

December 24, 2021  
The Nativity of Our Lord/Christmas Eve  
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA  
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

### O Little Town of Bethlehem

The last time we went caroling before the Covid-19 pandemic was December 19<sup>th</sup>, 2019. I didn't know it yet, but I found out the next day, that when we went caroling, I had pneumonia.

I knew I didn't feel well that night, but this was before Covid, back when it still seemed like a good idea to drag yourself out of your bed even though you felt horrible, head spinning-ly, limbs shakingly, gasping for breath, horrible so that you could do what you had said that you would do, so that you would never disappoint, never show weakness, and make sure you didn't breathe on anyone just in case whatever IT is is contagious.

In retrospect it was not a good idea for me to be out and about with the other carolers on that cold almost winter's night. It sure felt like winter that night and we were very glad that so many of the people we went to sing for invited us in, so that we didn't turn to solid blocks of ice on their front lawns.

It wasn't a good idea for me to be out caroling that night, when I could tell that if I wasn't already sick, I was getting sick, and I would never do it again, not with Covid loose in the world, but even though it wasn't a good idea for me to be out in the world, trying to sing around the tightness in my chest, if I hadn't gone caroling that night, I wouldn't have made an interesting discovery.

At every house we went to, I would ask the people there if they had a favorite carol that they would like for us to sing for them.

Many of them said that they liked them all and would be thrilled with whatever we sang for them. But, a few of them made a request. Interestingly it was the same request. And, of course, the frequently requested song was a Christmas

carol that we didn't have in the songbooks that Alice had made up for us earlier in December. The frequently requested song was *O Little Town of Bethlehem*. Even though we didn't have it in our songbooks, we had it in our hearts and memories and we managed one verse of it in every house where it was requested.

In January, once the Christmas chaos had settled down, I asked Alice to add *O Little Town of Bethlehem* to our songbooks, for the next time that we went caroling.

It was a good thing that I did, or I might have forgotten between 2019 and 2021 that the people that we went to carol to liked *O Little Town of Bethlehem*.

And that would have been sad, because, after our one-year Christmas caroling hiatus, when we went caroling again, this year, on December 17<sup>th</sup>, I gave people a choice between *O Little Town of Bethlehem* and another Christmas carol and seven out of the eight people we visited requested *O Little Town of Bethlehem*.

Gabby and I talked about the hymns for Christmas Eve long before we went caroling this year, so, it was in remembrance of how much *O Little Town of Bethlehem* was loved and chosen in 2019 that we chose it to be the hymn of the day at the Christmas Eve services this year.

And then, of course, this year, when it was, again, a most loved and chosen song for the people that we caroled to, that just confirmed our choice.

In 1865 a pastor, named Phillips Brooks went on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. On Christmas Eve of that year, he travelled on horseback from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. His account of that ride says:

Before dark we road out of town to the field where they say the shepherds saw the angel. It is a fenced piece of ground with a cave in it, in which, strangely enough, they put the figures of the shepherds...Somewhere in those fields we rode though, the shepherds must have been.

<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-o-little-town-of-bethlehem>

Another account of Brooks' trip says that after this ride to Shepherds' Fields, he and his companions entered Bethlehem and attended Christmas Eve worship at the basilica that was built by Emperor Constantine in A.D. 326 on the traditional site of Christ's birth. The Christmas worship service that Brooks attended on that night lasted from 10:00 p.m. to 3:00 a.m. <http://askherabouthymn.com/q-what-hymn-was-written-by-an-american-clergyman-inspired-by-his-post-civil-war-christmas-trip-to-bethlehem/>

The memories of his experiences in Bethlehem and its surrounding area on Christmas Eve inspired Brooks to write the words to *O Little Town of Bethlehem* three Christmases later.

He wrote it, intending it to be a carol for the Sunday School's Christmas service at his church and he asked his church musician, Lewis Henry Redner, to write a tune to go along with the words that he had written.

This is what Mr. Redner said about writing the tune to *O Little Town of Bethlehem*.

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 [before the Sunday that the music had been promised] 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.  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/O\\_Little\\_Town\\_of\\_Bethlehem](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/O_Little_Town_of_Bethlehem)

Later, a publisher asked to be allowed to print the carol in a Sunday School hymn book and he gave the tune the name “St. Louis,” probably after the first name of the man who composed it.

If I had not done this little bit of research into *O Little Town of Bethlehem*, I would have never guessed that it was written for children. But what is clear about it is that whoever it was written for, it has enduring meaning for many people.

In the words of this song, we experience the peace of the sleeping town, a town not knowing that God is there, not knowing that something momentous is occurring within its precincts.

