

CHRISTMAS EVE SERVICE OF LESSONS AND CAROLS  
Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota  
December 24, 2022

Welcome, all of you gathered to observe this holiest of nights, to hear again the ancient words of prophets and their fulfillment in the miracle of birth, of God entering the world through a mother's womb, in a time of change, hardship, and uncertainty, to people in physical and spiritual bondage. As you know, the modern tradition of celebrating Christmas Eve in a service of lessons and carols began at King's College, Cambridge, in England in 1918. The music director had served as a chaplain during World War One. He felt the need for a religious expression that would bring people back together after that terrible war, and to bring them back to faith in the God of all ages. Tonight, we take the story into our hearts again, and pour it back in music, in carols sung from perhaps the beginning of Christianity down through time. Our worship is our prayer; our lives are our worship.

CAROL GTG 133     O Come, All Ye Faithful (vs. 1 and 3)

*English, Text and Music: John Francis Wade, c. 1743; originally in Latin*

I personally can't imagine gathering for worship on Christmas Eve to any other words, any other tune than O Come, All Ye Faithful. True, its majesty evokes grand cathedrals and endless processions of robed priests and choirs. The organist has to blast out a few extra verses just to get them all in place. But it is no less meaningful here with Glenna at the piano and our small reverent band. The meaning is clear: we come together to adore the Word made flesh, and our own flesh tingles in awe.

CAROL GTG 128     Infant Holy, Infant Lowly (both verses)

*Polish, 13th or 14th-century, W Żłobie leży, "In manger lying"*

THE FIRST LESSON     Isaiah 11:1-10 *The Peaceful Kingdom*

A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse,  
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.  
The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,  
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,  
the spirit of counsel and might,  
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.  
His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.

He shall not judge by what his eyes see,  
or decide by what his ears hear;  
but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,  
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;

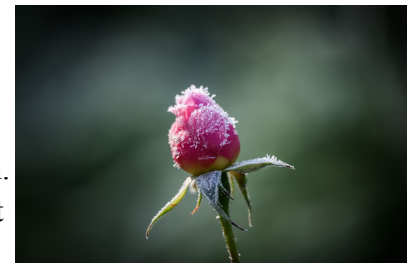


he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,  
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.  
Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,  
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

The wolf shall live with the lamb,  
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,  
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,  
and a little child shall lead them.  
The cow and the bear shall graze,  
their young shall lie down together;  
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.  
The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,  
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.  
They will not hurt or destroy  
on all my holy mountain;  
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord  
as the waters cover the sea.

### **It's all about harmony**

As far as I know, Isaiah didn't actually mention the sweet-smelling rose by name. What's more important is the sweetness of life in harmony, people with people, people with nature, nature within itself. This passage, and a similar one in Isaiah 65, inspired the 19th century American Quaker minister and artist Edward Hicks to produce 62 paintings, each one of them entitled "The Peaceable Kingdom." He expressed his faith through his art. The words to the hymn are anonymous, probably from late 15th century Germany; the tune and harmonization from the composer Praetorius, in 1699. This gentle reverent hymn relies on harmony to nestle into our hearts. The voices twine together, as when the alto crosses above the soprano, or when tenor and bass take turns stepping forward. The harmony embodies friendship, community, peace. Consider, then, that it comes to us from a time of deep political and social ferment: the Reformation, the Renaissance, but also plagues, famines, and mass death. As today, in the most violent and conflicted times, God comes to us most tenderly and most beautifully.



CAROL GTG 129    Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming (vs. 1 and 2)  
*Germany, 15th-century, arr. Michael Praetorius, 1699*

## THE SECOND LESSON

Isaiah 35:5-10

*Everlasting Joy*

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,  
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;  
then the lame shall leap like a deer,  
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.  
For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,  
and streams in the desert;  
the burning sand shall become a pool,  
and the thirsty ground springs of water;  
the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp,  
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.  
A highway shall be there,  
and it shall be called the Holy Way;  
the unclean shall not travel on it,  
but it shall be for God's people;  
no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.  
No lion shall be there,  
nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;  
they shall not be found there,  
but the redeemed shall walk there.  
And the ransomed of the Lord shall return,  
and come to Zion with singing;  
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;  
they shall obtain joy and gladness,  
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.



Holiday Joy, Honduras

The words of the most-published hymn in Christianity were indeed the work of Englishman Isaac Watts; the tune most commonly heard was actually composed by American Lowell Mason in 1848, but often attributed to George Frederick Handel. Actually only the first four notes were Handel's: they open "Lift Up Your Heads," from the Messiah. The words, by the way, were not written for Jesus' birth at all, but in anticipation of his Second Coming. Like other carols, this one reflects its times: the global colonial march of the English, when Britannia ruled the waves and, indeed, much of the world. Undoubtedly, more than a little national pride accompanied the writing. But empires rise and fall; the true king for whom heaven and nature sing remains the same throughout the millenia: Jesus the Christ.

