mary and Joseph, and the baby who was lying in the feeding trough” (Luke 2:16).

Not much is known about the origin of this song, except that it is called a “Christmas Plantation Song,” which means it was composed by slaves and sung in a back-and-forth responsive fashion. According to *The New Oxford Book of Carols*, most of the slave songs were collected during the Civil War, mostly from slaves on the offshore islands of Georgia and South Carolina. The tune is related to various British folk songs, including a Welsh carol. It could be called an American shepherd carol, with the principal singer giving out the line and the chorus repeating the refrain. You can get a sense of this “Christmas Plantation Song” by reading the lyrics.

*There's a star in the East on Christmas morn
Rise up, shepherd, and follow.
It will lead to the place where Christ was born.
Rise up, shepherd, and follow.*

Leave your sheep and leave your lambs.

Rise up, shepherd, and follow.

Leave your ewes and leave your rams.

Rise up, shepherd, and follow.

Follow, follow, rise up, shepherd, and follow.

Follow the star of Bethlehem

Rise up, shepherd, and follow.

If you take good heed to the angel's words,

Rise up, shepherd, and follow.

You'll forget your flocks, you'll forget your herds,

Rise up, shepherd, and follow

This simple song reminds us of the enduring power of music. Since most slaves wouldn't have a printed Bible, they conveyed the Christmas story through their music. The leader would sing out, "There's a star in the East on Christmas morn," and the people would respond, "Rise up, shepherd, and follow." The next line of the story would be sung, and the refrain repeated, "Rise up, shepherd, and follow." The song would continue until the full story had been told. That's how the gospel has always been passed along in oral cultures.

The message is simple and clear. When Jesus calls, we must "rise up and follow." But as the song suggests, and as the disciples themselves would find out, it meant leaving everything else behind.

When Jesus enters, everything changes.
When Jesus calls, we must rise up and follow.
That's still true 2000 years after Bethlehem.

Rise up, boys and girls!
Rise up, moms and dads!
Rise up, rich and poor!

There's a baby in the manger.
Jesus has arrived.
Rise up, everyone, and follow!

I found a lovely arrangement of this song by [the King's Singers](#).

*Father, give us eyes to see Jesus in a new and fresh way this Christmas season. Help us to see him as he is—a king sleeping in a stable. May we rise up and follow when he calls.
Amen.*

December 15

Thou Didst Leave Thy Throne

“He emptied Himself by assuming the form of a slave, taking on the likeness of men” (Philippians 2:7).

Friends remembered her as a woman of compassion, and with good reason. Emily Elliott loved to care for the sick and dying. Like many Victorian churchwomen, she gave herself to rescue missions and Sunday School work. She published 48 hymns for the sick in a book called *Under the Pillow*.

Today we remember her for a hymn she wrote called *Thou Didst Leave Thy Throne*. It begins with a verse recalling there was no room in the inn:

*Thou didst leave thy throne and thy kingly crown,
When thou camest to earth for me;
But in Bethlehem's home there was found no room,
For thy holy nativity.*

Unlike many Christmas carols, this one does not trace other details of the story. Instead the verses take us through the life of Christ, focusing on the humility of our Lord. Emily Elliott

wrote it especially for children. Here's a sample verse:

*The foxes found rest, and the birds their nest
In the shade of the forest tree;
But Thy couch was the sod, O Thou Son of God,
In the deserts of Galilee.*

Then we sing about the cross:

*Thou camest, O Lord, with the living Word,
That should set Thy people free;
But with mocking scorn and with crown of thorn,
They bore Thee to Calvary.*

The final verse looks forward to the return of Christ:

*When heaven's arches shall ring, and her choirs shall sing
At Thy coming to victory,
Let thy voice call me home, saying, 'Yet there is room-
There is room at my side for thee!'*

Although I love this carol, I have rarely heard it sung in church. The refrain always moves me:

*O come to my heart, Lord Jesus,
There is room in my heart for Thee.*

I wonder if Emily Elliott was not influenced by her aunt, Charlotte Elliott, who wrote the famous invitation hymn *Just*

As I Am. In any case, I'm happy to include this lesser-known but beautiful carol. Let's listen to [this a cappella version](#).

