

## Christmas Carols – A Presentation by Two Readers – January 2, 2021

R1: Our text for today is Ephesians 5:18-20 “Be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

R2: It has become a kind of tradition at Good Shepherd that on the Sunday after Christmas, we talk about some of the songs we sing at Christmas time. This is the fifth in the series about Christmas music. Unfortunately, we missed last year. As with many things, this service was a casualty of Covid. We are very happy to be worshipping live again so we can continue this tradition. We started this series because Carols and hymns about the coming of Jesus are the staples of the music of the church from Advent through Epiphany and many of us wanted to know about their origins.

R1: Christmas music is everywhere this time of year. Most stores begin playing songs in November, but some have started as early as the end of October. Most of the music you hear is secular like “Rudolph the Red nosed Reindeer” or “Frosty the Snowman.” But even secular music put us in the holiday spirit and for Christians, that spirit leads directly to the Christ child.

R2: By the way, if you want to have some fun, ask anyone under the age of 40 about Rudolph or Frosty and they will probably be able to sing the songs. Then ask them to identify Gene Autry or Jimmy Durante or Burl Ives. They were, of course, the singers who first performed the songs and who were very famous in the 1940’s and 50’s.

R1: Christmas carols have always been a special and simple way that the news of the Christ child can be shared. They have become essential in transmitting the Gospel to people of all ages. Many of us have memorized verses from Christmas songs because they have been sung so often. We share them with our children who also learn them, and so the message is passed on from one generation to the next.

R2: From earliest times, singing has been an essential part of worship. Consider Psalm 40 verse 2: *He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God. Many will see and fear the Lord and put their trust in him.* Or Psalm 47 verses 6 and 7: *Sing praises to God, sing praises; sing praises to our King, sing praises. For God is the King of all the earth; sing to him a psalm of praise.*

R1: But the Christmas season seems to be the time we really emphasize singing. Most of us know by heart at least a few Christmas songs, and have heard many others, both secular and religious. From Thanksgiving, and often even earlier, until Christmas we are inundated with them in stores, on the radio, at Christmas concerts. And when the secular world is putting away their Christmas decorations, Christians get to continue to hear and sing Christmas hymns and carols for another couple of weeks until Epiphany.

R2: Two favorites of many Christians, no matter what their denomination or worship style, are “Joy to the World,” and “I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day.” You often hear both played on the radio, and even stations that play mostly secular Christmas songs play these two because of their popularity and familiarity. We sang them earlier, so now we will take a short look at the origins of each.

R1: We will begin with Joy to the World. This time we are going to say the verses rather than sing them so that you can really concentrate on the words. Listen carefully as there is a test coming up. Verse 1 reads:

*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.*

R2: The rest of the verses are:

*Joy to the world, the Savior reigns! Let men their songs employ; While fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains Repeat the sounding joy, Repeat the sounding joy, Repeat, repeat, the sounding joy.*

*No more let sins and sorrows grow, Nor thorns infest the ground; He comes to make His blessings flow Far as the curse is found, Far as the curse is found, Far as, far as, the curse is found.*

*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.*

R1: OK it's test time. How many of you heard about Mary and the baby Jesus in those lyrics? How about Shepherds or Wise Men? A manger or Angels? Is this really a Christmas Carol? Other than stating that the Lord is come, there are no references to Christmas, and you could say at any time of the year that you have Joy because Jesus has come into your heart.

R2: All right, the test is over. You probably get the point. Joy to the World is a little like Handel's Halleluiah Chorus. Neither was really written to be a Christmas song, the "Messiah" is about the life of Christ, not just his birth, and as we will see, Joy to the World is based on the Psalms not the Gospels, but both seem to meet the spirit of the Christmas season because of their lively melodies and joyous lyrics.

R1: You may have heard about or even engaged in conversations about the words and music used in Christian churches. Usually the discussion is about traditional or contemporary music or King James Version of the Bible and modern translations. The debate is usually about which should be used and how often.

R2: It may surprise you to learn that debates like this aren't unique to this century. In the early 1700's, Isaac Watts found the readings and especially the music of the church to be uninspired and monotonous. In fact he thought that there was little joy in the church service. When Isaac complained to his father, his father challenged him to come up with something better.