CAROL GTG 134

Joy to the World (vs. 1, 3, 4)

*English, Text: Isaac Watts, 1719; Music, George Frederick Handel, 1742*

### THE THIRD LESSON

Micah 5:2-5a *The One of Peace*

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,  
who are one of the little clans of Judah,  
from you shall come forth for me  
one who is to rule in Israel,  
whose origin is from of old,  
from ancient days.  
And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord,  
in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.  
And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great  
to the ends of the earth;  
and he shall be the one of peace.



### *That glorious song of old*

“It Came upon the Midnight Clear” is a thoroughly American carol. Words and music were written by two friends in the mid-19th century United States. Edmund Hamilton Sears, a popular Unitarian pastor, suffered a breakdown and returned to serve a church in the small town of Wayland, Massachusetts. “Writing during a period of personal melancholy, and with news of revolution in Europe and the United States' war with Mexico fresh in his mind, Sears portrayed the world as dark, full of ‘sin and strife’, and not hearing the Christmas message. Sears' song is remarkable for its focus not on Bethlehem, but on his own time, and on the contemporary issues of war and peace. Written in 1849, it is assumed to be Sears' response to the just ended Mexican American War.” But Civil War would not be long in coming, either. Like the prophet Micah, Sears clung to the hope of a transcendent peace brought about by the promised One of Peace. May we hold fast to the same hope as we sing.



CAROL GTG 123 It Came Upon the Midnight Clear (vs. 1, 3 and 5)

*American, Text: Edmund Hamilton Sears, 1849; Music: Richard Stores Willis, 1850*

### THE FOURTH LESSON

Luke 1:26-38

*Mary Opens Herself*

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, ‘Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.’ But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom





there will be no end.’ Mary said to the angel, ‘How can this be, since I am a virgin?’ The angel said to her, ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.’ Then Mary said, ‘Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.’ Then the angel departed from her.

### Joseph helps

Like Mary herself, the words and tune of “The Snow Lay on the Ground” belong to common peasant folk. They were not composed, they just grew in their places: the lyrics are Anglo-Irish from the West of England, the tune sung as a folk song in Italy by the Pifferari people of the Abruzzi Mountains. (I just had to say that out loud). In addition to its lovely lilting melody, The Snow is memorable for its mention of Joseph (note in the picture how Joseph is crouched down, blowing on the cooking fire there in the stable). Like several other popular carols it is called “macaronic” in style, because it incorporates two different languages.



CAROL GTG 116      The Snow Lay on the Ground (vs. 1-3)

*West of England, Text: Anglo-Irish carol, 1860; Music, Italian folk melody  
(Originally sung in Rome by the Pifferrari from the Abruzzi Mountains)*

THE FIFTH LESSON      Matthew 1:18-25      *Joseph's Dream*

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.’ All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:



‘Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel’, which means, ‘God is with us.’

When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

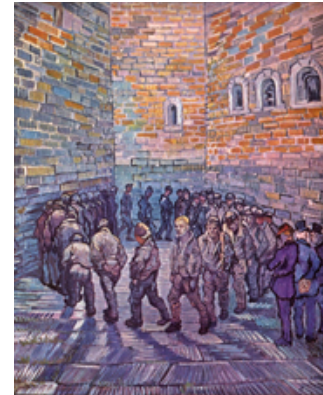
Most of our carols tonight are older and European or American in origin. The one we're about to sing is from 20th century Africa. It's published in only one hymnal: our own *Glory to God*. Tom Colvin, a Scottish engineer and missionary, put the words to a Malawi melody. Colvin also gave us the more familiar "Jesu, Jesu, Fill Us with Your Love." Several of his missionary stints were served in Nyasaland, in Africa. He wrote this in 1967 just three years after that country achieved independence and was renamed Malawi. The country's history is not a very happy one: the Portuguese introduced the slave trade in the 1600s, a grievous evil that lasted for hundreds of years. This was followed by nearly a century of British colonial rule. During that time, Malawians were as good as enslaved, mostly working in dismal conditions on coffee plantations owned by absentee landlords. The name change asserted their right to self-determination. No wonder they cared so deeply about the name of Mary's boychild. Despite their rocky relations with the Europeans who oppressed them, their population is 83% Christian. Perhaps the conviction that God was with them in spite of all allowed them to endure. Incidentally, Joseph's naming of Mary's baby indicated, in Hebrew tradition, his claiming him as his own son.



