

Christmas Carols



○ Little Town
of Bethlehem

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- Phillips Brooks, an Episcopal pastor from Philadelphia wrote “O Little Town of Bethlehem” in 1867.
- During trip to Holy Land, he was moved by the experience.
- He rode by horseback from Jerusalem to attend a 5-hour Christmas Eve service at the Church of the Nativity.



○ Little Town of Bethlehem

- While at Philadelphia's Holy Trinity Church, he decided to compose an original Christmas hymn for the children to sing during their annual program.
- Then he asked his organist, Lewis Rednor, to write the music for his poem.

○ Little Town of Bethlehem

- He wrote about what it must have been like in Bethlehem the night of Christ's birth:
- “○ 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.”

○ Little Town of Bethlehem

- While the streets of our cities are quiet on Christmas day, most likely that day was just like any other day for the people in Bethlehem.
- But as evening came, the town grew quiet and something remarkable took place.

○ Little Town of Bethlehem

- The second verse the hymn says, “While mortals sleep, the angels keep their watch of wondering love.”
- This is just like today. Our world goes about its business, usually oblivious to the spiritual realities around it.

○ Little Town of Bethlehem

- “How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given! So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of His heaven. No ear may hear His coming, but in this world of sin, Where meek souls will receive Him still, the dear Christ enters in.”

○ Little Town of Bethlehem

- When Christ came into the world, He came quietly.
- The angelic announcement was the only public announcement at His birth.
- And He was born in a stable and laid in a feeding trough.

○ Little Town of Bethlehem

- “O holy Child of Bethlehem! Descend to us we pray, Cast out our sin, and enter it; be born in us today. We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell; O come to us, abide with us, Our Lord Emmanuel.”
- Christ came to “cast out our sin” so we can abide with him “our Emmanuel.”

Oh Come, Oh Come
Emmanuel

Oh Come, Oh Come, Emmanuel

- The carol “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” is an English translation of a Latin hymn that is sung during Advent and Christmas.
- The text goes back to at least the 18th century (and perhaps much earlier) while the music put to it goes back to the 15th century.

Oh Come, Oh Come, Emmanuel

- “O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel. That mourns in lonely exile here, until the Son of God appear.”
- “Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.”

Oh Come, Oh Come, Emmanuel

- Emmanuel means, “God with us.” Even before the coming of Christ, we see passages in the Old Testament that remind us that God was with Israel.
- In 1 Kings 8, we read, “Praise the Lord who has given rest to his people Israel, just as he promised.”

Oh Come, Oh Come, Emmanuel

- It continues: “Not one word has failed of all the promises he gave through his servant Moses. May the Lord our God be with us as he was with our ancestors; may he never leave us or abandon us.”
- In Psalm 46, we read that, “The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our stronghold.”

Oh Come, Oh Come, Emmanuel

- One of the most visible reminders of God's presence was during the Exodus.
- God was with the Israelites as a pillar of fire by night and a pillar of smoke by day.
- His presence was with them in the Tabernacle and later the Temple in the Holy of Holies.

Oh Come, Oh Come, Emmanuel

- But the most important aspect of Emmanuel is found in the New Testament. John tells us in his gospel, “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14).
- This is the miracle of the Incarnation. God put on human flesh and came to Israel so that He might give His life for all of us.

We Three Kings

We Three Kings

- John Henry Hopkins, Jr. received his education at the University of Vermont and at General Theological Seminary in New York City.
- Hopkins wrote the carol around 1857, based on the narrative of the journey of the magi in Matthew 2:1-12.



We Three Kings

- “We three kings of Orient are; bearing gifts we traverse afar, field and fountain, moor and mountain, following yonder star.”
- “O star of wonder, star of light, star with royal beauty bright, westward leading, still proceeding, guide us to thy perfect light.”

We Three Kings

- The carol is performed in a plodding manner, giving the feel of the long journey of the magi.
- The traditional number of magi is usually set at three, probably because of the three gifts.
- Stanzas two, three, and four describe in detail the symbolic nature of each of the three gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

We Three Kings

- The Oxford Book of Carols provided an arrangement for three voices: Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar.
- The imagery of the star is central to the Epiphany season and the narrative.
- The refrain focuses on the star and invites us to follow its light, “guide us to thy perfect light.”

It Came Upon
A Midnight Clear

A Midnight Clear

- This American Christmas carol was written as a poem by Edmund H. Sears and came from his personal struggles and national turmoil (Mexican-American War, slavery tensions).
- It's notable for its focus on the angels' message of "peace on earth" rather than just the Nativity story, urging listeners to heed the call for peace amid worldly strife.

A Midnight Clear

- “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 men, from heaven's all-gracious King.”
- “The world in solemn stillness lay, to hear the angels sing.”

A Midnight Clear

- While based on Luke 2:14 (angels announcing peace to shepherds), Sears emphasizes the need for peace, lamenting humanity's failure to hear the angels' song amidst war and strife.
- The lyrics, especially the third verse directly address the "woes of sin and strife" and "man, at war with man," making it a prayer for reconciliation.

A Midnight Clear

- It's considered one of the first popular Christmas carols written in the United States.
- The version most familiar in the U.S. is "Carol," composed by Richard Storrs Willis (a student of Felix Mendelssohn) in 1850.
- Other Tunes: In the UK, it's often sung to the tune "Noel," adapted by Arthur Sullivan.

Angels We Have
Heard on High

Angels We Have Heard On High

- This is an 18th century traditional French carol “Les Anges dans nos Campagnes.”
- It originally had the title “Harken All! What Holy Singing!”
- It was based on Luke 2:14 in which the angels say: “Glory to the God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom His favor rests.”

Angels We Have Heard On High

- “Angels we have heard on high, Sweetly singing o'er the plains, And the mountains in reply Echoing their joyous strains.”
- “Gloria in excelsis Deo, Gloria in excelsis Deo.”

Angels We Have Heard On High

- The hymn also has the refrain that tells us what the angels said: “Gloria, in excelsis Deo” which means “Glory to God in the highest!”
- As the vast number of angels descended toward earth, they were directed to the humble shepherds by God.

Angels We Have Heard On High

- The Bible reports that the shepherds were terrified. Each one covered his face.
- But they listened with awe to the angel in his blinding light - “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you; He is Christ the Lord.”

Angels We Have Heard On High

- Then there was singing in sounds that the shepherds most likely had never heard.
- Here was the long-awaited Savior for Israel who was born that night in Bethlehem.
- Angels are God's ministering spirits and messengers to human beings.

