

SINGING PRAISES
A Christmas Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
University Public Worship
Stanford Memorial Church
December 25, 2011

A merry, merry Christmas to each of you in the midst of this darkest season of the year. "The light shines in the darkness," we're told in our gospel lesson from John.ⁱ "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory." "Hark the herald angels sing, glory to the newborn king," we sang to open this service.ⁱⁱ "Light and life to all he brings." Christmas carols give us the opportunity to sing our gospel lessons. After my sermon, we'll sing "Joy to the World," which is based on today's Old Testament or Hebrew Bible reading of Psalm 98: "Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises."

And sing praises we will, and have been. "O Come All Ye Faithful" to experience the "Angels We Have Heard on High". "Joy to the World," for "Hark the Herald Angels Sing." This service is all about Christmas carols, and so is my sermon. Some scholars have called them "the most culturally dominant body of enduring or lasting songs in Western society."ⁱⁱⁱ They're a mass phenomenon, seemingly present everywhere for at least a month each year, popular with a wide range of society, flourishing in side and outside of the Christian church. Not only are they sung in worship services like this, but they emanate from supermarket and shopping mall sound systems and from the lips of carolers going door to door all over this country and much of the world.^{iv} For many people they are the quintessential expression of Christmas, ahead of presents or stockings or Christmas trees or all the other religious and cultural aspects of this widely celebrated holiday.^v

But where do they come from and how long have they been around? Here's one scholarly summary: "Carols originally had nothing to do with Christmas, nor even with Christianity. They were among the many pagan customs taken over by the medieval Christian Church... The subsequent development of the carol [was] as a distinctive genre standing somewhere between the hymn, the folk song and the sacred ballad... Born out of late medieval humanism, carols were suppressed by Puritan zealots after the Reformation, partially reinstated at the Restoration, sung by Dissenters and radicals to the distaste of the established Churches in the eighteenth century, [and] rediscovered and reinvented by Victorian antiquarians and romantics...."^{vi} The heyday English and European Christmas carols, once they were re-dedicated to the theme of Jesus' birth, was the 1400's and 1500's.^{vii} For example, the 1400's produced "Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming" in Germany and "I Saw Three Ships" in England. Carols from the 1500's include "The First Nowell," "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen," "We Wish You a Merry Christmas," "Deck the Halls," and "O Christmas Tree."^{viii}

There was a decline in carol production in the 1600's and 1700's, largely due to the rise of Puritanism in England, although on the continent a number of Christmas songs continued to be created, including two we're singing today: "O Come, O Ye Faithful" and "Angels We Have Heard on High." By the 1800's and 1900's America moved into dominance in hymn creation and there was a great resurgence of this musical form.^{ix} For example, We have "It Came Upon the Midnight Clear" in 1850 from a New England Unitarian and graduate of the Harvard Divinity School,^x "O Little Town of Bethlehem," in 1868 in from a Boston Unitarian turned Episcopalian,^{xi} "Away in a Manger" in 1885 from Pennsylvanian Lutherans,^{xii} "Go Tell It On the Mountain" from the Black Church in the early 1900's,^{xiii} "I Wonder as I Wander" in 1933

from the Appalachian Mountains in Cherokee County, North Carolina,^{xiv} and "White Christmas" from a Jewish composer in 1940.^{xv}

How about the four hymns we're singing this Christmas morning? "Joy to the World" is the oldest of the group, first published in 1719 and written by a man often called the father of English hymnody, Isaac Watts. It paraphrases and Christianizes the second part of Psalm 98, singing praises -- indeed with heaven and nature singing too -- with fields, floods, rocks, hills and plains all repeating the sounding joy.^{xvi} It's been called the most positive proclamation of all carols about the birth of Jesus, and most editors have retained the exclamation points at the end of the title and first line for further effect.^{xvii}

"Hark the Herald Angels Sing" was written by the co-founder of Methodism, Charles Wesley, and published in 1739. It had the fortuity of being re-set to music by Felix Mendelssohn in 1856, which made it almost an instant success after having languished in relative obscurity for more than a century.^{xviii} It's known for packing a lot of biblical theology into a few lines: Luke's nativity scene, John's incarnation of the Word, Isaiah's kingdom concept, identification of Jesus with Isaiah's Immanuel and with the pagan Sun of Righteousness, the virgin birth, the atonement, the resurrection, and the promise of eternal life.^{xix}

