

Week 10: Christmas

Glory Be to God on High

Text: Charles Wesley (1707–1788), 1744

- First published in the collection *Hymns for the Nativity of our Lord*, as was “Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus”
- The book itself consisted of only 18 hymns total, yet was reprinted twenty times in Wesley’s life because of its popularity
- The small size of the collection was intended to keep it affordable for use by as wide an audience as possible

Tune: Johann Georg Hille (?–1744), 1742

- An organist, composer, and contemporary of Johann Sebastian Bach, little is known about his early life
- As an acquaintance, visited Bach in Leipzig in 1739, and Bach later visited him in 1740
- Wrote an essay arguing in favor of the permissibility of parallel 5ths and octaves in keyboard music, contrary to popular opinion at the time
- The tune AMSTERDAM, first published in the Wesleys’ *Collection of Tune Set to Music, as they are commonly sung at the Foundry*, was modified from an earlier chorale by Hille
- Hille himself likely adapted the tune from an even earlier source, adding a basso continuo to the melody
- Considered one of the oldest Methodist hymn tunes, as the “foundry” referenced was an abandoned cannon foundry in London used as a meetinghouse for the Methodist society in the first years following the Wesleys’ conversion
- Sometimes attributed to the 18th-century British composer James Nares, but scholars believe that to be incorrect

1. What stands out as unique about this hymn, compared to the usual Christmas carols? What particular insight or perspective does it give you?
 - a. Doesn’t just stick to the simple Christmas story
 - i. Combines elements from Luke 2:14 with Philippians 2:8-10
 - ii. Highlights the paradoxes of the incarnation (“the invisible appears”, “being’s source begins to be”)
 - iii. Identifies us with the angels, invites us to join the heavenly chorus of praise
 - b. Uses very poignant imagery
 - i. “He bows the sky”
 - ii. The phrase “earthly clod” was originally “earthy clod”, even more colorful
 - iii. “humbled to the dust He is”

In The Bleak Midwinter

Text: Christina Rossetti (1830–1894), 1872

- Born in England, her father was an exiled Italian poet and mother a London socialite, sister of a good friend of Lord Byron
- Educated at home in classical and religious literature, all of her siblings became artists or writers in some fashion
- A prominent female poet of her time, her writing is Romantic in style and often deals with religious themes
- Also wrote another popular Christmas carol, “Love Came Down at Christmas”
- Simply titled “A Christmas Carol”, this poem was first published in the American magazine *Scribner’s Monthly*
- Of the original five stanzas, the third is almost always omitted from the hymn

Tune: Gustav Holst (1874–1934), 1906

- Holst’s father was an organist and music teacher, his mother a former student who died during his early childhood
 - His father pushed him to become a concert pianist, but poor eyesight, asthma, and a nerve condition made the physical exertion too difficult
 - Ralph Vaughan Williams, a friend of Holst’s from the Royal College of Music and editor of the 1906 *English Hymnal*, requested he compose a tune to match this text
 - The tune is named CRANHAM after the town where Holst’s mother’s family lived, providing inspiration for the music
 - Some have suggested when writing the tune, Holst may have returned to visit a bed-and-breakfast in the town, known today as “Midwinter Cottage” for that reason
1. What stands out as unique about this hymn, compared to the usual Christmas carols? What particular insight or perspective does it give you?
 - a. Because it follows an irregular meter, some verses of the music require an extra note in places to accommodate the text
 - b. An interesting connection, here we see Jesus worshipped with a kiss, later we know he is betrayed with a kiss
 - c. References the second coming of Christ (“when He comes to reign”)
 - d. Rossetti’s “heaven cannot hold him” matches Wesley’s “whom heaven cannot contain”
 - e. The final stanza abruptly shifts to the first person, an unusual move, especially for a Christmas carol

How Bright Appears the Morning Star

Text: Philipp Nicolai (1556–1608), 1599

- Son of a Lutheran pastor, entered ministry in the Lutheran church himself in 1583
- Outside of hymns, his writings were mostly sharply-worded critiques of Calvinist and Catholic theology (requiring him to flee or go into hiding on a number of occasions)
- The seven stanzas in the original German text start with the letters “W E G U H Z W”, forming an acrostic for the name of his student, Wilhelm Ernst Graf Und Herr Zu Waldeck
- Reportedly, the hymn was inspired as a response to the death of young Count Wilhelm Ernst at age 14, a result of the black plague
- The original publication was given with the description, “a spiritual bridal song of the believing soul concerning her heavenly bridegroom, founded in the 45th Psalm of the prophet David”
- The English text is a very loose adaptation by William Mercer, who replaced Nicolai’s bridal imagery with a more general theme of praise

Tune: Philipp Nicolai (1556–1608), 1599

- Named WIE SCHÖN LEUCHTET after the original German text, was likely adapted from an even earlier melody
 - Along with the more famous “Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme”, are said to be the “Queen and King of Chorales”, having inspired settings by Bach, Pachelbel, Buxtehude, Praetorius, and others
 - Although the original had a lot of rhythmic variety (typical of the period), today we use an “isorhythmic” version with a consistent beat
 - The harmonization commonly used in hymnals today is by Johann Sebastian Bach
1. What stands out as unique about this hymn, compared to the usual Christmas carols? What particular insight or perspective does it give you?
 - a. Connects Old Testament metaphors (“Jesse’s rod”) with Revelation (“morning star”)
 - b. Doesn’t cover the Christmas “story” directly at all - no shepherds, angels, etc (perhaps since the original German was not a Christmas hymn)
 - c. Turns from prayers of petition in verses one and two into a prayer of praise in verse 3
 - d. Like Wesley, invites to join the praise already being sung: “rejoice, O heav’ns, and earth, reply / with praise, O sinners, fill the sky”