In its words we hear people’s deep longing for salvation, deep longing for redemption, deep longing for something more. We hear people’s hopes, that the silence and the stillness of the vast universe are not all that there is. We hear people’s hopes for something more, for presence, for relationship, for companionship, and community, for meaning and for purpose. And in its words, we hear people’s fears acknowledged, fear that in God we meet only judgment, fear that in God we meet only absence, fear that perhaps we are all alone in the silence and in the clamor.

This hymn calls together the hopes and the fears of the long-ago people of Bethlehem, sleeping under a silent sky, not knowing that the world was changing forever as they slept in the presence, of the birth of God with us, Emmanuel.

This hymn calls together the hopes and fears of its author’s own time, the hopes and fears of his own life, his own congregation, living in the aftermath of a

Civil War, yearning toward a future of peace and reconciliation and justice, but still broken and bleeding, having seen the fearful worst of human hatred and vengeance and injustice. What hopes and fears they must have held in their hearts as they heard their children sing this song, for the very first time on a cold December morning in Philadelphia?

This hymn calls together the hopes and fears of our own time. For we too, have seen fearful things. A pandemic rages, and sicknesses of all kinds ravage bodies and minds, storms come, waters rise, fires burn, winds howl and these disasters tear away those ones most dear, those things most dear. Racism and violence tear apart communities, schools, the very social fabric that we rely on, even as we are forced to reckon with injustices that are woven into that fabric.

And we too, do we dare to hope in spite of our fears, for the peace and reconciliation and justice that our ancestors longed for, that we still need like we need water to drink, like we need air to breathe?

So, to all of the hopes and fears that people of every time and every place have carried with them in the darkness of the long nights and as the years have waned, we hear this promise of Christmas:

*For Christ is born of Mary*

And it goes on to say:

*and gathered all above*

*while mortals sleep the angels keep their watch of wondering love.*

*O morning stars, together proclaim the holy birth,*

*and praises sing to God the king, and peace to all the earth!*

What good news it is to hear that God acts, acts on our behalf, comes to us, is born for us, blesses us, graces us, whether we know it or not, whether we're ready for it or not, even if we sleep through it.

Perhaps some of you have felt this month like Christmas could not be accomplished without great feats of effort and energy on your part.

And some of you might have had the time, might have had the energy, might have been able to put in the effort to make Christmas everything that you wanted it to be this year, everything that it couldn't be last year.

But some of you might not have been able to do everything that you wanted to, without time, without money, without health, or perhaps most grievously, without the people necessary to make the celebration; people lost to death, to distance, to disease, or to conflict.

Today we hear that whether we are ready or not, whether we are even awake to it or not, Christmas still comes.

We are not what is required to make a perfect Christmas, only Jesus is required, and Jesus comes, and even if we cannot celebrate his birth the way that we might want, the way that we might choose, the angels, the stars, heaven itself sings and worships and praises God for the salvation that comes to us this night.

You might have noticed that in the emails that have gone out from this church in the past month, there has been a flurry of activity:

- Ascentria gifts to buy
- Sanctuary to decorate,
- Caroling to Do
- Worship assistants needed
- Pageant to prepare for
- Poinsettias to buy
- Luminaria to sponsor

There's been a lot of news and a lot of noise even coming from this church.

And then, if you've been out in the world, well, there's a lot of noise out there too. People screaming and fighting with each other on television about politics, with endless wrangling and speculation, people in person and on social media endlessly searching for who is to blame for the troubles that are a part of our lives and our world, people panicking about Christmas gifts, people overwhelmed even by their own blessings, their busy social calendars, too much to do, and all of it, the good and the bad creates a cacophony that can be hard to face, hard to deal with.

Hear this good news, not just that God comes, but how God comes:

*How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is giv'n!  
So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heav'n.  
No ear may hear his coming: but, in this world of sin,  
Where meek souls will receive him, still the dear Christ enters in.*

John the Baptist, who we heard from this Advent came, a voice crying in the wilderness, a voice shouting in by the river, "You brood of vipers", an Advent shout, an Advent warning, get ready for the coming one!

But when the coming one came, he came not with a shout, not with a rending, not with a storm or an earthquake, not in terror or judgement, but in peace, in quietness.

And still he comes. Jesus comes, not to be born as a baby in Bethlehem, but into our open hearts bringing love and peace.

And so, as we celebrate that Jesus came, born as a baby in Bethlehem, we pray for that coming, for the prayer of Advent, "Come, Lord Jesus" to be answered this Christmas; for Christ to come to us into our hearts, into our minds, into our

homes, and into our world, made manifest through us, and also meeting us, surprising us wherever we go:

And so, we pray the prayer of Christmas:

*O holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us we pray;*

*Cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today.*

*We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell;*

*Oh, come to us, abide with us, our Lord Immanuel. Amen.*