

*Advent Calendar 2 on DVD:
Christmas Carols Edition*

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December 1
O Come, O Come Emmanuel

Wait...wait...wait.... We spend a portion of each day waiting: waiting at stop signs and traffic lights or waiting on the bus, waiting at the doctor's office, or waiting in line at the supermarket. Is it then a surprise that the most wonderful time of the year is also a time of waiting?

The word Advent comes from a Latin word meaning "the coming" and refers to the first coming of Christ to the world at His birth, and to the anticipation of Christ's future return. The four weeks of Advent are a time of waiting, when people prepare their hearts and minds for the celebration of Christmas. For many, it is a time of spiritual renewal and rebirth.

The carol "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" is often sung as a prayer of invitation during the Advent season. The song is comprised of antiphons, which are short verses or responses that are sung at vespers during the week before Christmas in the liturgical Christian tradition. In the carol, each verse centers on a different name for Christ, though many people may not be familiar with these uniquely divine names.

The prophet Isaiah gives us many names for Christ including Emmanuel, meaning God with us, that is found in the song's first verse, and the Rod of Jesse in the second verse, which refers to Christ's family tree as traced back to Jesse, the father of King David.

Christ is also called the Dayspring in the carol's third verse. This name is found in the Gospel of Luke as a reference to a heavenly sunrise, and so singers of the third stanza are inviting Christ as Dayspring to break the dark clouds of night and cheer our spirits by His coming.

In the fourth verse, Christ is called the Key of David. As John Wesley explained, just as a king holds the key to unlock all the doors of his palace, so Christ alone holds the key that can open the door for his followers to do His work here on the earth. In the sixth verse, Christ is called the Desire of Nations, a phrase first used by the prophet Haggai in describing the Lord's first coming.

Even the song's refrain, "Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel," is a promise given by the Old Testament prophet Zechariah, who foretold that a King was coming.

As you sing this beautiful and holy Advent carol, reflect on the meaning of the season and the joy to come at the celebration of Christ's birth. You'll find it's worth the wait.

December 2 Deck the Halls

Did you know that the famous “fa-la-la-la” of this popular carol originally referred to the sound of the plucking of a harp?

The Christmas song “Deck the Halls” is a traditional Welsh melody, for which singers would make up verses to accompany the tune as they danced in a circle around a harp player. The phrase “troll the ancient yuletide carol” in the first stanza of the song actually refers to this practice of singing the melody of “Deck the Halls” as a round, similarly to how we sing “Row, Row, Row Your Boat” or “Frere Jacques” today.

The carol is one of the few to focus on the decorations and festivities of the season rather than the nativity story. That said, here are some trivial facts about the celebrations of Christmas.

- The idea of hanging an evergreen wreath was first invented by the Romans, who adorned their doors with greenery to wish each other good health in the New Year.
- There was once rumored to be a 165 pound holiday pie in medieval times that included many unusual ingredients including four geese, two rabbits, six pigeons, and seven blackbirds. Think about that the next time you sit down to Christmas dinner!
- The song “Deck the Halls” mentions a yule log, which was a firelog burned during the celebration of Christmas. Many households kept a piece of the log to start their first fire of the following year, hoping to continue their good fortune from year to year.
- Finally, did you know that many of your Christmas decorations have other uses? Pine needles are actually edible and contain vitamin C. Pinecones can be used to predict the weather, particularly the amount of water in the air. A pinecone’s scales will swell and close during humid days, but their scales will stay open on drier days.

As you prepare for the holidays, think of this joyful song and remember to give thanks for the good food, beautiful decorations, and fun family traditions of Advent and Christmas. And don’t forget to give thanks for the best gift of all!

December 3 Carol of the Bells

A Christmas carol that has nothing to do with Christmas?

Traditionally in the Ukraine, young women travel from door to door on New Year's Eve, singing folk songs in exchange for baked goods and treats. One of the popular folk songs sung on this day describes the adventures of a tiny swallow as it flies into a house, wishing its master wealth, a good harvest, and a beautiful wife. In 1916, composer Mykola Leontovich used the melody of the old folk song to complete a new choral work, which he titled "Bountiful" in his native language.

The new work traveled to America through a tour of the Ukrainian National Chorus and was first performed to a sold-out crowd at Carnegie Hall on October 5, 1921. American composer Peter Wilhousky said that the song reminded him of bells, and so he began writing new lyrics to the Ukrainian carol. The result, "Carol of the Bells," was first performed in 1936. Its updated message inspires listeners to leave behind the cares of the world for the joyful peal of bells, ringing in the Christmas season.

