

Lessons in Carols

Exploring the Meaning Behind the Songs We Sing

First Sunday of Advent – Nov. 30	
<i>O Come, O Come, Immanuel</i>	2
Second Sunday of Advent – Dec. 7	
<i>Hark! The Herald Angels Sing</i>	4
Third Sunday of Advent – Dec. 14	
<i>Joy to the World</i>	6
Fourth Sunday of Advent – Dec. 21	
<i>O Holy Night</i>	8
Christmas Eve	
<i>Silent Night</i>	10

First Sunday of Advent

Hope

O Come, O 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.

O come, Thou Day-Spring, come and cheer
Our spirits by Thine advent here
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night
And death's dark shadows put to flight.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.

Oh, come, Thou Wisdom from on high,
And order all things far and nigh;
To us the path of knowledge show,
and cause us in her ways to go.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to you, O Israel!

Oh, come, Desire of nations, bind
All peoples in one heart and mind;
Bid envy, strife, and quarrels cease,
Fill the whole world with heaven's peace.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to you, O Israel!

O Come, O Come Emmanuel is a classic carol with the heart cry of waiting. It is one of the earliest Christmas carols written - some trace it back to the eighth-century Latin Antiphon "Veni, veni Emmanuel!" It was often sung at the stroke of midnight on Christmas Day. The hymn is all about hopeful expectation and the longing of Israel for her messiah, and the longing of the Church for the second coming of Jesus reiterated every liturgical year during Advent.

1. Describe what it was like for you as a child to wait for Christmas to come. Did you have a particular present you were waiting for? How did the wait impact how you felt about it when you received it?
2. Take a look at the first verse. According to the song, what is Israel waiting for? Read Isaiah 9:2-7. What were they hoping for?
3. The nation of Israel was once held captive in exile by the pagan Babylonian Empire, until God freed them. What aspects of our culture seek to hold us captive? How does Jesus release us from this kind of worldly captivity?
4. In what sense are sinners those who "mourn in lonely exile"? What does the advent of Jesus provide for them?
5. The carol uses many different names for Jesus. What are they? What do they mean? (see Isaiah 7:14/Matt. 1:23, Luke 1:78 [KJV], Proverbs 8, and Haggai 2:7)
6. At the end of each verse, the refrain tells us to rejoice. What is the reason for our rejoicing and hope, even in the midst of this waiting season?
7. Verse four envisions a time when all people will be unified in heart and mind, and "peace on earth, good will toward men" becomes a reality. How does this hymn help us in our longing for Jesus' Second Coming (the Last Day) as well as His first coming (Christmas Day)?
8. What is your favorite line from this carol and why? How would you explain it to a non-Christian friend?

Second Sunday of Advent

Peace

Hark! The Herald Angels Sing

Hark! the herald angels sing,
“Glory to the newborn King.
Peace on earth and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled!”
Joyful, all ye nations, rise;
join the triumph of the skies;
with th'angelic hosts proclaim,
“Christ is born in Bethlehem!”
Refrain: Hark, the herald angels sing,
“Glory to the newborn King!”

Christ by highest heav'n adored,
Christ, the everlasting Lord,
late in time behold Him come,
offspring of the virgin's womb.
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see;
hail the incarnate Deity,
pleased as man with men to dwell,
Jesus, our Immanuel. [Refrain]

Hail the heav'n-born Prince of Peace!
Hail the Sun of Righteousness!
Light and life to all He brings,
ris'n with healing in His wings.
Mild He lays His glory by,
born that we no more may die,
born to raise the sons of earth,
born to give them second birth. [Refrain]

Hark! The Herald Angels Sing took four different writers and composers to get it into its current form. The great Methodist preacher John Wesley wrote the original lyrics in 1739, which fellow evangelist George Whitefield, a staunch Calvinist, revised in 1753. Almost a hundred years later, William Cummings decided to pair the lyrics with a melody from Mendelssohn's cantata, *Festgesang*, and added the refrain to make it fit better with the music. With lyrics coming from such great theologians as Wesley and Whitefield, it is no wonder the carol is full of scripture and timeless truths!

