

St. Paul's Congregational Church  
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The Carols: A Christmas Message  
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Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

I've learned over the years that as we approach the highest of our holy days, the spoken word, while important, does not touch us in the same ways as the arts – it seems to me that the arts touch our soul and allow us to enter the mystery of our faith much more easily and even profoundly. So the great celebrations of Christmas and Easter are sometimes best observed and understood through the arts – including painting, dance, and music. It's no wonder, then, that Christmas carols are so beloved – they tell the story in wonderful ways, and by singing them we join with our brothers and sisters in faith through the ages.

Music has always been part of faith expression – the book of Psalms is a songbook for the early Hebrew people – the apostles sang songs of praise – and women often sang to God in prayer and praise – think of Hannah, think of Elizabeth, think of Mary's songs. The Philippian hymn – rejoice in the Lord always – again, I say rejoice – takes me back to the dishroom at the Silver Lake conference Center when teens cleaned up after meals, singing so loudly they drowned out the sounds of the dishwashers. We remember words of songs, don't we – and we remember the stories they tell.

One of the earliest known Christmas songs is from the 4<sup>th</sup> century. But it was during the 12<sup>th</sup> century that St. Francis of Assisi formally introduced Christmas carols in church services. As a patron of the arts he inspired the composers and poets of the day to deliver Christmas music. Many years later in renaissance Italy the lighter, more joyous Christmas songs were introduced.

Then when Gutenberg started the printing press rolling in 1454 copies of Christmas carols were distributed fairly freely. Christmas carols, though, were banned between 1649 and 1660 in England by Oliver Cromwell who thought Christmas should be a solemn day. But the Protestants, inspired by Martin Luther took to the joy of Christmas carols – many had to flee Europe under pressure from the Roman Catholic church. So they brought the Christmas carols with them to the new world – in 1649 the first American Christmas carol was written: called Jesus is born.

And in Europe even though carols couldn't be sung in churches, they found their place elsewhere – the passion play was first staged in Oberammergau, Germany, in 1634 and has been performed every 10 years since then. Then in the

1700s the music by Mendelssohn and Handel were adapted and used as Christmas carols.

So today we continue our celebration of Christmas using the words and music from very old sources, to the Bible, to more modern composers and writers. We hear the same story told for centuries in new ways every time we say it and sing it – the timeless mystery of the incarnation, of Emmanuel, God with us – may it be new to us every day.

“*Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming*” was originally a medieval Catholic Christmas song, first published in 1588. The main focus of the original 23 stanza version is Mary – she’s compared to a rose, from the mystical rose tradition associated with the Song of Solomon – I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys (Song of Solomon 2:1). When the hymn was revised for use in Protestant churches, Mary became instead the rose bush which bore the rose, Jesus Christ. The inspiration is Isaiah 11: and there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

The tune first appears in 1599, though some scholars think it dates back to the 14<sup>th</sup> century. The carol was printed first around 1600 – Michael Praetorius harmonized it in 1609. And the melody was later adapted by Brahms as a basis for an 1896 chorale prelude.

So our study of Christmas carols starts with Isaiah’s word of prophecy of the coming Messiah – the beginning of the story. You may remain seated as we sing 2 of the original 23 verses:

### **Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming (B – 127)**

Lo, how a Rose e'er blooming from tender stem has sprung!  
Of Jesse's lineage coming as saints of old have sung.  
It came a floweret bright, amid the cold of winter,  
When half spent was the night.

Isaiah had foretold it, the Rose I have in mind,  
With Mary we behold it, the Virgin Mother kind.  
To show God's aright, she bore to us a Savior,  
When half spent was the night.

Our second carol, *Joy to the World*, is one of the most beloved of all Christmas songs – but the reality is, the association with Christmas is not original.

Except for the line, “the Lord is come”, there is nothing else in it related to Christmas – no shepherds, no star, no Mary, no manger, no wise men – in fact, I’ve been known to include this carol in the liturgy during the summer! But, we can’t imagine Christmas services today without *Joy to the World*.

The carol was written by Isaac Watts – in 1719 he published a book of poems, all based on a psalm. One of those was an adaptation of Psalm 98. He interpreted this psalm as a celebration of Jesus’ role as King of both his church and the whole world. It was more than a century later that the second half of his poem was adapted and set to music – attributed to Georg Handel – to give us what has become one of the most famous of all Christmas carols. The third collaborator was the Boston music educator, Lowell Mason, who published his own arrangement of Handel’s melodic fragments in 1836 – it was Mason who named the tune Antioch. The result is a favorite Christmas hymn based on an Old Testament Psalm, set to musical fragments composed in England, and pieced together across the Atlantic in the United States.