If you've never trusted Christ, here's a simple prayer that could change your life forever:

Lord Jesus, for too long I've kept you out of my life. No longer will I close the door when I hear you knocking. I believe you are the Son of God who died on the cross for my sins and rose from the dead on the third day. Come into my heart, Lord Jesus, and be my Savior. There is room in my heart for you.
Amen.

December 16

We Three Kings

“After Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of King Herod, wise men from the east arrived unexpectedly in Jerusalem” (Matthew 2:1).

They needed a song for the Christmas program.

That’s why John Henry Hopkins wrote this carol in 1857. He was an author, book illustrator, designer of stained glass, and the musical director for the General Theological Seminary in New York City. Though he wrote other songs for the program, “We Three Kings” is the only one still in general use.

Strictly speaking, this is an Epiphany Carol because it recalls the coming of the Wise Men from the East to offer gifts to the Christ child.

When we read Mathew 2, we discover something interesting. The Wise Men show up in Jerusalem *after* the birth of Jesus. That runs contrary to the notion the shepherds and the Wise Men arrive in Bethlehem at the same time. Not so. The shepherds were there the night Jesus was born. The Wise

Men came later.

But how much later? No one knows for certain. It may have been a few months later. Some think even a year or so later. One hint: It was at least a few days later because when the Wise Men found Jesus, he was with his mother in a house in Bethlehem, not in a manger.

That fits well with the tradition the Wise Men came 12 days after Christmas--on January 6, usually called Epiphany in the liturgical calendar. Epiphany celebrates the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles.

The poem John Henry Hopkins wrote is a little gem in that it covers, verse by verse, every part of the story of the coming of the Wise Men in Matthew 2. We don't know how many there were. The gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh suggest there were at least three, but there may have been many more. Hopkins arranged the song so each verse mentions a gift brought by one of the "three kings":

"Gold I bring to crown him again."

"Frankincense to offer have I."

"Myrrh is mine, its bitter perfume."

In this carol, gold emphasizes his kingship, frankincense his deity, and myrrh his coming death on the cross. That sets up the majestic final verse:

*Glorious now behold Him arise;
King and God and sacrifice;
Alleluia!, Alleluia!,
Rings through the earth and skies.*

Matthew 2:11 tells us that when the Wise Men found the baby, they bowed down and worshiped him. Somehow they saw beyond the present and into the future and in deep faith, they worshiped him. They knew this child would one day rule the world, and they were not ashamed to fall on their faces before him.

Let us lay aside our cares and follow the Wise Men on their journey to Bethlehem. A baby lies there who is the Light of the World. If they found Jesus, then so can we.

Not surprisingly, there have been many fine recordings of “We Three Kings.” Let’s listen to this version recorded in a [live performance at Royal Albert Hall in London](#).

*Lord Jesus, may we be like the Wise Men who
followed the star until they found you. Give
us wisdom to seek you and light to find you
this Christmas season. Amen.*

December 17

Breath of Heaven (Mary's Song)

“The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you” (Luke 1:35).

We should all be glad Chris Eaton said yes.

He wrote the first version of “Breath of Heaven,” but when Amy Grant heard it, she asked for permission to rewrite it from a woman’s perspective. In an interview she explained what happened next:

“That song is so profound, but the chorus is so simple. It’s authentic and perfectly written, because it uses an incredibly moving economy of words. And, selfishly, I just really wanted to be able to use the song on my Christmas record. So finally Chris said, ‘Well, OK, just for this one version, we’ll let you put a different lyric on there.’ I said, ‘Well, you couldn’t possibly have written the lyric I’m thinking of, because I’m going to write it from a woman’s perspective.’ I was very pregnant at the time, and I felt that was part of the inspiration as I tried to imagine Mary’s experience.”

This song imagines what Mary must have felt like as a frightened young girl who has just learned she has been chosen to carry the Son of God in her womb. Mary could not know what the future would hold. Before it was over, she would experience heartache, opposition, slander, confusion, anguish, despair and loneliness. She would face the greatest pain a mother can endure when she watched her son die on the cross (John 19:25).

