

O Holy Night
Luke 2:13-18
John Breon

The second favorite Christmas song in our countdown is *O Holy Night*. Written in France in 1847 and translated into English in 1858, it's become one of the most popular Christmas solos. It was the second piece of music ever broadcast on the radio (in 1906) and it's been performed and recorded by many popular artists. It's been sung and/or played in many Christmas cantatas and Christmas Eve services.

The Appleton City High School Band played it during one of our Christmas concerts sometime in the late 70s. Our director had me do a devotional talk before the song. I told a story I read in some little Christmas book that probably wasn't really accurate. It was the story of soldiers on Christmas Eve in World War I stopping their fighting and singing Christmas carols together. They probably didn't sing *O Holy Night* then. There is an unverified story that this carol figured prominently on Christmas Eve, 1870, during the Franco-Prussian War. The story goes that, unexpectedly, a French soldier jumped out of the trench and sang this song, *Cantique de Noel*. Moved by the song, the Germans didn't fire on him and, inspired by the sentiment, a German soldier emerged from his trench and sang Luther's *From Heaven Above to Earth I Come*. Possibly *Silent Night* was also sung by soldiers on both sides. Something similar did happen on Christmas Eve, 1914, during WW I (www.hymnsandcarolsofchristmas.com).

Let's look at the origin story of *O Holy Night*, then look at the lyrics to see what it tells us about Jesus and how it helps us celebrate his birth.

In 1847, Placide Cappeau, who was a *commissionaire* of wines, was asked by the priest of the Roquemaure parish to write a song to celebrate the renovation of the church organ. The song would be sung at the Christmas mass. Cappeau was probably surprised by this request. He wasn't a particularly devout churchgoer. But he took the request seriously and looked into the Scriptures, especially Luke 2, for inspiration.

Sometime during a long carriage ride to Paris for business, Cappeau started thinking about what it would have been like to have been in that

Bethlehem stable on the night Jesus was born. He began writing and produced the poem *Cantique de Noel* ("Song of Christmas"). He took the words to his friend Adolphe Adam, a composer of a popular ballet and many other stage works. Adam composed the tune in a few days and the song was premiered at the midnight mass on Christmas Eve, 1847, in Roquemaure.

The song quickly became popular and many people across France sang it. But some in the church establishment didn't appreciate it. They weren't opposed so much to its content; their attacks were based more on the reputations of the lyricist and composer.

Late in his life, Cappeau was seen as a social radical, a socialist, and a non-Christian. Adam was falsely alleged to be Jewish. That, plus his reputation as a composer of light operatic works and ballets, was seen by some church leaders as incompatible with the composition of Christian music. Adam wasn't Jewish, but even if he had been, that shouldn't matter in terms of the music he composed.

The best known English translation of *Cantique de Noel* is *O Holy Night*, by John Sullivan Dwight, a Unitarian minister, music critic, and journalist. He was part of the Transcendentalist movement in 19th Century America.

It's interesting to think about the various writers of our favorite Christmas songs. The top five in our survey were written by a Southern Baptist (*Mary, Did You Know?*), a Lutheran (*Away in a Manger*), an English Puritan-Congregationalist (*Joy to the World*), a French Catholic (*O Holy Night*), and an Austrian Catholic (*Silent Night*). Don't you love how God works through and speaks through so many different kinds of people?

It's also interesting that some church leaders tried to discredit this carol based on the reputations of the writer and composer—whether those reputations were true or not. And even if their reputations were deserved, God's grace is active in such ways that God's message can show up in surprising ways in unexpected places through messengers we might not have looked for.

James Bryan Smith tells about getting acquainted with Rich Mullins. Rich was a Christian singer-songwriter who became famous in the 1980s.

He died in a car crash in 1997. Jim Smith teaches at Friends University in Wichita and Rich was a student there in the early 90s. As they got acquainted, one day Rich said to Jim that if they were going to be friends, he wanted Jim to really know him. Rich didn't want Jim to be his friend just because he was famous. So Rich unloaded and told him about his sin and brokenness. He told Jim a story of abuse and of reckless, selfish, sinful behavior. And a lot of that had happened after Rich became famous. He wasn't proud of that behavior, but felt remorse.

Jim wasn't sure what to do. He wondered if he should confess his sins to Rich, but Rich said, "No, they'd probably be boring. Sin is pretty much the same for all of us. Let's leave it at this: we are both ragamuffins who need love and grace." And they became good friends. Jim says he kind of struggled with trying to put together what Rich told him with his ministry of songwriting and performing (*The Magnificent Story* 71-73). I admit that since I read that, I've wondered about God using someone like Rich. But, the point is that God will work through a person who's available and willing to be open. Without going into great detail, Rich was very open and honest in his music, his comments during concerts, and things he wrote. It was very refreshing. Again, God in grace can speak to us through just about anyone.

Let's listen for how God can speak to us through the lyrics of Placide Cappeau in John Sullivan Dwight's translation.

O holy night! The stars are brightly shining,
It is the night of our 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, holy night, O night divine.

This verse seems to reflect the experience of the shepherds, who were living in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks by night. After

Jesus was born, the shepherds got the news from the angels and hurried into town to find the manger with the newborn Savior in it.

We celebrate the night of our Savior's birth. Jesus is Savior, Messiah, and Lord. We need a Savior because we were *pinning in sin and error*. "To pine" is to suffer with longing. The world longs to be forgiven and free. The world is weary of being separated from God, weary of carrying heavy burdens, sick and tired of being sick and tired. Mary's child was named Jesus because he would save his people from their sins.