Again, we remain seated and sing this great carol:

### **Joy To the World (B – 132)**

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 All their songs employ;  
 While fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains  
 Repeat the sounding joy, repeat the sounding joy,  
 Repeat, repeat the sounding joy.

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.

Christmas carols are also expressions of the human condition at the time they are written – our next carol, *It Came Upon the Midnight Clear* – deals with much more than the pleasant atmosphere of Christmas. It directly acknowledges that humanity suffers and that the message of Christ offers hope.

The words were written in December, 1849, by a Unitarian minister from New England – the Rev. Edmund Sears. Only a few years before it would have been unlikely to find a carol written, let alone in New England – from 1659 to 1681 Christmas celebrations in this puritan area were forbidden by law as they were in Oliver Cromwell’s England. A child missing school on Christmas day in the Boston public schools as recently as 1870 would be punished and possibly expelled. Workmen missing work on that day would also be penalized. The writing of this carol, then, represents the emerging acceptance of Christmas in New England as a holiday.

When the song was written in 1849, a time just before the Civil War, there was much tension over the question of slavery, the industrial revolution in the north, and the frantic gold rush in California. We see Sears’ emphasis on the hope of Christmas spreading peace and good will to others who are burdened and painfully toiling. The final verse looks forward optimistically to a time when all people will enjoy the peace of which the angels sing.

Carols stressing the social message of Christmas – that of peace on earth and good will to all are distinctly American. *It Came Upon the Midnight Clear* is one of the first that offers this hope in the midst of turmoil in the country – isn’t this message just as dear to us today – God’s message of peace comes to us in spite of all life’s stormy circumstances.

Listen for the hope Christ brings as we sing the first and last verses of this carol:

**It Came Upon the Midnight Clear** (B – 131)

It came upon the midnight clear, That glorious song of old,  
From angels bending near the earth, To touch their harps of gold;  
“Peace on the earth, good will to all, From heaven’s all gracious king”  
The world in solemn stillness lay, To hear the angels sing.

For lo, the days are hastening on, By prophet bards foretold,  
When the ever circling years Comes round the age of gold;  
When peace shall over all the earth Its ancient splendors fling,  
And the whole world give back the song Which now the angels sing.

The poem that would become the basis for our last, perhaps the most popular carol of all time, was written in 1816 by Joseph Mohr – it came to life amid regional conflict, natural disaster, and yes, even 200 years ago, climate change. The nation was reeling from the aftereffects of the Napoleonic Wars: the conflict had decimated cities and the local economy. In 1815 there was an eruption of Mount Tambora in Indonesia – enough ash and debris were blasted in the air to darken much of the planet, resulting in crop failure and famine in some parts of the world. Mohr, a young priest, was facing a congregation that was poverty stricken, hungry, traumatized – perhaps it was his wish that this poem would convey hope that there still was a God who cared.

Silent Night was not performed until Christmas Eve, 1818, when Mohr gave the poem to Franz Gruber to compose the melody. Legend says that the church organ was broken and the music was composed for the guitar. In any case, 200 years later this timeless carol continues to deeply touch our hearts – a very simple song – an eternal message of peace – something we all need to hear, yearn to hear: God is with us. God cares and will never leave us alone. That’s the promise of Christmas: God loves us enough to send his Son that we might live! And we are called to bring God’s realm on earth as it is in heaven – together.

Let us make music in our hearts and our voices as we sing again the first and last verses of this beautiful carol:

### **Silent Night** (B – 134)

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,  
 Wondrous star, lend thy light:  
 With the angels let us sing  
 Alleluia to our King:  
 Christ the Savior is born, Christ the Savior is born.

Yes – Christ the Savior is Born. May this continue to make a difference in our lives – individually and as church! Howard Thurman’s poem “Now the Work of Christmas Begins” inspires us:

When the song of the angels is stilled,  
when the star in the sky is gone,  
when the kings and princes are home,  
when the shepherds are back with their flocks,  
the work of Christmas begins:  
to find the lost,  
to heal the broken,  
to feed the hungry,  
to release the prisoner,  
to rebuild the nations,  
to bring peace among the people,  
to make music in the heart.

Merry Christmas, dear friends – may the peace of Christ rule in our hearts that we may be instruments of God’s peace on earth now and forever. Amen!