Mary couldn't know all those things. Perhaps if she had known, she might not have said "Yes." *But it's just as well she didn't.* Sometimes we say, "I wish I knew what the future holds for me." But you really don't want to know. It's far better we don't know what life will bring us in 10 or 15 years.

Mary didn't know the full cost of saying "Yes." *But having made her decision, she never looked back.* Those two aspects of her life may be the greatest things we can say about her:

1. She believed God when it seemed to be impossible.
2. She never looked back.

Amy Grant commented that the song connects with people because it touches a universal chord in the human heart. "It is a prayer that fits a lot of circumstances because it is a cry of mercy."

*Do you wonder as you watch my face
If a wiser one should have had my place
But I offer all I am
For the mercy of your plan
Help me be strong
Help me be
Help me*

That's the sort of prayer we all have to pray sooner or later. Life breaks all of us eventually, and in those moments when we are forced to our knees, we discover God is more than enough.

Let's listen as Amy Grant sings [Breath of Heaven](#).

*Thank you, Lord Jesus, for mercy that
reaches us in our most desperate moments
and never lets go. Amen.*

December 18

Strange Way to Save the World

“Joseph, son of David, don’t be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because what has been conceived in her is by the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 1:20).

There aren’t many songs about Joseph.

We sing a lot more about Mary, and that’s the way it should be.

I’m sure Joseph would agree.

The Bible doesn’t tell us a great deal about him. He is the husband of Mary and the foster father of Jesus. He’s the person from the first Christmas story I would most like to meet.

When I call Joseph “the forgotten man of Christmas,” that’s not an exaggeration.

So here’s a song about Joseph. If “Breath of Heaven” tries to imagine what Mary was thinking, “A Strange Way to Save the World” puts us in Joseph’s shoes. How would you feel if you were told the baby your beloved is carrying is not yours, was conceived by the Holy Spirit, and he will be called

Emmanuel, God with us? That's a heavy load for a young man.

*Why me, I'm just a simple man of trade
Why Him with all the rulers in the world
Why here inside this stable filled with hay
Why her, she's just an ordinary girl
Now I'm not one to second guess
What angels have to say
But this is such a strange way to save the world*

The Bible says Joseph was a righteous man. We know that's true because when he didn't understand how she got pregnant, he resolved to divorce her privately to prevent her from being publicly disgraced. After he made that decision, the angel came with the news Mary had conceived through a miracle of the Holy Spirit and the baby would be the promised Savior. It was a lot to consider, but somehow Joseph found the strength to believe, so he married Mary and did not divorce her. The song explains the truth this way:

*But Joseph knew the
Reason love had to reach so far*

Was it really a strange way to save the world? Yes, indeed. We made a mess of things. God had every reason to kill us all. But he didn't. He said, "I love you too much to let you go." And after we had trashed everything, God said, "I'm

coming down there so you'll know once and for all how much I love you." We didn't pay any attention; it didn't make sense to us. How could God visit us? But he did—and he came to the world in a very strange way. He entered a virgin's womb and came out as a baby, born in Bethlehem, a baby named Jesus, born to save us from our sins.

He came and we killed him.
He died and became our Savior.

That's the good news of Christmas: God has done it all. The only thing left to you and me is to believe. God wrapped his Son in swaddling clothes and said to the whole world, "This is my Christmas gift to you."

Let's listen together and enjoy [A Strange Way to Save the World by 4Him](#).

My Lord, I will never understand why you would save someone like me. Help me to make my life one great "Thank you" in return. Amen.

December 19

God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen

“I bring you good tidings of great joy” (Luke 2:10 KJV).

Ebenezer Scrooge didn't like this carol.

In a funny scene from *A Christmas Carol*, Charles Dickens imagines a caroler singing “God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen” at the door of Ebenezer Scrooge, who grabs a ruler and chases the singer away. Dickens puts it this way:

Scrooge seized the ruler with such energy of action that the singer fled in terror, leaving the keyhole to the fog and even more congenial frost.

This carol was published in Britain in 1833, but even then it was called an “ancient carol, sung on the streets of London.” No one knows who composed this traditional English carol. A version of it seems to have existed as early as the 16th century. One can easily imagine villagers singing and dancing to this lively tune. During Queen Victoria's reign in the late 1800s, it became part of the Anglican hymnbook and soon spread around the world.