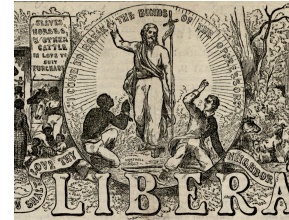
CAROL GTG 139      That Boy-Child of Mary (1, 2, 6)  
*African, Text: Tom Colvin, 1967; Music, Malawi Melody*

THE SIXTH LESSON      Isaiah 9:2-7      *Unto Us a Child*

The people who walked in darkness  
 have seen a great light;  
 those who lived in a land of deep darkness—  
 on them light has shined.  
 You have multiplied the nation,  
 you have increased its joy;  
 they rejoice before you  
 as with joy at the harvest,  
 as people exult when dividing plunder.  
 For the yoke of their burden,  
 and the bar across their shoulders,  
 the rod of their oppressor,  
 you have broken as on the day of Midian.  
 For all the boots of the tramping warriors  
 and all the garments rolled in blood  
 shall be burned as fuel for the fire.  
 For a child has been born for us,  
 a son given to us;  
 authority rests upon his shoulders;  
 and he is named



Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
 Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.  
 His authority shall grow continually,  
 and there shall be endless peace  
 for the throne of David and his kingdom.  
 He will establish and uphold it  
 with justice and with righteousness  
 from this time onwards and for evermore.  
 The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.



### A favorite of abolitionists

As Lo How a Rose speaks of harmony, O Holy Night, or the Cantique de Noel, is a song for a soloist - preferably Mark Neville, in our case. And it is a staple of Christmas Eve services. Nothing about the song's origins is really obscure, though the story gets muddled after its beginning: Placide Cappeau is said to have renounced Christianity after writing the lyrics, and the composer, Adolphe Adam, was supposedly Jewish. The carol came into its own on American soil, after it was translated by John Dwight into English in 1855. He altered the words of the third verse to reflect more clearly Isaiah's words about the promised one at once breaking the burden of the oppressed and the rod of the oppressor. Almost immediately, this became a rallying song for people calling for the abolition of slavery. To my mind, these words declare God's salvation as no other carol does. Hearing it, we are inspired again to worship no ruler but the one who brings peace, hearing the pleas of the enslaved and casting aside the enslaver.

SOLO                      Cantique de Noel                      Soloist Mark Neville  
*French, Text: Placide Cappeau, 1843; Music, Adolphe Adam, 1843;  
 translated, John Dwight, 1855*

### THE SEVENTH LESSON                      Luke 2:1-7      *Born into Oppression*



In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

Phillips Brooks was a well-known American preacher who was inspired to write these lyrics after a trip to Bethlehem. Lewis Henry Redner, the organist in Brooks's church, recounts the



story of the carol's creation in his own words: "As Christmas of 1868 approached, Mr. Brooks told me that he had written a simple little carol for the Christmas Sunday-school service, and he asked me to write the tune to it. The simple music was written in great haste and under great pressure. We were to practice it on the following Sunday. Mr. Brooks came to me on Friday, and said, "Redner, have you ground out that music yet to 'O Little Town of Bethlehem'?" I replied, "No", but that he should have it by Sunday. On the Saturday night previous

my brain was all confused about the tune. I thought more about my Sunday-school lesson than I did about the music. But I was roused from sleep late in the night hearing an angel-strain whispering in my ear, and seizing a piece of music paper I jotted down the treble of the tune as we now have it, and on Sunday morning before going to church I filled in the harmony. Neither Mr. Brooks nor I ever thought the carol or the music to it would live beyond that Christmas of 1868." In our minds' eye, we tend to see the simple town portrayed on Christmas cards, not the current city walled in with 40-foot high concrete barriers; yet we can hope that even over those forbidding structures, the angels still keep their watch of wondering love.



## CAROL GTG 121 O Little Town of Bethlehem

*American; Text, Phillips Brooks, 1868; Music: Lewis Henry Redner, 1868*



### THE EIGHTH LESSON Luke 2:8-20

### *In Heaven and on Earth*

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the

heavenly host, praising God and saying,

'Glory to God in the highest heaven,  
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!'

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.' So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger.

When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.



Oldest of all? An ancient legend suggests that the 2nd century Pope Telesphorus so loved a particular Gloria that he ordered it sung every Christmas Eve during midnight mass. That *Gloria* became the Latin refrain of Angels We Have Heard, and also makes it another macaronic or mixed-language carol. We do know that this familiar arrangement was a much later French adaptation. The long drawn out “Glow” of Gloria is called a “melisma.” It’s rare for congregations to stretch out a single syllable like that, one commentator notes - and actually enjoy it. But enjoy it we do, especially since it highlights the exuberant praise of the one we’re here to worship, the same Christ Child sung by angels and by Christians through all the tragedies and triumphs of history down to the present day.

