

3rd Week of Advent – Christmas Carols

This week of Advent Devotionals, we will focus on the rich heritage of Christmas Carols. The word carol came from a Greek dance called a *choraulein*, which was accompanied by flute music. The dance later spread throughout Europe and became especially popular with the French, who replaced the flute music with singing. Originally caroling would occur several times during the year, but by the 1600's, carols involved singing only, and Christmas had become the main holiday for these songs.

December 16, 2019

“O Little Town of Bethlehem,” a song inspired by a trip to Israel, was first written for a children’s choir.

In 1865, as the Civil War was coming to an end, Phillips Brooks, one of the most famous preachers in America, (he had preached Abraham Lincoln’s funeral) took a trip to Israel. Three years later, in 1868, Brooks was ministering in Philadelphia and noticed that the memories of his trip to Israel, “were still singing in my soul.” He then decided to write a Christmas poem, about the town of Bethlehem. The church organist, Lewis Redner, who also taught Sunday School, wanted to use the new words as a song for the children’s choir to sing. When the children’s choir performed this carol for the very first time, it was an instant hit. Since then, it has been sung by millions of people around the world as they celebrate the birth of Jesus.

Scripture: Micah 5:2-5

Song: O Little Town of Bethlehem - 201

Words by Phillips Brooks and Music by Lewis Redner

O little town of Bethlehem,
How still we see thee lie;
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep.
The silent stars go by.
Yet in thy dark streets shineth
The everlasting Light;
The hopes and fears of all the years
Are met in thee tonight.

For Christ is born of Mary,
And gather'd all above,
While mortals sleep, the angels keep
Their watch of wond'ring love.
O morning stars together
Proclaim the holy birth,
And praises sing to God the King
And peace to men on earth.

Family Prayer: Heavenly Father, thank you for the creative gifts that you give to us. Help us to always look for ways to use those gifts to bring you glory. We thank and praise you that you choose a small town, to be the birthplace of your Son. We praise you in the words of Micah that Jesus is the great Shepherd of your flock and that all who rest in Him “shall dwell secure.” Thank you that you are our peace. Amen

December 17, 2019

"Joy to the World" combines the talents of two of the most gifted composers in the history of Christianity. The words were penned by Isaac Watts, who some call "the father of modern hymnody", as an adaptation of Psalm 98. The music was written by George Frederick Handel, as part of his masterpiece, Messiah. The words and music were brought together by a Boston composer and music publisher, Lowell Mason.

Three men in three different countries over the span of more than a hundred years, brought together by the joy of the Lord's coming. As we sing this carol to celebrate the first advent of Christ over 2000 years ago, we should look in faith for the Lord's Second Coming, when the words of Psalm 98 will be fulfilled perfectly.

Scripture: Psalm 98

Song: *Joy to the World* - 195

Words by Isaac Watts; Music by GF Handel

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.

Joy to the earth! 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 blessing 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.

Family Prayer: Heavenly Father, You have made known Your salvation. You have revealed Your righteousness in the sight of the nations. It is no wonder that we can sing Joy to the World, for you have given us Jesus, and He is reason enough "to make a joyful noise unto the Lord." Help us when we are discouraged or sad, or feel like we have lost control, that "the seas roar" and the "rivers clap their hands" and "the hills sing for joy" all because You have come and because You are coming again to make all things right. Amen.

December 18, 2019

The year was 1818. The place: Oberndorf, near Salzberg, in the Austrian Alps. A young Assistant Pastor, named Josef Mohr, had a moment of inspiration and a problem. His moment of inspiration was brought about by a peaceful evening walk after a Christmas play. The problem was due to some mischievous mice.

The problem Josef Mohr had as Christmas approached was that the bellows of his church's organ had been eaten away by mice. The lack of a church organ had already caused a traveling band of actors to hold their Christmas play in a private home, instead of in Mohr's church. It was while walking home from this inspiring play on a calm evening that Mohr was struck with the first line of a beautiful poem, "Stille Nacht! Heilige Nacht!" (That's German for: *Silent Night, Holy Night*)

Mohr got home that night and finished his simple yet beautiful poem. Wishing that his new poem could be sung in the church, Mohr visited his friend Franz Gruber, who was the church organist. That Christmas, Gruber and Mohr sang their new Christmas carol in the church. Since they still had no organ, Gruber played his guitar as they sang.

Scripture: Luke 2:8-12

Song: *Silent Night* - #210 Words by Josef Mohr; Music by Franz Gruber

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,
Sleep in heavenly peace.

Silent night, holy night,
Shepherds quake at the sight.
Glories stream from heaven afar,

Heav'nly hosts sing Alleluia;
Christ the Savior is born;
Christ the Savior is born.

Silent night, holy night,
Son of God, love's pure light.
Radiant beams from Thy holy face,
With the dawn of redeeming grace,
Jesus, Lord, at Thy birth;
Jesus, Lord, at Thy birth.

Family Prayer: Ever present God, who gives peace to all who trust in You, we ask that by the power of Your Spirit you would fill our hearts with wonder. That we might become a people who constantly rejoice at Your goodness, who are always ready to worship you and who are growing in our love for our neighbor. We thank you that Christ the Savior is born! Amen.

December 19, 2019

"God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen" is a carol that was originally sung by "the waits". "Waits" were town watchmen in old England who, like the town criers, were licensed to perform certain duties, such as singing seasonal songs, including those of Christmas, to the wealthy people of the town.

It was first published in 1827 as "an ancient version, sung in the streets of London." One of the most humorous uses of the carol appears in *A Christmas Carol*, by Charles Dickens. Ebenezer Scrooge, the rich but unhappy old man, hears it sung joyfully in the street and threatens to hit the singer with a ruler if he does not cease immediately. Fortunately, Scrooge is about to learn the true meaning of Christmas and be made merry -- and generous -- himself.