Many people miss the meaning of the first line because they

leave out the comma between “merry” and “gentlemen.” This is not a song about “merry gentlemen,” but rather an exhortation to godly men. The word “merry” originally meant strong or valiant, as in Robin Hood and his “Merry Men,” meaning his strong, brave men. The word “rest” meant to make. So the first line means, “God make you strong and valiant, gentlemen.” That explains the second line, “Let nothing you dismay.” What is it that makes us strong in the face of the struggles of life and our repeated failures? “Remember Christ our Savior was born on Christmas Day.”

The whole essence of the gospel is in the opening verse:

*God rest ye merry, gentlemen,
Let nothing you dismay,
Remember Christ our Savior
Was born on Christmas Day;
To save us all from Satan's power
When we were gone astray.*

*O tidings of comfort and joy, comfort and joy;
O tidings of comfort and joy.*

In contrast to many traditional carols with a somber tone, this one is exuberant. It calls us to celebrate the good news of Christmas. No wonder it has endured for so long. I particularly love this line that explains why Christ came: “To save us all from Satan’s power when we were gone astray.”

We have all gone astray, often repeatedly and foolishly, and we have suffered because of it. Jesus came to save us from Satan's power that pulls us continually in the wrong direction. In the spirit of the title, we should wish each other not only a "Merry Christmas," but also a "Mighty Christmas" because Christ has come to make us strong in the Lord.

Old Scrooge was wrong about this song. We ought to sing it every year.

Here is a beautiful version sung by the Bach Choir: [God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen](#)

*Deliver us from evil, O Lord, so our hearts
may truly be merry today. Amen.*

December 20

Some Children See Him

“Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these” (Matthew 19:14).

Our story begins at All Saints Episcopal Church in Pontiac, Michigan. A gifted minister named Bates Burt served as pastor for 25 years. In 1922 he began the practice of writing a Christmas carol each year and sending it to his friends. Year after year people looked forward to the annual Christmas carol.

When his youngest son, Alfred, had finished college, his father said he was handing over the writing of the annual Christmas carol. Starting in 1941, father and son sent out the carols together. After the father's death, Alfred Burt composed the music each year, and longtime family friend Wihla Hutson wrote the lyrics.

In 1951 they collaborated to produce “Some Children See Him.” It became an instant hit. The first verse sets the tone:

Some children see Him lily white,

*The baby Jesus born this night,
Some children see Him lily white,
With tresses soft and fair.
Some children see Him bronzed and brown,
The Lord of heav'n to earth come down.
Some children see Him bronzed and brown,
With dark and heavy hair.*

The final verse brings the truth home:

*The children in each different place
Will see the baby Jesus' face
Like theirs, but bright with heavenly grace,
And filled with holy light.
O lay aside each earthly thing
And with thy heart as offering,
Come worship now the infant King.
'Tis love that's born tonight!*

Two years after this song was published, Alfred was diagnosed with lung cancer. He died a year later at the age of 33. In his short life, he gave us three carols we still sing today: "Some Children See Him," "Caroling, Caroling," and "The Star Carol."

Alfred Burt and Wihla Hudson had it exactly right. Children do see him in different ways. For 2000 years people have wondered what Jesus looked like. We know he was Jewish

and was raised in a workingman's home. But that doesn't tell us anything about his height, his weight, the color of his eyes, the color of the hair, or anything about his distinctive features.

It is no surprise that in various cultures around the world, Jesus often looks like people within those various cultures:

A Chinese Christ.

A Brazilian Christ.

A Haitian Christ.

A Filipino Christ.

A Norwegian Christ.

This is good and right because Jesus belongs to the whole world.

Over sixty years have passed since the writing of "Some Children See Him." The world seems more deeply divided than ever. We need to catch a glimpse of Christ who loves us all, and we need to proclaim that Jesus belongs to everyone, regardless of language, culture, skin color, or nationality.

We're all in the same boat: highly valued, deeply fallen, and greatly loved. Because of Jesus, the things that unite us are greater than the things that divide us. We pray for the love of Christ to spread across our broken world.

