

Stories of the Christmas Carols

1st Sunday after Christmas, December 26, 2010

Scripture: Psalm 148; Luke 2, 7-14

As we begin today, I'd like for you to take a hymnal and turn to the hymns we're discussing. This hymnal is a very interesting book; if you ever get bored with the sermon, you can just read the hymnal. You'll notice that, just below the title, on the left-hand side, is a name or two. This place indicates the writer of the words. On the right hand side is the name (or names) of the composer(s).

Would it surprise you to learn that Christmas was not celebrated until the 4th Century? Christmas has become such an important part of our church life that this fact startles us. The earliest hymn that we still sing related to Christmas comes from that time. It is called "Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence." You'll find it as hymn #309 in our hymnbook. It's not included in the Christmas section because it's also about Christ's power and final victory, but it's still sung as a Christmas hymn. It was written in Latin by a Spaniard Aurelius Clemens Prudentius. Prudentius studied the Latin poets Horace and Virgil. He also studied law and later served under the emperor Theodosius. Centuries later an Englishman, John Mason Neale, translated the hymn and set it to a medieval melody. Neale was born in London and became an Anglican priest. He was deeply interested in Latin and Greek and became a master of maintaining the sense of the original text and at the same time creating a beautiful English poem.

Notice, I said "hymn" not carol. Our very own Martha Jane Bannister tells me that the word "carol" comes from a French or Latin word meaning "circle" or circular dance. Early carolers went to people's houses to sing, just as we sometimes do, and stood in a circle as they sang, and carols date from medieval times.

The first actual carol we'll talk about is #28, "Good Christian Friends Rejoice." We don't know for sure how old it is, or who wrote the words. It appeared in a German manuscript dating from about 1400, but it's probably older than that. It was in German and Latin, and was set to a German folk tune. . John Mason Neale translated it into English in the 1850'.

After the Reformation, Protestants began to sing hymns in their native language instead of Latin. Martin Luther especially advocated this practice

and wrote many hymns himself. But followers of John Calvin sang only settings of the Psalms, which didn't leave room for Christmas music. It wasn't until the late 1600s that Isaac Watts began championing the Christianizing of and modernizing of the Psalms and the writing of hymns. He believed our songs are a human offering of our praise to God.

“Joy to the World” comes from the mid-seventeen hundreds. The text was written by Isaac Watts. When he was a little boy Watts was so good at rhyming that his annoyed father forbade him to do it at mealtimes. (Evidently he would say things like, “Gentle father, will you please, pass me more of those excellent peas.”) He wrote his first hymn when he was 15 and composed over 600 hymns. He refused an offer to be educated in Oxford because it meant he'd have to become an Anglican and was instead educated at a nonconformist academy. Shortly after being called as pastor to an independent chapel in London he became very ill. He never really was well after that. A parishioner invited him to spend a week in his country house. Watts stayed for 36 years! A memorial to Isaac Watt stands in Westminster Abbey.

Lowell Mason, an American, adapted two of George Frederick Handel's tunes to create the melody for Joy to the World. Mason was born in Massachusetts in 1812 and started directing choirs when he was 16. He moved to Savannah Georgia, and worked as a bank clerk, but was also choirmaster of a Presbyterian Church and began writing hymn tunes.

Hymn #31, “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing,” was first published in 1739 by Charles Wesley. Wesley, the 18th Child of Samuel and Susanna Wesley, was born in 1707. He came to Georgia in 1735 as secretary to Gen. Oglethorpe. He was already an Anglican priest but, after meeting some dedicated Moravians, he had a personal conversion experience 1738. This released in him a gift of hymn writing; he wrote more than 6000 hymns. He dedicated his life to the Methodist movement, but he never left the Church of England.

The tune is an adaptation from a composition by Felix Mendelssohn. Mendelssohn was born in 1809 in Hamburg Germany. Although he was grandson of the Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn, he was raised Lutheran. He was a prodigy—as a child he was accomplished on piano and organ and he began to compose at age 12. The original composition that became the tune for “Hark the Herald Angels Sing,” was for a male chorus.

It was written in 1840 to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the invention of printing.

William Cummings took the second movement of Mendelssohn's piece and set Wesley's words to it. When Cummings was a boy he sang in the boy's choir at ST. Pauls' Cathedral. He sang the alto arias in Mendelssohn's oratorio Elijah in 1846, with Mendelssohn himself directing.

Hymn #41, "O Come, All Ye Faithful," was written in Latin by an Englishman living in France. The poet, John Francis Wade, a musician and calligrapher, also wrote the music. Almost a hundred years later in 1840, Francis Oakeley translated the hymn into English. Oakeley had studied at Oxford and became an Anglican priest. Five years after he translated this hymn he left the Church of England and became a Roman Catholic priest.

Hymn # 44, "O Little Town of Bethlehem," was written by Phillips Brooks. Born in 1835, he was known as the "Prince of the Pulpit" and was one of America's foremost preachers. He wrote the text for this hymn while he was pastor of Holy Trinity Episcopal Church in Philadelphia. On Christmas Eve 1865 he traveled from Jerusalem to Bethlehem on horseback across the "Field of the Shepherds" and worshiped in the Church of the Nativity. This experience probably inspired him as he wrote this carol for the Christmas Sunday School service in 1868.

Lewis Henry Redner composed the tune for the text. Redner entered the real estate business when he was 16, and he became quite rich. But he also must have been Phillips Brook's right hand man. He served as organist, choir director, superintendent of the Sunday school, and teacher at Holy Trinity church. Brooks asked him to compose a melody simple enough for children to sing. After he struggled, the melody came to him during the night on the Saturday before the program. He composed the harmony the next morning before going to church.

The stanzas of "Go Tell it On the Mountain," hymn #29 were written by John Wesley Work II. He was born in Nashville Tennessee in 1872, the descendant of an ex-slave. He was educated in Nashville, he worked there and he died there. He graduated from Fisk University where he later taught Greek and Latin. He and his brother Jerome were fascinated by Afro-American spirituals, and worked for their preservation, study and

performance. Shortly after the turn of the 20th Century, after John Work heard the refrain of this spiritual, he wrote the stanzas

The melody is an African American tune usually associated with the words. It was arranged by John Wesley Work III who continued the work begun by his father and uncle.

Before we sing this last hymn I want to share with you a quote from Dietrich Bonhoeffer which expresses the importance of our singing:

It is the voice of the Church that is heard in singing together, It is not you that sings, it is the Church that is singing, and you, as a member of the Church, may share in its song. Thus all singing together that is right must serve to widen our spiritual horizon, make us see our little company as a member of the great Christian Church on earth, and help us willing and gladly to join our singing, be it feeble or good, to the song of the Church.