R1: This challenge initiated a creative burst that didn't end until Watts had composed more than six hundred hymns and hundreds of other poems. "Joy to the World" became one of his most famous and enduring hymns. It was based on Psalm 98 which in the King James Version reads beginning in verse five, "Make a joyful noise unto the Lord, all the earth: make a loud noise, and rejoice, and sing praise."

R2: Using this verse and the five verses that followed, he wrote the poem that we sing today. He set the poem to a traditional common meter hymn. But despite the glorious words of joy, the hymn was not well received. Watts was criticized because he had dared to rewrite the psalms and few English Christians embraced the song.

R1: Eventually people began to recognize Watt's talent. In fact, he is credited with beginning a revolution in Christian music. But it took another church music revolutionary to set the poem to the

music we sing today. Lowell Mason became a popular hymn writer in the 1830's. He constantly battled with the music establishment to try to "modernize" church music. In 1836 he wrote a tune he called "Antioch" after the city where Paul began his missionary journeys. He linked his work with Watts' poem and the modern version of "Joy to the World" was born.

R2: No one really knows how it became known as a Christmas carol. The lyrics would work as well in July as in December. Perhaps it is so joyful it just feels like a Christmas carol. It is really a unique carol in the fact that it not inspired by the Gospels. But perhaps it is fitting since both Watts and Mason were trying to push the envelope in order to get people to view Scripture and music in a whole new way. They both knew, and we should always remember, that Christians should exude joy each and every day because the "Lord is come."

R1: Our second carol is "I heard the Bells on Christmas Day." The words of the poem need some explanation as the middle verses are much less "cheery" than we normally expect of a carol. The lyrics were written as a poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, who many consider to be America's greatest poet. In 1861 Longfellow was at the peak of his popularity. He had financial security and a wonderful family. He loved his wife and his five children.

R2: But all this began to rapidly change. First, his wife died in an unusual accident when her clothes caught fire from a match she had lit. Needless to say, his faith was tested. But the test didn't end there. That same year, the Civil War began. Longfellow hated the war, believing it to be caused by greed and the sinful nature of man. He prayed that God would end the madness of the war.

R1: But his faith would soon be tested further. Not only did the war drag on for years, but in 1863, his eighteen-year-old son was wounded fighting for the Union. It was while his son was recovering at home that Longfellow fell into a kind of despair. He had seen so many wounded soldiers and had visited so many friends who had lost relatives in the war that he began to question God. "Where is the peace?" he would ask.

R2: Finally on Christmas Day in 1863, he sat down to do what he always did, that is to write about his feelings. As he tried to write, he heard the church bells tolling in celebration of Christmas and his poem was centered on those bells. His words described the war as two struggling forces: God's love and understanding against the devil's hate and anger. He came to realize that God is not dead and is still proclaiming peace on earth good will to men. Even in despair we can rely on Him.

R1: The original poem had two more stanzas that are not included in the hymn as we know it. They are even darker, speaking of the canons of war and forlorn feelings born by so many households that were affected by death and destruction. But the confident statement that "Right will prevail," inspired the people of the North, and eventually the whole world would feel similarly inspired.

R2: The poem was so popular worldwide that in 1872 an Englishman named John Baptiste Calkin decided to put it to music. The finished song gained popularity in both Europe and the United States. Except for the deletion of the two verses about the war, the song remains the same today as it was when it was first published.

R1: The carol pleads for sanity in a world often gone insane. It expresses the hope that the joy and peace that Christ was born to offer would be realized. As a result, it has offered comfort to millions. This was especially true not just in the Civil War, but during the dark days of World War I, during the

depression of the 1930's, during World War II, and during the Korean and Viet Nam wars. Today, as conflict and chaos seem to rule, as natural disasters and disease are so prevalent and as many see religion under constant attack, the words of the poem are as true as ever. "God is not dead, nor doth he sleep... the wrong shall fail, the right prevail." God through Christ will always provide, "Peace on Earth, Goodwill to men!" And by His death on the cross, he has provided salvation for all who believe.

R2: We hope you leave today not only with a new understanding of these carols, but also with the joy and peace of Christ that so many writers and musicians have expressed in the carols we sing. May that peace and joy go with you, not only today, but throughout the year. May you share that joy and peace with people everywhere.

R1: Please join us in prayer: Heavenly Father as we sing of our joy at the birth of the Christ child, we ask you to bless and keep us in the joy and peace which were proclaimed at Jesus birth. May we be bringers of your joy to the whole world and may we always preach the message of your salvation that came through the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. We pray in His holy name. Amen.