Let's listen as [James Taylor sings Some Children See Him.](#)

*Lord Jesus, give us eyes to see the world as
you see it and a heart to love the world as
you love it. Amen.*

December 21

Good Christian Men Rejoice

“For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:11 ESV).

Have you ever heard of a macaronic hymn?

I hadn't either until I began to read the story behind “Good Christian Men Rejoice.” In the first place, this hymn goes back a long way, back at least to the Middle Ages when it was sung in Latin mixed with German. That's the “macaronic” part. It means a hymn containing words and phrases from two different languages.

That gives us a clue about the origin of this carol. Mixing two different languages means it probably started as a folk tune of some sort. A German mystic named Heinrich Seuse is thought to have written the first version in 1328. He said he heard angels sing these words and then joined them in a dance of worship.

We have no way to verify that.

Over the generations it was translated into various European languages, and eventually became known as “In Dulce

Jubilo,” which means “In sweet rejoicing.” Martin Luther may have written one of the verses. In 1745 a group of Moravian missionaries in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania sang this carol in 13 different European and Native American languages. In 1853 John M. Neale produced the translation we use today.

The music has been around almost as long as the words, going back to at least 1400. Bach used it twice and Franz Liszt included it in one of his piano suites.

As for the carol itself, the jubilant tone reminds us Christmas ought to be the most joyous season of the year:

Good Christian men, rejoice with heart and soul, and voice;

Give ye heed to what we say: News! News! Jesus Christ is born today;

Ox and ass before Him bow; and He is in the manger now.

Christ is born today! Christ is born today!

The second verse reminds us why Christ came:

Good Christian men, rejoice, with heart and soul and voice;

Now ye hear of endless bliss: Joy! Joy! Jesus Christ was born for this!

He has opened the heavenly door, and man is blest

forevermore.

Christ was born for this! Christ was born for this!

The final verse gives us the gospel promise of everlasting life:

Good Christian men, rejoice, with heart and soul and voice;

Now ye need not fear the grave: Peace! Peace! Jesus Christ was born to save!

Calls you one and calls you all, to gain His everlasting hall.

Christ was born to save! Christ was born to save!

You can see the gospel progression in the last lines:

The *fact* of his coming: “Christ is born today!”

The *reason* for his coming: “Christ was born for this!”

The *promise* of his coming: “Christ was born to save!”

Let’s listen to the beautiful simplicity of [this rendition by the Robert Shaw Chorale](#).

O Lord, may we never forget the real reason for Christmas. If Christ had not come, we would never be saved. Thank you for everlasting life through Jesus Christ! Amen.

December 22

Mary, Did You Know?

“But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart” (Luke 2:19 ESV).

It all started when Jerry Falwell asked Mark Lowry for some help.

For more than 40 years, Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Virginia has produced an extremely popular Christmas program. First called the Living Christmas Tree, it was later named the Virginia Christmas Spectacular. In 1984 Jerry Falwell, well-known pastor, author, speaker, and founder of the church in Lynchburg (and Liberty University) asked Mark Lowry (who was then virtually unknown) to write some dialogue for the Christmas program that year. He ended up with a series of questions he would like to ask Mary. Those questions were used between scenes of the Christmas program.

In 1991 he shared his idea for a song with his friend Buddy Greene while the two men rode a tour bus cross-country. Several days later Greene called and said the melody had come to him in just 30 minutes. *Mary, Did You Know?* has

become a holiday classic, featured in Christmas programs around the world.

The song lingers in the mind because the title asks us to consider a question we can't fully answer:

How much did Mary know about the birth of her son?

No doubt Mary thought about what Gabriel said, and how Joseph responded when she told him she was pregnant. She must have recalled the long, arduous journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, and all the events of the birth itself, including the surprise visit of the shepherds. She certainly had plenty to think about. No doubt she wondered why God had chosen her, and I'm sure she pondered what was ahead for her newborn son.

The refrain reminds us of Jesus' miracle-working power:

Oh Mary did you know

The blind will see, the deaf will hear, the dead will live again.