1. Imagine you are one of the angels who gets to announce Jesus' birth. What would you be excited to tell the shepherds?
2. Read Luke 2:8-15. What do the angels proclaim to the shepherds?
3. In verse 14, to whom does God bring peace? How does God bring peace through "God and sinners reconciled"?
4. Read Isaiah 7:14 and Matthew 1:18-25. What is the significance that Jesus is the "offspring of the virgin's womb?" What does his type of birth tell us about who he is and how he is different from other humans?
5. Read Philippians 2:6-8. What does Wesley mean when he writes in verse 2, "Veiled in flesh the godhead see / hail the incarnate deity"? Describe how you might have reacted if you had been a shepherd viewing this baby, the incarnate deity.
6. In verse 3, we see another nod to Phil 2. What does it mean that "Mild he lay his glory by"? Why did Jesus set aside his glory?
7. Read Malachi 4:1-2. The prophet describes judgment, that the sinful will be burned up, but the "Sun of Righteousness" will bring healing for those who believe. In what ways does Jesus bring both judgment and healing?
8. What is your favorite line from this carol and why? How would you explain it to a non-Christian friend?

Third Sunday of Advent

Joy

Joy to the World

Joy to the world, the Lord is come!
Let earth receive her King!
Let ev'ry heart prepare Him room,
and heav'n and nature sing,
and heav'n and nature sing,
and heav'n, and heav'n and nature sing.

Joy to the earth, the Savior reigns!
Let men their songs employ,
while fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains
repeat the sounding joy,
repeat the sounding joy,
repeat, repeat the sounding joy.

No more let sins and sorrows grow,
nor thorns infest the ground;
He comes to make His blessings flow
far as the curse is found,
far as the curse is found,
far as, far as the curse is found.

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.

Joy To The World was written by Isaac Watts and is based loosely on Psalm 98. That psalm looks forward to the day when the Lord will come to judge the world in righteousness. In this hymn, Watts reinterpreted the psalm to rejoice in the coming of the Christ as our Lord and Savior.

1. A Bible dictionary defines joy as happiness over an unanticipated or present good. What brings you joy in this season? How do you think the joy of Christmas for a Christian is different than the joy of the “world” that doesn’t know Jesus?
2. Verse 1 includes the line, “Let every heart prepare Him room.” Reflecting on this Advent season, what steps are you taking to make room in your heart for Jesus?
3. Read Psalm 98. Verses 4-6 include several imperatives about how we are to worship. Name them and reflect on your experiences with worship. Does this describe your worship? If not, how might your worship better reflect these commands?
4. ***Joy to the World*** is written in present tense. 1 Corinthians 16:22 includes the Greek word “maranatha”, translated two ways, our Lord come or our Lord *has* come. This word represents the tension we celebrate in Advent as Jesus has been born but we are waiting for His second coming. Reflect on the lyrics of the carol; where do you see references to both translations of maranatha?
5. Verse 3 alludes to Genesis 3, specifically verses 14-15, where God told Adam that the ground would be cursed as a consequence of his sin. Because Jesus died for our sins, our sins are forgiven and therefore they don’t “grow” like thorns among the good plants. Can you remember a time when you didn’t know the forgiveness of Jesus? Share with the group.
6. Verse 4 refers to God’s righteousness. When Christ comes again, God will bring to completion what He began in us through Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. The God of all grace and mercy will then declare us righteous. How does this bring you hope throughout life?
7. Can we continue to sing ***Joy to the World*** when the world is so messed up?
8. What is your favorite line from this carol and why? How would you explain it to a non-Christian friend?

Fourth Sunday of Advent Love

O Holy Night

O holy night! the stars are brightly shining;
It is the night of the dear Savior's birth.
Long lay the world in sin and error pining,
Till He appeared and the soul felt its worth.
A thrill of hope--the weary world rejoices,
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn!
Fall on your knees! O hear the angel voices!
O night divine, O night when Christ was born!
O night, O holy night, O night divine!

Led by the light! of faith serenely beaming,
With glowing hearts by His cradle we stand.
So led by light of a star sweetly gleaming,
Here came the Wise Men from Orient land.
The King of kings lay thus in lowly manger,
In all our trials born to be our Friend.
He knows our need - to our weakness is no stranger.
Behold your King, before Him lowly bend! (Repeat)

Truly He taught us to love one another;
His law is love and His gospel is peace.
Chains shall He break, for the slave is our brother,
And in His name all oppression shall cease.
Sweet hymns of joy in grateful chorus raise we;
Let all within us praise His holy name.
Christ is the Lord! O praise His name forever!
His power and glory evermore proclaim! (Repeat)

O Holy Night has one of the most unusual origins of all our carols. What do a priest, a wine commissioner, and a Jewish ballet composer have in common? You guessed it – one of the most beautiful Christmas carols of all time. In 1847, a priest in a small French village asked his friend, Placide Cappeau, a wine expert known more for his poetry than his church attendance, to write a poem for Christmas mass. Cappeau then turned to another friend, Adolphe Charles Adams, a composer of Jewish descent, to set the poem to music. The carol quickly gained popularity in France – until church leaders discovered that Adams was both a Jew and a Socialist. It was temporarily banned from church worship, but it was already so popular, the people continued to sing it. In 1855, the carol was discovered by American abolitionist John Sullivan Dwight, who believed it had an important message for his own country in the days leading up to the Civil War. “O Holy Night” also had the unique honor of being the first song ever played on the radio, on Christmas Eve 1906.