When he appeared, *the soul felt its worth*. How do we measure our worth? By salary, real estate, portfolio, and countless other status markers? Jesus was born to poor parents and was himself homeless for some time. He was "despised and rejected" (Isaiah 53:3). He has a different view of worth.

Human worth is determined by God who creates us and who comes to be one of us.

How fantastic are you? Look at your finger, your skin, your hair. Feel your pulse, notice your breathing. Feel the weariness in your feet or the hunger in your stomach.

God said, "I will be like that. Human life is the perfect vehicle for me to be me, to exhibit my heart, to reveal my mind." As a human being I have immeasurable worth because God joined God's own self to who I am, who you are, to the stranger, the one you love, the one who broke your heart, even to the one who doesn't believe. ...[Jesus'] very appearing, his showing up on earth...is God's stupendous adventure to love us, to save us, to bring us home.

We do not submit a resume of worth to God, and then God appears. No, God appears, and while we might blush a little over the two-bit life we were leading before we noticed his coming, we are not shamed but invigorated. For the first time, we look in the mirror, we go out into the world fearlessly, with a lilt in our step and a song in our heart, sensing our true worth—and the worth of all other people as well. (James Howell, *Why This Jubilee?* 110)

No wonder we feel *a thrill of hope*. No wonder *the weary world rejoices*. The birth of Jesus means a new beginning, *a new and glorious morn*. Zechariah had prophesied about "the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace" (Luke 1:78-79). Peter later wrote that we have "the prophetic message as something completely reliable, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star shines in your hearts" (2 Pet 1:19).

With the shepherds we hear the angel voices. We come to the manger and bow before the Savior.

There's a second verse to this carol that I don't remember hearing. It draws on Matthew 2 and talks about the magi or wise men.

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 come 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 no stranger,
Behold your King! Before him lowly bend!

The star led the magi to Judah and then to Bethlehem and to the house where Jesus was. We don't know what that star was. It could have been an alignment of planets or other bodies in the sky. It could have been some sort of comet. I think it's likely that it was something supernatural, like the pillar of fire that led Israel through the wilderness. Whatever the star was, it's an example of how we can be guided and come to worship Jesus. The light of faith leads us. We come with the magi to the infant King and we honor him with our gifts, especially the gift of our hearts, of ourselves.

And the King of kings humbles himself to be with us. He knows our need and our weakness. He takes them on himself and becomes our friend. There's so much in Scripture about this. I'll just lift up a couple of passages.

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! (Philippians 2:5-8)

For this reason he had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted. (Hebrews 2:17-18)

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. (Heb 4:14-16)

The third verse of *O Holy Night* is one I've heard, though some arrangements leave it off.

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.

In many ways, Jesus taught us to love one another. Specifically, when he was asked what the greatest commandment is, he drew on Deuteronomy and Leviticus to declare, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments" (Matthew 22:37-39). He also said that treating others the way we want to be treated sums up the Law and the Prophets (Mt 7:12). He told his disciples on the night before his death, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another" (John 13:34).

Can love be commanded? Law and love seem to be opposites. But Jesus commands love. *His law is love*. If Jesus commands love, he expects us to do it. And he expects that we can love, with his help. But we have to learn that love isn't just a feeling; it's a decision and a commitment. It led God in Christ to come among us, to humble himself to be one of us. And his love sets us free.

And his gospel is Peace. Jesus breaks down barriers between God and us and between us and each other. He is the Prince of Peace who makes peace through his life, death, and resurrection.

Chains shall he break, for the slave is our brother. Remember when this carol was written—1847. And it was translated in 1858 by an American abolitionist. Jesus took on the form of a slave so he could set free all slaves of sin and death—and all literal slaves. The apostle Paul wrote to his friend Philemon about Philemon's slave Onesimus. He encourages Philemon to welcome Onesimus back "no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord" (Philemon 16).

Jesus is still setting free slaves of sin and death. He will set us free if we ask him. We need to be set free from bondage to selfishness, to meaningless life, to our culture's trivial view of love. And Jesus still sets free those who are literally slaves. He still calls us to work for the freedom of people who are enslaved by others. And that still happens in today's world. The International Justice Mission says that forty million people are trapped

in slavery right now. They define slavery as “the use of lies or violence to force another person to work for little or no pay.” Go to www.ijm.org to find out more and to see ways to help.

On the holy night Christ was born, he came to teach us to love, to show us love in the flesh, to set us free, to pioneer the path for us to become the people God wants us to be. We were made by love; we were made for love. It's commanded and the one who commands is the one who enables, encourages, and empowers us to love God, to love one another, to love ourselves, and to put an end to oppression and injustice. (Howell 112-13)

Because Jesus sets us free, because he is the Savior of all, we encourage everyone to receive him and his grace. And we praise him. We raise our hymns of joy. We praise the Messiah, Savior, and Lord with all that is within us. *Christ is the Lord! O praise his name forever! His power and glory, evermore proclaim.*

(Most of this information on the carol is from [www.hymnsandcarolsofchristmas.com/Hymns and carols/o holy night.htm](http://www.hymnsandcarolsofchristmas.com/Hymns_and_carols/o_holy_night.htm). Other references are <https://billygraham.org/story/more-to-the-music-o-holy-night>; www.beliefnet.com/entertainment/movies/the-nativity-story/the-amazing-story-of-o-holy-night.aspx; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/O_Holy_Night).