The lame will leap, the dumb will speak, the praises of the lamb.

The song ends with a strong statement about Jesus' true identity:

Mary did you know that your baby boy is Lord of all creation?

Mary did you know that your baby boy would one day rule the nations?

*Did you know that your baby boy is heaven's perfect Lamb?
This sleeping child you're holding is the great I am.*

How much of all this did Mary know? We can read a large part of the answer in Luke 1:26-38. Mary heard the amazing things Gabriel said, but she could not have foreseen all the details of the life of her son, Jesus of Nazareth. That makes her response in Luke 1:38 all the more remarkable: "I am the Lord's slave. May it be done to me according to your word."

When the angel said, "Nothing is impossible with God," Mary took a deep breath and said, "Be it unto me as you have said." And with those words, Christmas came to the world.

Let's listen together as Kathy Mattea sings [Mary, Did You Know?](#)

*Our Father, thank you for the amazing gift of
your Son. Sometimes we doubt because we
fear what the future holds. Make us like
Mary, willing to believe even when we don't
completely understand. Amen.*

December 23

Go Tell it on the Mountain

“You who bring good news to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good news to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, ‘Here is your God!’” (Isaiah 40:9 NIV).

John Wesley Work wanted to make sure we knew this song.

Generally regarded as the first African-American collector of folk songs and spirituals, he traveled the length and breadth of Appalachia, collecting and arranging the music he found in those mountains. When he published *New Jubilee Songs and Folk Songs of the American Negro* in 1907, he included “Go Tell it on the Mountain.” Historians say the tune is similar to the spiritual “We’ll March Around Jerusalem” and “Oh, Susanna.”

The Reader’s Digest Merry Christmas Songbook tells the following story:

“To black slaves in the United States, the birth of a Savior who would set all men free was a miracle to be sung about. And when there was something so

notable to tell, what better place to tell it from than a mountain, just as Jesus had chosen for His Sermon on the Mount. "Go Tell It on the Mountain," an authentic spiritual that dates probably from the early 1800s, was first popularized in 1879 by the Fisk University Jubilee Singers. This chorus traveled throughout the United States and Europe at the end of the last century, earning scholarship-fund money for Fisk, a school founded to educate freed slaves."

Here are the joyful words of this spiritual:

*While shepherds kept their watching
O'er silent flocks by night,
Behold throughout the heavens
There shone a holy light*

*Chorus:
Go, tell it on the mountain
Over the hills and everywhere
Go, tell it on the mountain
That Jesus Christ is born.*

*The shepherds feared and trembled
When lo! above the earth
Rang out the angel chorus
That hailed our Savior's birth;*

*Down in a lowly manger
The humble Christ was born;
And God sent us salvation
That blessed Christmas morn.*

“Go Tell it on the Mountain” means, “Don’t keep it a secret. Go tell everyone, everywhere, Jesus Christ is born.”

Christ has come!
The King has arrived!
God has moved into our neighborhood!

Go tell the whole world.

Today we get a treat—two songs in one. I found a version of [“Mary Had a Baby” and “Go Tell it on the Mountain” by Vanessa Williams](#) that captures the essence of these two great spirituals. Enjoy!

*Heavenly Father, help us to do as the song
says, and go spread the Good News that
Jesus Christ is born. Amen.*

December 24

Angels We Have Heard on High

“Suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!’” (Luke 2:13-14 NKJV).

Historians call this a “French carol” to indicate its origins, but that’s about all we know for certain. It seems to have been published in English around 1860, but there are older versions. The original French title meant “Angels in our Countryside,” which seems perfectly suited to the scene recorded in Luke 2 where angels suddenly fill the skies.

No wonder the shepherds were afraid. Some questions come to mind at this point. If we had been there, would we have seen the angels? Could the people in Bethlehem see the angels? Could they be seen in Jerusalem—six miles away? Could the sound of their voices be heard in other places, or did the angels reveal themselves only to the shepherds? We cannot fully answer these questions, but this much is certain: The angels were really there, and the shepherds really did hear them.