1. When Cappeau first began to write the lyrics to “O Holy Night,” he imagined himself present at the birth of Christ. Picture yourself there that evening. What sights and sounds stand out to you?
2. As we discussed with “O Come, O Come Emmanuel,” the world had been in “sin and error pining” for hundreds of years, awaiting the coming Messiah. Is our world still pining? If so, is it pining for the same things or different things now (or both)?
3. The carol says the Savior “appeared and the soul felt its worth.” What is a soul’s worth? Where does our worth come from? How does that impact how we treat other people?
4. In the Nativity stories in Matthew 2 and Luke 2, who falls on their knees in worship? What does kneeling represent? How are we called to join in that worship today?
5. In Luke, we see the shepherds, and Matthew 2, we meet the wise men. In what ways is it significant that such different people were witnesses to the birth of Christ?
6. The final verse was controversial in its time. How does it reflect Jesus’ proclamation in Luke 4:16-19? What forms of oppression do you see in the world today? In what ways can we as Christians help break the chains of bondage?
7. On Christmas Eve 1871, in the midst of a war between Germany and France, a French soldier stood up in his trench and began singing this carol. A German soldier responded with a carol written by Luther. The guns ceased for 24 hours – and as a result, the French church decided to reinstate the hymn in worship. What do you think it is about this hymn that allows it to transcend division?
8. What is your favorite line from this carol and why? How would you explain it to a non-Christian friend?

Christmas Eve Celebrating the Christ Child

Silent Night

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!
Shepherds quake at the sight!
Glories stream from Heaven afar,
Heavenly Hosts sing Alleluia!
Christ, the Saviour, is born!
Christ, the Saviour, is born!

Silent night, holy night,
Wondrous star, lend the light;
With the angels let us sing
Alleluia to our King;
Christ the Savior is born,
Christ the Savior is born.

Silent night! Holy night!
Son of God, love's pure light
Radiant beams from Thy Holy Face,
with the dawn of redeeming grace,
Jesus, Lord, at Thy Birth!
Jesus, Lord, at Thy Birth!

Silent Night was first performed on Christmas Eve, 1818, at St. Nicholas parish church in Oberndorf, Austria. A young priest, Father Joseph Mohr, had written a poem he called “Stille Nacht,” in 1816. Moved by a nativity play he had seen two days before Christmas, Mohr brought his poem to organist Franz Xaver Gruber, and asked for his help. The organ was broken, so Gruber composed the melody with guitar accompaniment for the Christmas Eve mass, and together they performed the new carol during the mass that night. Three verses of the original carol have been translated into English, and a fourth has been added over the years.

1. If you remember this Christmas carol from a Christmas Eve worship service, share your memory with the group.
2. As you have shared stories, recognize that you all have different memories of a similar event, a Christmas Eve service, singing “Silent Night”. In the same way, our four gospel writers tell Jesus’ birth story in different ways. Read Matthew 1:18-25, Luke 1:5-2:21, and John 1:14. What differences and similarities do you see?
3. As you reflect on the story in the different gospels, which do you think Mohr was reflecting on for “Silent Night”?
4. After reading the versions of the Christmas story in Matthew and Luke, consider, was that night of Jesus’ birth really that silent? What noises might you have heard?
5. If you were to put yourself in the story, who do you identify with? Mary, a new mother? Humble shepherds who dropped everything to go to Bethlehem? Joseph? The Innkeeper? Why did you choose the character you did?
6. “Silent Night” has been described as a hymn that is beautiful in its simplicity. Do you agree or disagree? Why or why not?
7. The final verse includes the line, “Radiant beams from thy holy face, with the dawn of redeeming grace.” Describe the “dawn of redeeming grace” in your own words. What scriptures come to mind with that line?
8. What is your favorite line from this carol and why? How would you explain it to a non-Christian friend?

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