

WGUMC December 23, 2018

“Songs and Stories to Welcome the Christ Child”

We listened to Mary’s *Magnificat* this morning. That’s the first word of the Latin translation of Mary’s song in the Gospel of Luke. So I thought we’d share some stories about some of our favorite songs for the season and then sing them to welcome Mary’s child.

After the week we’ve had in Washington, we could all use some “Peace on earth, good will to men” and women. So let’s start with “It Came Upon a Midnight Clear.” It’s especially appropriate this year, because it was written at another time when the country seemed to be careening into chaos. The year was 1849. The author was Edmund Hamilton Sears, a Unitarian minister who served congregations in Massachusetts.

Sears had a social conscience. He cared about the plight of all human beings and believed that the Gospel cares, too. And this is one of the first social gospel hymns ever written in the U.S. As the country was starting to break apart over the issue of slavery, Sears wrote this prayer for peace. The original third stanza that doesn’t

appear in our hymnal is one that I wish Washington and the whole world could hear:

*But with the woes of sin and strife
The world has suffered long;
Beneath the angel-strain have rolled
Two thousand years of wrong;
And man, at war with man, hears not
The love-song, which they bring:
O hush the noise, ye men of strife,
And hear the angels sing!*

#218 It Came upon the Midnight Clear [sing first and last verses and recite the middle verses]

Our second Christmas Carol was also written by someone who was caught up in the political turmoil of his day. James Montgomery was a preacher's kid who was born in 1771. He went to a Moravian boarding school in England while his parents were missionaries in the West Indies. He began writing poetry at the age of 10, inspired by the same Moravian hymns that inspired John Wesley.

Tragically, both of his parents died on the mission field, and James flunked out of school at age 14. He did various jobs and finally took a position working for a radical weekly newspaper, the

Sheffield Register. He was a staunch opponent of slavery and child labor and took up the cause of young chimney sweeps. In another parallel to our current situation, his political views got him imprisoned twice. But this young reporter used his time in jail to write poetry.

Though he never succeeded as a journalist, he did as a hymnist. We have in our hymnal: “Stand Up and Bless the Lord”; “Prayer is the Soul’s Sincere Desire”; the Advent hymn, “Hail to the Lord’s Anointed”; and the song we’ll sing today, “Angels from the Realms of Glory.” The last stanza of his song, which makes a reference to slavery, both physical and spiritual, isn’t included in our hymnal:

*Sinners, wrung with true repentance,
Doomed for guilt to endless pains,
Justice now revokes your sentence,
Mercy calls you; break your chains...*

#220 Angels from the Realms of Glory [sing first and last verses and recite the middle verses]

Our third and final carol, was written by Phillips Brooks, in 1868. Brooks was a priest in the Episcopal Church and there is a private elementary school in Menlo Park named after him. Like most Northern clergymen at that time, Brooks was a vocal opponent of slavery and a supporter of the Union cause. He served at the Church of the Holy Trinity in Philadelphia during the Civil War.

The War ended in May of 1865 and that December he was in the Holy Land. Just before Christmas, he traveled by horseback from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. In his diary he wrote: “Before dark, we rode out of town to the field where they say the shepherds saw the star...Somewhere in those fields we rode through, the shepherds must have been. As we passed, the shepherds were still ‘keeping watch over their flocks,’ or leading them home to fold.”

Having just come from a land still reeling from the wounds of a horrendous war, wounds that in many ways have never healed and have been ripped open afresh today, it must have been a comforting scene. Later, Brooks attended the Christmas Eve service at the

basilica built by the Emperor Constantine over the traditional site of the Nativity. But it was his memory of that journey through the peaceful countryside that would inspire him to write a hymn for children three years later. We know it as “O Little Town of Bethlehem.”

The last verse that was omitted from our hymnal is especially for children and, this year, for the child in all of us:

*Where children pure and happy
Pray to the blessed Child,
Where misery cries out to thee,
Son of the undefiled;
Where charity stands watching
And faith holds wide the door,
The dark night wakes, the glory breaks,
And Christmas comes once more.*

Brooks prayer for his country in a sad and uncertain time is my prayer for everyone in this crazy time: that your charity will stand watching and your faith will hold wide the door. That way, the Christ Child can enter. Despite the chaos around us, we can welcome that Child to be God-with-us. Then we can tell the whole world that this

dark night will wake and glory will break, and Christmas will come
once more.

#230 O Little Town of Bethlehem [sing first and last verses and
recite the middle verses]