It is impossible to miss the supernatural element in the birth of Jesus. Angels pop up all over the Christmas story. An angel tells Mary she will give birth to Jesus. An angel tells Joseph to call his name Jesus. An angel warns Mary and Joseph to flee to Egypt. An angel tells them when it's safe to return to Israel. An angel announces the birth of Christ to the shepherds, and then the angelic choir serenades them.

Many miracles surround Christmas—the angels, the star, the dreams, the prophecies, and most of all, the virgin birth. But those miracles are just signs pointing to the greatest miracle of all: That someone from the “other world” has visited our world. Someone from the world of light came to the world of darkness. Someone from the eternal came to the temporary. Someone from heaven came to live with us on earth!

This carol calls us to make Christmas much more than a holiday. We must . . .

*Come to Bethlehem and see
him whose birth the angels sing
Come adore on bended knee
Christ the Lord the newborn King.*

Because of its obscure origins, it is not surprising there is some variation in the exact wording of the verses. Several years ago, while doing some research, I discovered this carol appears to be one of very few that mentions Joseph:

*See Him in a manger laid
Jesus, Lord of heaven and earth!
Mary, Joseph, lend your aid,
With us sing our Savior's birth.*

The refrain, with its soaring melody and antiphonal parts, calls each of us individually and all of us together to say, "Glory to God in the highest!" An early church father named Saint Hilary said, "Everything that seems empty is full of the angels of God." Sometimes the world around us seems empty, and we may feel entirely alone, but now and then—Suddenly!—when we least expect it—when we've almost given up hope—when we're tired or bored or fearful or disgruntled—God breaks through and the angels start to sing. They sang for some startled shepherds one night in Bethlehem 2,000 years ago. They still sing today for those who care to hear them.

Let's listen to this beautiful [a cappella version by Pentatonix](#).

*Our Father, on this happy Christmas Eve,
open our hearts so we will believe and never
doubt that Christ has come! Amen.*

December 25

Joy to the World

“And the angel said to them, ‘Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people’” (Luke 2:10 ESV).

Isaac Watts wasn't impressed. He thought he could write better hymns than the ones he heard because most church music sounded dreary to him. So his father, a radical non-conformist who was shunned because he did not support the Church of England, told him, “If you can do better, go ahead.”

Isaac was only 18 years old at the time.

For 222 Sundays he prepared a new hymn each week for the worship service, revolutionizing English congregational singing in the process. In those days (the 1700s) the Puritans believed only the Psalms should be sung in church. When Isaac Watts wrote his paraphrase of Psalm 98, he didn't intend it to be a Christmas carol. After all, if you compare this to the other songs on our list, you mostly notice what is missing. “Joy to the World” contains nothing about the shepherds, the Wise Men, the star, Bethlehem, Mary, Joseph,

or baby Jesus.

Which is why some people don't think of this as a Christmas carol.

When Isaac Watts wrote this song in 1719, he entitled it "The Messiah's Coming and Kingdom," which has the virtue of being accurate, though not very catchy. Over a century later Lowell Mason wrote the music, using *Handel's Messiah* as inspiration. The words and music perfectly capture our emotions on Christmas Day:

*Joy to the World , the Lord is come!
Let earth receive her King;
Let every heart prepare Him room,
And Heaven and nature sing,
And Heaven and nature sing,
And Heaven, and Heaven, and nature sing.*

The second verse calls on nature to "repeat the sounding joy," while the third verse looks forward to the day when we will

*"No more let sins and sorrows grow,
Nor thorns infest the ground."*

The final verse triumphantly proclaims that one day his rule and reign will spread over all the earth:

*He rules the world with truth and grace,
And makes the nations prove
The glories of His righteousness,
And wonders of His love,
And wonders of His love,
And wonders, wonders, of His love.*

Someone has said we need bifocal vision at Christmas so we can look back to Christ's first coming and look ahead to his second coming. In the meantime we celebrate the "wonders of his love."

For our final stop on this Advent journey, let's listen to an [acoustic version of Joy to the World](#) by Steven Curtis Chapman.

*Lord Jesus, may we never take for granted
the miracle of your birth. May your presence
fill our hearts today as we proclaim, "Joy to
the World! The Lord is come!" Amen.*

We hope you have enjoyed this journey through the Advent season with us!

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