

O Come, All Ye Faithful

Luke 2:8-11; Matthew 2:11; John 1:14

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We tend to like what's familiar, don't we? Most of the carols selected as favorites in the survey are familiar ones. In a world full of rapid and chaotic change, we like to have some things stay the same. That's good to a point. We still have to deal with the changing world. But it's good to know we have an unchanging gospel that speaks to any time and to all situations.

Maybe one reason we like familiar Christmas music is that it can remind us of our past. In the church where I grew up, each year we had a "vespers" service on a Sunday afternoon a week or two before Christmas. This was when the choir did their cantata and the congregation would light candles. It was a long-standing tradition when I was very young—and they're still doing it. I remember finally being old enough—a teenager—to be one of the candle lighters. We would each carry a large candle to the front of the sanctuary, get the light and then go to the congregation, passing the light. I think I also remember that during the candle lighting we always sang "O Come, All Ye Faithful."

Christmas music from the past can also have an impact on our lives in the present. In an article entitled "The Lyric that Saved My Life," Mary Ellen Rothrock describes being a graduate student in the 1960s. At her university, as at many others during that time, despair seemed to permeate the student body. One of her fellow students summed up the prevailing attitude: "Playwright Samuel Becket is right. Man is just a piece of trash in a universe that's running down." Mary rebelled against that thinking. She had grown up attending the church where her father was the organist, so she knew about God. But she says that Jesus was just a historical figure to her. She never heard—or she heard without hearing—that Jesus died on the cross for her sins.

In college, atheism became her religion. But in graduate school she began trying to fill a spiritual void in her life. She began practicing Transcendental Meditation (TM). She met periodically with a TM supervisor. After a year or so of meditating, she told her supervisor that a thought kept

recurring when she was trying to concentrate on her mantra. She said, "It's a line from Handel's *Messiah*. Something in my mind keeps repeating 'And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed.'" Those words brought back wonderful Christmas memories from her childhood growing up in Pittsburgh.

Two holiday musical events were highlights in her mind. Each year, the Pittsburgh Symphony presented Handel's *Messiah* with the Mendelssohn Choir. Mary and her parents attended the performance every December from as early as she could remember. Not only did she find the music thrilling, but the words seemed to her to come from beyond this world. She loved the joyful language: "Hallelujah! for the Lord God Omnipotent reigneth. ... For unto us a Child is born ... And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together."

The second holiday event took place at Pittsburgh's Carnegie Music Hall. It was a Christmas carol festival called "United We Sing" that celebrated the immigrant diversity of Pittsburgh. Colorfully costumed choirs representing different nationalities filled the auditorium, spilling off the stage and into the audience.

The native costumes dazzled young Mary's eyes and the choirs sang in strange languages. A tenor sang "Deck the Halls" in the baffling Welsh language. Bagpipers piped their piercing "O Come All Ye Faithful." Chinese women rose in vivid Oriental silks and sang. A Russian men's chorus roared.

But the high point was when the choirs rose together in their colorful costumes to sing Handel's great "Hallelujah" chorus. Mary's father directed the mass international choir. The hall reverberated with the triumphant refrain: "He shall reign for ever and ever. Hallelujah! Hallelujah!"

Holding these memories, Mary went against her TM supervisor's instructions to ignore the words, and she told herself, "These aren't just random thoughts." Suddenly it hit her. The phrase *And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed* was an invitation from a personal God of glory to seek him! Why couldn't he be "Wonderful Counselor, the mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace"?

Within months, Mary met a woman who explained how she could have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. It began to make sense. The

words she had listened to in Handel's choruses and other carols had pointed to Jesus Christ, the Lord and Messiah.

Listening to the words from the Bible, the words from the musical score made sense. The Holy Spirit convinced her of the truth. The God she hungered for, the personal God, loved her (*Christian Reader* [from *Christianity Today*], Nov-Dec 1998).

Maybe another reason we love these old carols is that they keep inviting us, calling us, showing us the way to life with the Lord God, the real and personal and living God. Maybe some lyrics that are deep in our memories will help us find our way, will help us come to know Christ, or remind us that he is always Emmanuel—God with us.

Number six in our favorite Christmas carols survey is "O Come, All Ye Faithful." It's number 234 in the hymnal. This hymn was originally in Latin (so our hymnal includes the first verse and chorus in Latin). This led some to think it was an ancient hymn or chant. Historians and musicologists are still not exactly sure who wrote this song and when. But it was most likely written around 1743 by John Francis Wade, an English Roman Catholic.

1743 was a tough time to be a Roman Catholic in England. Since the time of Queen Elizabeth, the Church of England had tried to steer the middle way between Roman Catholic and Protestant. Sometimes the church leaned more one way than another. At various times Protestants took over church buildings and monasteries, often destroying the religious art within them. At other times, Catholics persecuted Protestants. The mid-1700s was one of the times when sentiment was more strongly Protestant. Many English Roman Catholics fled to France for safety. John F. Wade was apparently one of those. Incidentally, the 1740s was a tough time to be a Methodist in England as well. While the Methodist revival was going strong, there was also strong opposition to it from the established church and from others who didn't like being confronted with the gospel as John and Charles Wesley preached it.

