

Psalm 150

Praise the Lord!

Praise God in His sanctuary;

praise Him in His mighty firmament!

Praise Him for His mighty deeds;

praise Him according to his surpassing greatness!

Praise Him with trumpet sound;

praise Him with lute and harp!

Praise Him with tambourine and dance;

praise Him with strings and pipe!

Praise Him with clanging cymbals;

praise Him with loud clashing cymbals!

Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!

Praise the Lord!

Each week during worship services congregations pray prayers, hear Scriptures read and sermons preached expounding upon the Scriptures, but there is also another part and integral part of the worship service which tells the gospel story and that is the hymns. Hymns are either sung by choirs, individuals, and/or congregations every week and each hymn tells the gospel story.

Hymns also possess another story. They also have their own story the story of how they came to be written and why. Each hymn has its own unique story as to how it came about. This morning's passage says we are to "Praise the Lord in His sanctuary." If we were to take notice of what our passage says, it says we are to praise God in "*His sanctuary*", in "*His firmament*" or in the world. Our passage even tells us how to praise God. It says we are to "*praise Him with trumpets, lutes, harps, tambourines, strings, cymbals, more specific loud clashing cymbals.*" Notice it does not say only with the organ or only with the piano. Actually it never lists either one of those instruments. The point is we are to praise God together here in His sanctuary and in the world by singing His story.

In the early years of this country a group of people heavily persecuted suffering incredible cruelty and humiliation managed to encounter the powerful touch of the Holy Spirit and allowed this touch to be manifested in songs of majesty and beauty. Their songs were passed along at first through only oral tradition due to the fact that many were uneducated and did not know how to write. Their songs spread from the fields they worked to small slave churches; on to chain gangs and eventually into white churches some even reaching the concert halls. One such song came from the fields of the south, and born from the inspiration of a slave's Christmas. Brothers Fredrick and John Work II having discovered one such song left the words intact only rearranging the music to have an anthem-like structure.

These two brothers produced a hymn which came from a southern slave with no hope of earthly freedom, probably unable to even read the Bible; this unknown slave envisioned the emotions of the shepherds as this powerful light shone down upon them. These shepherds left their flocks not understanding where they were headed to see a child in the most humble of surroundings. It was in that place the shepherds found understanding, knowledge, and love.

A slave many years ago was inspired by the birth of Christ and in spite of his own dire situation came up with the words to “Go Tell It on the Mountain.”

Let us now stand and sing #251.

The year was 1737, and during his quiet time Charles Wesley who wrote more than 3000 hymns in his lifetime, who was the younger brother of John Wesley founder of the Methodist church was working on a new Christmas composition. His pastor had written down one line “*How all the welkin rings.*” *Welkin*, a word literally meaning “*vault of heaven makes a loud noise.*” And from that one line Wesley wrote a hymn which he believed would stand the test of time. Problem was a college friend Wesley’s named George Whitefield, almost solely responsible for the 1st Great Awakening during the mid-1700’s which brought revival throughout the America’s, he changed the wording of the original hymn. Then in 1855 William Cummings changed the tune to one Felix Mendelssohn wrote to honor the man who first printed the Bible, Johannes Gutenberg. With a new tune and an incorrect translation of Luke 2:13 “*And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,*” the verse we all know is “Hark! The herald angels sing.” Let us stand and sing #240

In 1817 a 25 year old was assigned as assistant priest to St. Nicholas Church in Oberndorf, Austria. During his second Christmas at this church father Mohr was preparing for a special Christmas Eve service, a service he had been planning for months. Everything was in place including the music. But as Father Mohr cleaned and readied the sanctuary it happened the unthinkable, the organ would not play. For the next several hours Father Mohr worked on the instrument making adjustments fiddling with all the keys, stops, and pedals but to no avail he could not get the organ to play. He did the only thing he could do he knelt and prayed. The answer to his problem had happened two years before.

At his last church Father Mohr had written a Christmas poem and he remembered that poem and went and found it in the papers in his desk. Father Mohr then hurried to town to the home of a school teacher Franz Gruber who had played for services only a few times. Fr. Mohr explained about the organ and asked Gruber to write music for the guitar to fit his poem. Father Mohr left believing God had a special plan for this night.

Just after mid-night Father Mohr and Franz Gruber stood in front of the small congregation during the midnight Mass and sang for the first time “*Stille Nacht! Heilige Nacht!*” This new tune was remembered not only the following year but has been repeated for the last 196 years. Let us sing hymn #239 “Silent Night, Holy Night.”

This next hymn is one of the few surviving Christmas song which can be genuinely labeled a folk song. Whoever is responsible for this hymn was obviously enthusiastic about Christmas and fully understood the wonder of Christ’s birth. During the Middle Ages, this was often the rule rather than the exception. When this hymn was written there were very few Bibles available. Those who had them were the churches or monasteries and they were in Latin.. The common people of the time rarely, if ever saw the Bible. Even if they had most were illiterate and could not have read the words.

During the Middle Ages the people often times embraced customs passed on from generation to generation and one such tradition was that of the Yule log. Each winter the family would go into the woods, cut down a large tree, cut away its branches, drag it home where it was cut to fit the fireplace and the core hollowed out.

The hole cut through the core was then filled with oils, spices, and other sweet smelling ingredients, and the log then set in place. Either a daughter or wife would then lite the log using a piece left over from the year before. It was believed any family burning a Yule log would have good luck the following year.

When those who embraced the custom of the Yule log became Christian they adapted the custom to their Christmas celebration. Later the wood came to symbolize the wood of the cross, and the sweet smelling ingredients which burned came to represent the beautiful life Christ came to offer us. The log was brought into the house on Christmas Eve and was lit,. The hope was the log would burn for the entire 12 days of Christmas burning off on the day the wise men arrived January 6th, which would have been a sign of blessing. As the Yule log was being lit many would sing a special hymn which signified the beginning of the Christmas season.

This hymn like many before was originally not a part of any worship services. Most new songs were not allowed in most churches. Often because the clergy disdained Christmas carols and refused to allow them to be sung within the church. Like many hymns' before this hymn became a favorite of

the common folk and was passed down from generation to generation and only later found its way into worship services. This hymn represent the real essence of Christmas, the one element that eludes so many during the time of year: the announcement of the Christ's arrival here on earth. The tradition of the Yule log has all but died out, the message put forth from "The First Noel" still burns brightly for us. Let us stand and sing hymn #245 "The First Noel."

Hymn writer Issac Watts who in his life time wrote more than 600 hymns was also a minister. Due to his hymn writing many viewed Watts as a heretic some even saw him as a tool of the devil. Watts was viewed as a revolutionary throughout his career. Despite how many thought of him he refused to give up and/or change. He stayed true to his heart. Because of his hymns he became one of the best known ministers throughout England.

While studying Psalm 98 Issac Watts was inspired to write what is known as his most famous hymn. Studying verse 4 from this Psalm 98, *"Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises."*

Focusing on this verse Watts wrote a four stanza poem which took many years before it was accepted by the powers to be within the church, but not before inspiring other hymn writers like Charles Wesley and John Newton to push the envelope of hymn writing.

It remains a mystery how this hymn became known as a Christmas Carol. Inspired by Old Testament Scripture – with no words alluding to the birth of Jesus other than four words, this hymn is actually a hymn for all seasons, something to be sung in July as well as December. This hymn does not have any inspiration from the gospels, and it stands as the most non-Christmas Christmas standard ever. The writer of this hymn was pushing the boundaries and the result is a hymn continues to push the boundaries of the seasons. Let us stand and close with hymn #246 Joy to the World.