

St. Paul's Congregational Church
August 20, 2017; Christmas in August
The Rev. Cynthia F. Reynolds

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

How did you all learn the Christmas Story? We hear the Bible readings every year during the Christmas season – and as we celebrate Christmas in August, we read the stories of the nativity, the coming of the shepherds, the visit of the wise men this morning. You know, though, as beautiful as these words are, as familiar as these words are, we've also learned this Story from the time we were little children: through the arts: dance, visual arts. During our worship time this week during our Christmas at Vacation Bible School, we came up into this sanctuary every morning and learned a little about why we have stained glass windows here.

They tell a story, don't they – we looked for angels in the pictures, and we looked for the window that tells the story of Jesus' birth. And we talked a little about the beautiful Easter window in the back of the sanctuary. For people who can't read, these windows teach the stories without words.

Another way we learn the story is through music. And that's why we teach our children the Christmas Carols - they tell the story in wonderful ways, in ways we can understand, 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. One of the earliest known Christmas songs is from the 4th century! But it was during the 12th century that St. Francis of Assisi introduced Christmas carols in church services. And composers and poets of the time began writing Christmas music.

When Gutenberg invented the printing press in 1454, copies of Christmas carols were able to be distributed to many people. Christmas carols were banned though between 1649 and 1660 in England by Oliver Cromwell who thought that Christmas should be a solemn day. But the Protestants, inspired by Martin Luther, loved the joy of singing these carols – and they brought them with them when they came here, to the new world. In 1649 the first American Christmas Carol was written: called “Jesus is Born”.

Today we continue our celebration of Christmas using the words and music from very old sources, from the Bible, to more modern composers and writers. We hear the same story that's told for centuries in new ways every time we say it and sing it. It's a timeless and wonderful story of Jesus, of Emmanuel, God with us, born as a baby so many years ago.

So, today, we'll learn a little about four carols – and we'll tell the story in song as we sing some of their verses.

We begin with “It Came Upon the Midnight Clear” – written in December, 1849, by a Unitarian minister from New England – the Rev. Edmund Sears. When the words were written back in 1849, tensions were rising over the question of slavery, the industrial revolution was taking place in the north, and the gold rush in California was going on. The world was changing and people wanted and need the hope that Christmas

brings. We especially see that hope expressed in the last verse – looking forward to a time when people will know the peace the angels bring. And that message of hope is just as important to us today – God’s message of peace comes to us despite all that’s going on in the world that worries us all. Listen for the hope Jesus brings as we remain seated and sing the first as last verses of the carol: it’s on page 131 in the Black hymnal – page 131.

It Came Upon the Midnight Clear – verses 1 and 4

Next is: O Little Town of Bethlehem

During a trip to the Holy Land in 1865, Phillips Brooks went to the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem and worshipped there. He was deeply moved by this experience as we can imagine. 3 years later when he was the pastor of Holy Trinity Church in Philadelphia, he wanted to have a special carol for the children to sing during their Christmas program. He remembered that peaceful scene in Bethlehem and in one evening wrote the words for this carol.

He gave the words to his organist, Lewis Redner, and asked him to write a melody that would be easy for the children to sing – and he did just that, just before the program. This carol has been a favorite of so many adults and children since then.

In the same way that God’s wondrous gift came to Bethlehem, silently, so silently, Christ comes into our lives today and casts away our sins and fears if we are willing to let him abide, to live in us. So, let us take the time every day to rejoice in the joy of Christ’s birth, the peace that comes, the love he shows us and wants us to show to others – and ask him to abide in us now and always.

Let’s remain seated as we sing this lovely carol – O Little Town of Bethlehem - #99 in the RED hymnal – sing verses 1 and 4 - #99

Angels We Have Heard on High

Vast numbers of angels quickly came toward earth through the star sprinkled sky – the leading angel stopped them with a sign – and they hovered over a silent field in Bethlehem. “There they are,” said the leading angel. “The humble shepherds who have been chosen by God to receive our message – the most wonderful news the world has ever heard.”

They drifted down so the shepherds below could see them. Can you imagine their fear? They covered their eyes in the brilliance of the light but they couldn’t help but listen as the vision before them began to speak in their own language. “Don’t be afraid – I bring you good news of great joy for all people – today in the city of David a Savior has been born to you – Christ the Lord.”

The shepherds heard the most beautiful singing they could imagine and they hurried off to see the Baby Jesus with their own eyes.

French legend tells us that shepherds in the country’s southern hills watching their flocks on Christmas Eve would call to each other across the fields singing the words, “Gloria in excelsis deo.” – Latin words for Glory to God in the Highest.

We don't really know the origin of this traditional French carol – the first publication was in Quebec in 1842 and the most common English version was translated in 1862 by James Chadwick.

Again, please remain seated as we sing and let's rejoice that angels are still messengers of God – concerned about us – helping and protecting us as they did for those shepherds long ago.

The carol is on Page 90 in the RED hymnal – we'll sing all the verses. #90

Silent Night

Maybe the best known and most beloved Christmas Carol is Silent Night – on Christmas Eve in 1818 in the village church of Oberndorf in Austria, the 26 year old pastor Joseph Mohr struggled to find something special for his congregation that night. It had snowed in the village most of the day.

Mohr had been called out to a farmhouse where a young mother gave birth to a new baby during the very early morning. He didn't get back to his study until almost noon.

Adding to the challenge, the church's organ was broken. Mice had eaten the bellows and there was not wind to play it. As he was thinking about the service he began to write a poem, maybe thinking about the quiet of the new fallen snow and the miracle of the new baby born that day in his town.

He finished the poem quickly gave it to Franz Gruber, the church organist. Gruber immediately wrote the music for the poem, for two solo voices and a chorus of children. That very special Christmas Eve the carol was sung for the first time when the town's children came into the church singing as Gruber played the new music on his 12 string guitar. Despite the loss of the pipe organ, Christmas was very special that night in Oberndorf.

One person in the congregation who heard it was the man engaged to repair the organ. He was so moved by the music that he gave the music to the Strasser sisters, a touring troupe of Tyrolean singers. They made the carol popular all over Germany, Switzerland, and Austria.

The carol was brought to America by German speaking Congregations and came into its current English translation in a book of Sunday School songs published in 1863 during our nation's Civil War.

As we sing, still seated, this beautiful carol, let's listen to the words that bring such comfort – then and now. We all hope for not just heavenly peace, but peace on earth, good will to all people.

We sing together, Silent Night, verses 1-3, #95 in the RED hymnal - #95.

August is a good time to sing these carols and remember the Christmas Story, isn't it – our days are a little less busy and it's special to remember again the baby who was born for us, to save our world. It's so important to remember that the light of Jesus, the joy, peace, and love of the world, has come – we need to remember and believe that the light can and will light up our dark world – today and always. Merry Christmas to you and yours! Amen!