CAROL GTG 113      Angels We Have Heard on High (vs. 1 and 3)

*French, probably dating from the 1700s, but refrain possibly 2nd Century.*

### PRAYERS

Author of our lives, give us grace and confidence to share this story with the children in our lives, single parents, lonely young adults, unhoused neighbors, those who grieve, with people who couldn’t make it home for Christmas, who couldn’t afford to put much under the tree this year, who are hoping next year will be better. Let us share it not just with our words, but with our own life stories as they unfold. Help us share with courage and conviction with those nearest to our hearts, whom we remember now in the quiet of this night....

THE NINTH LESSON      John 1:1-5      *Beginning and Ending with Love*

Voice A: Let us listen for God speaking to us through the ancient poetry of John 1.

In the beginning was the Word,

Voice B: way back, a long, long time ago,

before the stars,

before the day,

before the rivers were carved out of clay.

Voice A: In the beginning,

Voice B: way back in that beginning,

Voice A: was the Word.

And the Word was with God,

And the Word was God.

He, Jesus, was in the beginning with God.

Voice B: In other words, we cannot say that love was born in a stable that day,

for love was born when the horizon was drawn.

It was born in the dark, long before dawn.



Love was born with the very first sea  
and when God breathed life into you and me.  
Long before Magi or shepherds or dreams,  
long before sheep or angels that sing,  
love was here—  
building a way, then and now,  
and on Christmas day.

Voice A: For all things came into being through him,  
and without him, not one thing came into being.  
And what has come into being in him was life,  
and the life was the light of all people.

Voice B: And so Jesus shined.  
Like a light in the dark,  
or a star in the sky,  
Jesus walked into this world  
and opened our eyes,  
shining a light on social divides  
and loving the scars we try to hide.  
He lit up this world like it's never seen,  
the light of all people, Emmanuel, King.

Voice A: The light shines in the darkness,  
And the darkness did not overcome it.

Voice B: Hatred did not overcome it.  
Fear did not overcome it.  
Greed did not overcome it.

Voice A: A light shines in the darkness.

Voice B: Envy did not overcome it.  
Doubt did not overcome it.  
Scarcity did not overcome it.

Voice A: A light shines in the darkness.

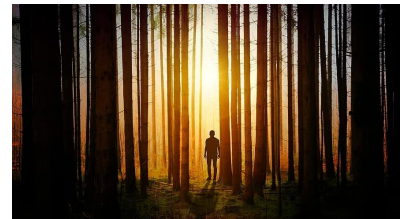
Voice B: Death did not overcome it.  
Sickness did not overcome it.  
Grief did not overcome it.

Voice A: For he was in the beginning with God,

Voice B: way back, a long, long time ago,  
before the stars,  
before the day,  
before the rivers were carved out of clay.

Voice A: And what has come into being in him was life.

Voice B: So we cannot begin with Magis and sheep,



for this story begins at the brink—

Voice A: of creation and light,

Voice B: of you and me,

Voice A: of beloved and love,

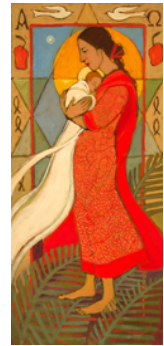
Voice B: of being set free.

Voice A: For in the beginning was the Word,  
and the Word was with God,  
and the Word was God.

Voice B: He was in the beginning with God,  
and that light shines in the darkness.

It always has, and it always will.

Voice A: That is where our story begins—with love for creation, from beginning to end. Amen.



Of all carols, Silent Night is perhaps the favorite. It is the *only* way to end a candlelight service. It's also the carol whose history is best known. I invite you to look up the story of the Christmas Truce of 1914, when English and German soldiers crawled out of their battlefield trenches to sing, play games, and share treats from home with each other. The story is true; but whether it was the singing of this carol, beloved by both sides, that lured them out and convinced them of their kinship, I'm not sure. Feel free to hold that kinship with all humankind in your hearts and pray for a lasting peace as you sing.

CAROL GTG Silent Night

*Original German text: Joseph Mohr, 1816; translated, John Freeman Young, 1863*

*Music: Franz Xaver Gruber, 1818*

### **Indebtedness:**

First, to Ivy Pillers, who suggested that recalling the histories behind the carols might spice up the service. I apologize for not including the words to the songs, but hope you look them up if you're interested after reading about them.

My research was drawn from far and wide, mostly by googling the carol titles. Wikipedia was a major source, as was a resource provided by the United Methodist Church, <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns>. In 2015, the Atlantic published a series on carols, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/12> that also popped up and proved helpful. Finally, two books from the library: *The Spirit of Christmas: A History of Best-Loved Carols*, by Virginia Reynolds, and *Stories of Christmas Carols*, by Ernest K. Emurian. The poetic reading of John 1 was written by Sarah Are Speed for *A Sanctified Art*.

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