Anyway, another of our favorite Christmas hymns, "Joy to the World," was written by an Independent/Congregational Church pastor (Isaac Watts). This one, "O Come, All Ye Faithful," was written by an exiled Roman Catholic layperson. That kind of diversity reminds us that God can use anybody and

that God can speak to us through just about anybody if we're willing to listen.

"O Come, All Ye Faithful" starts with an invitation, an exhortation, to come to Bethlehem. To come and see the One who rules. The chorus binds the entire song together with its repeated and building call to come and adore Christ the Lord. This obviously draws on the story of the shepherds going to Bethlehem to see what the Lord had made known to them. It also reflects the magi bowing before the child Jesus, paying homage to him and offering him gifts.

To adore Jesus means more than just looking at him with wonder or just having some warm feelings when we look at a nativity scene. Adoration is praise and worship. Like the shepherds and, later, the magi, we're drawn to seek the Lord, to come to him, to present ourselves and our gifts to him, then to go and tell others about him. We adore not only the infant Jesus, but Jesus who grew up, lived a life of love, died on a cross for us, rose from the dead, and is exalted as Lord of all. What better response than to adore him, to worship him, to praise him with all that we are and all that we have?

The second verse tells us more about this one we adore—and why he's worthy of our praise. This verse comes out of the Nicene Creed, affirming Jesus as "True God of true God, Light from Light Eternal." It affirms his birth from the Virgin and declares that he is God the Father's begotten Son, not created by God.

The first version of what we call the Nicene Creed was written in A.D. 325. Then, at another church council in 381, it was expanded and adopted as the church's statement of faith. We may take it somewhat for granted today, or even be uninterested in it. But in the Fourth Century, the issues addressed in the Nicene Creed were debated and argued by just about everybody.

The Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ was such a dramatic and astounding event that it took the church a few centuries to figure out how best to describe the Incarnation and its effects. What did it mean for God to be made human? Was Jesus just an especially inspired man? Or, was he a divine being with little or no real humanity? How could the unchangeable God experience the change of Incarnation? Many ideas were circulating

about these and other questions. One bishop named Arius concluded that God didn't enter fully into human life in Jesus. Arius believed and taught that the Son or Word of God was not equal to God, but was God's first creation. It was then this creature of God's, not God, who was made flesh and dwelt among us in Jesus. Politics got mixed up in this debate. The teaching of Arius became popular and almost took over the church and the empire that had recently accepted Christianity.

But others held that Arius was mistaken and held the biblical ground saying that God actually took on human flesh, that Jesus is "true God of true God." He is the Son of God who is eternally begotten by the Father, not made or created by the Father. Those lines in the Nicene Creed were a rejection of Arius' teaching and an affirmation of the church's faith, rooted in Scripture, that it's truly God who comes to us in Christ to save us. O come, let us adore him!

Verse three recalls the angels who appeared to the shepherds and sang, "Glory to God in the highest." Wade calls on all the "citizens of heaven" to sing "Glory to God." He may have been referring to the angels as citizens of heaven—and that's an interesting poetic phrase. But the Bible says, not just angels, but we now are citizens of heaven (Philippians 3:20; see also Hebrews 12:22-24). Certainly the angels sing of God's glory. But we're called to join them in giving glory to God. O come, let us adore him!

Verses four and five were added later by a Frenchman who was inspired by Wade's original hymn. Verse four envisions the shepherds going to the manger to see Jesus and says that we too will go there with them—in our imagination, by faith—joyfully to see our Savior. O come, let us adore him!

Verse five speaks of the humility and poverty of Jesus being born in a manger for us sinners. There's another echo of the Nicene Creed when it says that "for us and our salvation he came down from heaven and was incarnate of the Virgin Mary and the Holy Spirit." Imagine the eternal Word of the Lord God of the universe squeezing into a single cell and being implanted in a mama. Then he was born in poverty, humbling himself to be with us and to save us. Now we can embrace him "with love and awe." Isn't that great? Love and awe are both part of our relating to God. He becomes

one of us so we can love him. But at the same time he is unique and so he is awesome. O come, let us adore him!

Finally comes the great triumphant Christmas Day or Christmas Eve verse: "Yea, Lord, we greet thee, born this happy morning." This is a triumphant celebration of Christmas, of the Incarnation. As we give glory to God in the highest, we give all glory to Jesus because, in the words of John's Gospel, he is the "Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing." And we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father's only Son (John 1:14). O come, let us adore him!

This invitation and exhortation is for the whole church, all of God's people: *Let us* adore him.

Hear the invitation. Join the adoration. Let these familiar words spark new insight, new life, renewed faith and new commitment to Christ the Lord.