

Christmas Carols – A Presentation for Two Readers – January 2023

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 that we sing at Christmas time. This is the seventh in the series about Christmas music. 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 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: 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.

R1: 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 who Gene Autry and Jimmy Durante were. They were, of course, the singers who first performed the songs and who were very famous in the 1940’s and 50’s.

R2: Today we want to take a more serious look at two carols which enrich our appreciation of Jesus’ coming. Each contributes to the spreading of his story. They are “There’s a Song in the Air,” and “Go Tell it on the Mountain.” The first was created very formally by a composer and a poet. The second was developed from a traditional folk song. Although they have very different origins, they both center on encouraging Christians to spread the word about the coming of Jesus.

R1: The words of “There’s a Song in the Air” tell us about the events of Jesus birth and encourage us to “echo the song that comes down through the night from the heavenly throng,” and to shout out the evangelistic message as we “greet in His cradle our Savior and King.”

R2: Josiah Holland, who was born in Massachusetts in 1819, wrote the words. He was trained as a doctor, but his love of literature exceeded his passion for medicine. He gave up his practice and turned to writing, first as a journalist and later as a novelist and poet. In the 1860’s he founded Scribner’s magazine, one of the most influential magazines of the era. A deeply religious man, he was famous for stories and poems about ethics and strong moral heroes who, though tempted, stayed on straight and narrow path.

R1: In 1874 he wrote the poem “There’s a Song in the Air,” for an obscure Sunday school journal. The poem might have been lost if Holland hadn’t decided to include it in a book published the same year entitled “Complete Poetical Writings.”

R2: More than three decades later and 25 years after Holland died, a man named Karl Harrington was working on the most important assignment of his life. He was a noted teacher, musician and church music director. He was helping to assemble a new Methodist hymn book. It would require music that was appropriate for all sizes of congregations and all types of people, from rural to urban, from sophisticated to simple.

R1: Not only would the hymnal be a staple in the pews of the churches, but it was designed to be essential in the tasks of leading the lost to Christ and inspiring the saved to work for the Lord. Even with all his background and talent, Harrington found the assignment overwhelming.

R2: His problems were compounded by the fact that it was mid-summer and very hot. In the days before air conditioning and informal clothing, high temperatures often made it next to impossible to work. Harrington recounted in his journal that the oppressive heat and humidity made him so tired and uncomfortable that he began to question why he ever took on the task. He wondered how he would ever find ways to satisfy the needs of the various people who would use the hymnal. He prayed that he could find at least one song that would touch everyone who sang it.

R1: To keep up his strength and resolve, and to relax, Harrington began to read as he took breaks from his work. He often turned to the works of his favorite author, Josiah Holland. One especially hot day he was enjoying a cool drink and reading Holland's poetry. When he read "There's a Song in the Air," he decided it had to be set to music. He knew it could be the answer to his need to find a song which would appeal to everyone who used the hymnal.

R2: He ran to his organ and as he read the words aloud, he began to compose a tune around each phrase. A melody came to life. Isn't it ironic that on an oppressively hot summer day, a famous Christmas carol was born – the answer to a professor's prayer. We will be singing "There's a Song in the Air" later in our service but for now let's sing the first verse. The words will be on the screen. For those who prefer to see the music it #97 in the Red book.

(Begin at the conclusion of the singing)

R1: The other Carol we want to highlight today comes from an entirely different kind of source. Instead of a formal poem set to music, "Go tell it on the Mountain" is the result of the collection of the informal songs of African American slaves.

R2: The contribution of unknown slaves to Christian music is incredible. As a largely uneducated people, longing for freedom, suffering cruelty and humiliation, many still managed to encounter the powerful touch of the Holy Spirit in ways that manifested themselves in songs of unparalleled majesty and beauty.

R1: Even more amazing than the songs themselves is the fact that any survived at all. Many of the people with whom the songs originated were illiterate. The songs were unpublished for decades and passed along only in oral tradition. We know that many songs were lost in the mists of time.

R2: If it had not been for a very special American family and the dynamic voices of a college choir, it is possible all the songs of the slaves would have been lost. Not long after the Civil War, a man named John Wesley Work was an African American church choir director in Nashville, Tennessee. A scholar as well as a musician, Work had a deep interest in the music that defined the experience of black

Americans. Work felt the new generation of post-Civil War southerners would best understand the importance of spirituality by learning the songs their ancestors sang during the days of slavery.

R1: Work was fortunate to have members of his church choir who also attended nearby Fisk College, and were members of the Fisk Jubilee Singers, the college choir. Work influenced the Jubilee Singers with his ideas and his music. They were able to pass this influence on to the world through their uplifting arrangements of spirituals.

R2: In an era when few Southerners, black or white, traveled very far their birthplaces, the Fisk Jubilee Singers toured the world, appearing before, among others, Queen Victoria in England, and President Chester Arthur at the White House. They became a monumental force in exposing the musical talents of African Americans to the world.

R1: John Work and his wife, who was the music teacher for the Jubilee Singers, along with his brother Fredrick Work and his son John Work II were instrumental in collecting and saving a huge number of folk songs and spirituals including "Sometimes I feel Like a Motherless Child" and "Go down Moses." John Work II and Fredrick Work arranged them for choral presentation. In the 1880's the Fisk singers took them to the world.

R2: Still it took another generation of the Work family to guarantee the place of "Go tell it on the Mountain" in the library of popular Christmas songs. In the 1930's, John Work III reworked the song, added a verse that he had discovered in his conversations with the last remaining former slaves, and arranged it in the form we know today. He published it in 1940, along with many others, in his book American Negro Songs and Spirituals. Since then the song has spread "over the hills and everywhere."

R1: Even though we will sing the song later in the service, let's sing the chorus, the first verse and the chorus again right now. It is on the screen and is #70 in the Green book.

(wait until singing concludes)

R2: So these two Christmas songs represent two different forms of song development. The first was typical of many songs. One person wrote lyrics and another the melody. The other carol came from oral tradition and was a folk song.

R1: But both take the story of Jesus to the world in music and word. That's the most important characteristic of any carol. Let's pray: Lord, we ask you to help us to always remember that Jesus is the reason for our Christmas carols. You sent your Son to save us and we rejoice in your love for us. As we enjoy the words and music, and we find our hearts uplifted, keep us mindful of the fact that we can use songs and hymns to bring the message of Christ to people everywhere, especially at Christmas time. In Your holy name we pray. Amen.