The simple words to the carol remind us that Christ was born to free us all from Satan's power. It is a profound reminder of the true message of Christmas, and has been sung for hundreds of years as a treasure for God's people.

Scripture: Colossians 1:13-20

Song: *God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen - 211.*

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 pow'r when we were gone astray.

O tidings of comfort and joy, comfort and joy!
O tidings of comfort and joy!

From God our heav'nly Father, a blessed angel came;
And unto certain shepherds brought tidings of the same;
How that in Bethlehem was born the Son of God by name.

O tidings of comfort and joy, comfort and joy!
O tidings of comfort and joy!

"Fear not, then," said the angel, "let nothing you affright
This day is born a Savior of a pure virgin bright
To free all those who trust in him from Satan's power and might."

O tidings of comfort and joy, comfort and joy!
O tidings of comfort and joy!

Family Prayer: O Christ, Thou art preparing joy for me, and me for joy; I pray for joy, wait for joy, long for joy; give me more than I can hold, desire, or think of. Measure out to me my times and degrees of joy, at my work, business, duties. If I weep at night, give me joy in the morning. Let me rest in the thought of Thy love, pardon for sin and my title to heaven. Amen (from the *Valley of Vision*)

December 20, 2019

For years, "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing" was sung to a different tune than the one we now use. Charles Wesley, who wrote the carol in 1739, selected more somber music for his composition. But in 1855, English musician W.H. Cummings adapted some music written by Felix Mendelssohn and fit it to the words written by Wesley.

Charles Wesley wrote 6,500 hymns during his life, many of which we still sing in church today. He and his brother, John, were the founders of the Methodist church in England, and were both powerful preachers.

The tune by Mendelssohn was actually written to celebrate a famous Bible printer, Johann Gutenberg, the inventor of the printing press. Here again we see a story that demonstrates the providence of God in providing such wonderful carols for us to sing at Christmas time.

Scripture: Luke 2:13-20

Song: *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing* - 203

Hark! The herald angels sing,
"Glory to the newborn King!
Peace on earth and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled."
Joyful, all ye nations rise,
Join the triumph of the skies.
With the angelic host proclaim,
"Christ is born in Bethlehem!"

Hark! The herald angels sing,
"Glory to the newborn King!
Peace on earth and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled."
Joyful, all ye nations rise,
Join the triumph of the skies.
With the angelic host proclaim,
"Christ is born in Bethlehem!"

Christ by highest heav'n 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!

Hail the heav'n-born Prince of Peace
Hail the Son of Righteousness!
Light and life to all He brings,
Ris'n with healing in His wings.
Mild He lays His glory by,
Born that man no more may die.
Born to raise the sons of earth;
Born to give them second birth.

Family Prayer: Glory to God in the Highest! Lord, we join our voices with the angels who proclaimed to those shepherds years ago of Your great deliverance in and through Your Son, Jesus. Jesus, thank you for saving Your people from their sins. Holy Spirit, thank you for softening my heart that I might believe the good news, that Jesus was born to "raise the sons of earth, born to give them second birth." Let us praise you today and forevermore. Amen.

4th week of Advent (a short week)

Today and tomorrow we will look at two “Christmas poems” written by two exceptional poets. Notice how different the styles are between these two.

December 23, 2019

Descent. (by Luci Shaw)

Down he came from *up*,
and *in* from *out*,
and *here* from *there*.

A long leap,
an incandescent fall
from magnificent
to naked, frail, small,
through space
between the stars
into our chill night air,
shrunk, in infant grace,
to our damp, cramped
earthly place
among all
the shivering sheep.

And now, after all,
There he lies
fast asleep.

Scripture: Luke 2:21-35

Family project: See if you can write a poem together as a family about Christmas. Think about whether you want it to rhyme, or have rhythm in its meter or pace.

Family Prayer: Lord, what an amazing experience it must have been for Simeon to have seen your Son, Jesus Christ with his own eyes. You had revealed to him that he would not die until he had seen “the consolation of Israel.” You are always true to Your promises. Help us to remember that truth when we doubt from time to time. Lord, also help us to remember that you have promised to return again, and enable us to live for Your glory right now, as we continue to wait to see You fulfill all your promises. Amen.

December 24, 2019 - Christmas Eve

A Hymn on the Nativity of My Savior (by Ben Jonson)

I sing the birth was born tonight,
The Author both of life and light,
The angels so did sound it,
And like the ravished shepherds said,
Who saw the light, and were afraid,
Yet searched, and true they found it.

The Son of God, the eternal King,
That did us all salvation bring,
And freed the soul from danger;
He whom the whole world could not take,
The Word, which heaven and earth did make,
Was now laid in a manger.

The Father's wisdom willed it so,
The Son's obedience knew no "No,"
Both wills were in one stature;
And as that wisdom had decreed,
The Word was now made Flesh indeed,
And took on Him our nature.

What comfort by Him do we win?
Who made Himself the price of sin,
To make us heirs of glory!
To see this babe, all innocence,
A martyr born in our defense,
Can man forget this story?

Scripture: Luke 1:67-80

Reflection: As you read the above passage, list or mention all that the birth of Jesus accomplished for us. Pause and give God thanks for all those gifts.

Family Prayer:
(from *Leading in Prayer*)

“O God, our all-knowing Lord,
who granted to the wise men of the East
that most brilliant star.
Grant to us that same heavenly light,
That we might find that Savior of the world,
And kneeling before Him,
present what treasure we have,
the myrrh of sacrifice,
the gold of purity,
the incense of praise.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord, *Amen.*”