At about the same time, around 1740, a Catholic named John Wade was writing "Adeste Fideles," the Latin version of "O Come, All Ye Faithful," over in Northern France. The English translation that we sing now was made by Francis Oakeley a century later in 1841.^{xx} "Angels We Have Heard on High" was also created in France -- this carol in the late 1700's. An English translation was made in 1816 and revised in 1862 in England and 1916 in America. All translations have preserved the Latin refrain, though: "Gloria in excelsis Deo," meaning "Glory to God in the highest."^{xxi} Both the melody and the words of this carol are impressively simple

and graceful. Luke's story of the angels encouraging shepherds to come to Bethlehem to see the newborn Christ child is presented clearly and buoyantly.^{xxii}

One of the authoritative books on Christmas carols, written in the 1950's, asks how this form of music has remained so popular, say since the late 1800's, since large numbers of people have become so doubtful about doctrinal elements of the underlying biblical stories of Jesus' birth -- like the annunciation by the angel Gabriel to Mary that she would become pregnant through the Holy Spirit and the subsequent virgin birth of Jesus. The answer given is that on the one hand many people simply reserve these Christmas traditions in a place far away from the center of their faith and understanding -- a survival of a religious habit going back more than half a millennium, which in other contexts of their lives has been superseded. But this author claims that on the other hand there is really no sense of anachronism or insincerity involved, since Christmas carols are so much more than the words in their verses. The music itself is wonderful, they fill us with joy, and they are suffused with a feeling of hospitality and goodwill, which is what Christianity as a whole insists upon.^{xxiii}

From the beginning there has also been a mix of the secular and the sacred in Christmas carols, of folk traditions and high church, of seasonality in nature as well as in the church calendar. That's why the Puritans tried to wipe out Christmas carols entirely -- because of their pagan influence. Carols have been defined narrowly and broadly, but my favorite definition is scholar William Studwell's: "A song used to celebrate Christmas and its adjacent events (including Advent, the New Year, Epiphany, and to some extent the winter season)."^{xxiv} That means I can legitimately start singing and listening to Christmas carols four weeks before December 25 and then keep going through at least the subsequent 12 days of Christmas until Epiphany on January 6. Virtually every professional musician, singer, choir, chorus,

instrumentalist, orchestra and band at some point has produced an album of Christmas carols, so there are lots to listen to.

A merry, merry Christmas to each of you. In the words of Psalm 98, "Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises... Let the sea roar...Let the floods clap their hands; let the hills sing together for joy at the presence of the Lord."^{xxv}

BENEDICTION

May the light of this Christmas season shine in your heart

and bring you happiness and comfort.

May the joy and love that is in you be shared with others,

today and always. AMEN.

Adapted from Kenneth Phifer

NOTES

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- ⁱ John 1: 1-14.
- ⁱⁱ Charles Wesley, "Hark the Herald Angels Sing."
- ⁱⁱⁱ William E. Studwell, "The Christmas Carol as a Cultural Phenomenon: Four Musings on the Music of the December Holiday," in William E. Studwell and Dorothy E. Jones (eds.), *Publishing Glad Tidings: Essays on Christmas Music* (New York: Haworth Press, 1998), p. 143.
- ^{iv} *Ibid.*, pp. 137-145.
- ^v Linda Moss, "Preface" to William E. Studwell, *An Easy Guide to Christmas Carols: Their Past, Present and Future* (Kingsville, Texas: The Lyre of Orpheus Press, 2006). p. 3.
- ^{vi} Ian Bradley, *The Penguin Book of Carols* (New York: Penguin, 1999), p. ix.
- ^{vii} *Ibid.*, p. xi.
- ^{viii} Studwell, *Easy Guide*, p. 6.
- ^{ix} *Ibid.*, p. 8.
- ^x Herbert H. Wernecke, *Christmas Songs and Their Stories* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1957), p. 68.
- ^{xi} *Ibid.*, pp. 90-93.
- ^{xii} *Ibid.*, pp. 16-19.
- ^{xiii} Bradley, *Penguin Book*, pp. 96-99.
- ^{xiv} *Ibid.*, pp. 148-149.
- ^{xv} Studwell, *Easy Guide*, p. 18.
- ^{xvi} Bradley, *Penguin Book*, p. 177.
- ^{xvii} Studwell, *Easy Guide*, p. 14.
- ^{xviii} Erik Routley, *The English Carol* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1973), p. 152.
- ^{xix} Wernecke, *Christmas Songs*, p. 54, and Studwell, *Easy Guide*, p. 16.
- ^{xx} Routley, *The English Carol*, pp. 16-17, 214-215.
- ^{xxi} Studwell, *Easy Guide*, pp. 14-15.
- ^{xxii} Wernecke, *Christmas Songs*, p. 14; Studwell, *Easy Guide*, pp. 14-15.
- ^{xxiii} Routley, *The English Carol*, pp. 20-21.
- ^{xxiv} Studwell, *Easy Guide*, p. 5.
- ^{xxv} Psalm 98: 4, 7-9.