

## Christmas Hymn Sing

### **Luke 1:26-38**

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.

Did you know that in the early years of the church, the church leaders thought it was a sin to celebrate Christmas? Origen, a theologian in the second century, thought celebrating Christ's birthday was too much like the Egyptian custom of celebrating the pharaoh's birthday. As far as he and others were concerned, nothing terribly important happened on Christmas. Sure, Jesus was born, but without his resurrection, his birth is insignificant. Instead of celebrating Christmas, they wanted the church to focus on Easter.

Easter really should be our bigger holiday, but no one outside the church celebrates Easter too much. Christmas, however, has become such a tradition that there are people who don't believe in God who insist on celebrating a secular version of the holiday. It was a fear of exactly that which led the early Puritans to have their own campaign against celebrating Christmas. Because of their efforts, in 1645, Parliament enacted a ban on Christmas and all other festivals, declaring them frivolous, unchristian-like, and filled with superstition. The ban lasted 12 years, but even the Puritans couldn't hold back the joy of this season.

Christ was born, and we are allowed to celebrate that fact. We may not always get that celebration right, but one of the best ways we do honor Christ is with hymns of praise and worship. So let's sing a few this morning.

Oliver Wendell Holmes once declared our first carol to be “one of the finest and most beautiful ever written,” and I agree. When I think of Christmas Eve as a child, I remember looking up at the stars while crossing the street for the midnight service at church. The words to *It Came Upon a Midnight Clear* were written by a young Unitarian minister by the name of Edmund Hamilton Sears in 1849 and published that year in a church magazine. The following year, Richard Storrs Willis, an editor and critic for the New York Tribune, wrote the music. The carol became an immediate hit. Sears, however, didn’t like all the publicity it brought him and he literally spent the rest of his life trying to live down his notoriety. If he wrote the hymn today, he’d be thrilled to see it go viral on Twitter and YouTube – as long as his name was left off the credits. Let’s sing the first and last verses of this wonderful carol which is #218 in your hymnal.

The next carol that I’ve picked out for us to sing this morning is one of the most popular carols that we sing every year. But despite its popularity, *O Come, All Ye Faithful* can only be described as a mystery. The truth is, we don’t know its origin. What we do know is that John Francis Wade was an 18<sup>th</sup> century British exile who moved to a Roman Catholic community in France to escape persecution. There he eked out an income by copying and selling music and by giving music lessons to children.

Now some have attributed the words to Wade himself, but it’s more likely that at some point he came upon a Latin poem beginning with the words, “Adeste fideles” which translates, of course, “Come All Ye Faithful.” Wade then combined the text with music most likely written by another Englishman, John Reading, though we can’t be sure about that either.

In any case, four decades later Frederick Oakeley, a British clergyman came across Wade’s Latin text and music, translated it into English and almost overnight the carol became a Christmas standard. Let’s sing the first verse of this wonderful carol – but let’s sing it first in

English, and then in Latin. Don't worry about pronouncing any of the words right. Just wing with the joy and triumph described. It's #234 in our hymnal.

Now let's turn in our hymnals to #245, *The First Noel*. There are several interesting things about this popular song. First, it's one of the oldest carols we have, dating back at least 300 years and perhaps as many as 500. Second, the title of the carol as you see it in your hymnal, and the way we normally see it, is actually misspelled. The way you see it printed would lead you to believe it's a French carol... but look down at the fine print on the bottom of the page. It's an English carol! The correct spelling is Nowell, still pronounced Noel, which probably accounts for the fact that somewhere along the line it got misspelled.

Also, take a look at the words to the carol. In the first verse, we find the familiar account of how an angel appeared to the shepherds as "they lay keeping their sheep" but then look at the second verse and tell me what's wrong with this picture? Who can figure it out? The problem is right in the first line. In Luke where we read about the shepherds, there's no mention of the star of Bethlehem at all. The star only comes into the picture with the arrival of the wise men. But I think we can extend our hymn a little creative license this morning. Let's go ahead and sing the first two verses of #245.

The last carol I've picked out for us is unusual for one particular reason. It's unusual because the words of the carol were written by a woman. As far as I know, and I've done some checking, this is only traditional carol written by a woman. Her name was Cecil Frances Alexander and she was married to a Bishop in the Church of England. Legend has it that Alexander took her position as wife of a bishop very seriously and was constantly by her husband's side as he traveled through Ireland, "scolding the wicked and praising the good."

Alexander wrote the words to *Once in Royal David's City* in 1848 as a part of a collection of poems she wrote titled, "Hymns for Little Children." A year later, H. J. Gauntlett discovered Alexander's poem and set it to music, giving us the carol we have today. Let's sing the first two verses of this beautiful carol about Bethlehem, the birth place of both Jesus and King David. It's #250. And when we're done, the ushers can come forward to receive our offering this morning.