It is well known that bells have been an important part of worship throughout the centuries. The Old Testament Book of Exodus reveals that the high priests were instructed to attach bells to the hems of their robes, so that they might be heard entering and leaving the holy place. In Psalm 150, the instruction is given to praise the Lord with the loud cymbals. The word "cymbal" in Hebrew refers to a tinkling, ringing, or clanging instrument, such as a bell. In later centuries, bells were regularly used as a call to worship, summoning churchgoers to morning or evening services.

Today, it is common to see sacred songs and hymns performed by a handbell choir, though it is a strange footnote to history that circus promoter P.T. Barnum brought the first handbell ringers to America. The Swiss Bell Ringers, as Barnum named them, actually hailed from Lancashire, England, and performed in colorful outfits in Barnum's traveling show during the 1840s and 50s.

The great showman might have introduced handbells to the masses, but it was Massachusetts native Margaret Shurcliff who most influenced the modern American tradition of bellringing. She organized a professional guild of bellringers and paved the way for many handbell choirs to perform in concert halls and churches today.

Though Carol of the Bells may not have begun as a Christmas song, it has emerged as a seasonal classic, and a reminder that the good news of Christmas rings true during Advent and all year long.

December 4 The Holly and the Ivy

Will the groundhog see your Christmas lights as he searches for his shadow? Well, maybe, according to the tradition associated with the decorations of this popular holiday song.

The carol “The Holly and the Ivy” chronicles the story of the Christ Child as illustrated by the holly plant. The song’s origins are unknown, but according to ancient legend, the holly and ivy plants are rivals, with the holly representing the masculine characteristics of nature and the ivy representing the feminine.

The holly and the ivy plants have become a popular Christmas decoration for homes and churches, thanks to their beauty and abundance during the winter months. But did you know that before the 1900’s, many people did not decorate until Christmas Eve? Or that the decorations were often left up until the feast day of Candlemas on February 2? There were other traditions surrounding the plants, too, including the belief that to use ivy alone when decorating would result in a year of bad luck.

“The Holly and the Ivy” is itself a beautiful poem, even without its accompanying music. It is an unusual Christmas carol since it incorporates the story of Christ’s birth and death.

The holly and the ivy,
When both are well full grown.
Of all the trees that are in the wood,
The holly bears the crown.

Oh, the rising of the sun,
The running of the deer.
The playing of the merry organ,
Sweet singing in the choir.

The holly bears a blossom
As white as lily flower;
And Mary bore sweet Jesus Christ
To be our sweet Savior.

The holly bears a berry
As red as any blood;
And Mary bore sweet Jesus Christ
To do poor sinners good.

The holly bears a prickle;
As sharp as any thorn;
And Mary bore sweet Jesus Christ
On Christmas day in the morn.

The holly bears a bark
As bitter as any gall;
And Mary bore sweet Jesus Christ
For to redeem us all.

As you see the holly and ivy plants this Christmas, reflect on their special meaning and the wonderful story found in their leaves and branches. You'll be "berry" glad you did.

December 5 **Good Christian Men, Rejoice**

How did one of the most joyful Christmas carols of the season spring from two suffering saints of the faith?

For a pair of theologians born centuries apart in Europe, their lives intersected in the lyrics of a treasured Christmas hymn. The first, Henreich Suso, hailed from Germany in the early 14th century. From an early age, Suso was set apart for a holy life. He entered a Dominican convent when he was thirteen and went on to write several books and sermons. Some of Suso's work survives today, including one of his prose writings that is believed to be the original Latin lyrics to the song "Good Christian Men, Rejoice."

Many times, though, Suso's life did not reflect the joyous tone we find in his famous carol. Like many saints of his day, he deprived himself of many earthly pleasures as a way of connecting more deeply with Jesus and his suffering. Some of the ways Suso showed his intense devotion to God was by sleeping on a bare, cold floor in the winter and by going without a bath for 25 years.

Throughout his life, Suso also saw visions. The legend has been passed down through the ages that Suso once heard a beautiful song exclaimed by a chorus of angels, the words being the lyrics to Good Christian Men, Rejoice. Part of the legend also claims that while the angels sang, Suso joined them in a dance of praise and worship to God.

Though the exact origins of the song remain a mystery, its modern rediscovery has been well documented in church history. John Mason Neale was an English scholar and hymnwriter in the early 19th century. Like Suso, his life held its share of difficulties, including years of ill health and a calling to work as the warden of a residence for the poor. One of his special gifts to people throughout the world was his ability to translate ancient sacred music from the Latin and Greek into English. He translated the words for several endearing Christmas hymns including "A Great and Mighty Wonder," "O Come, O Come Emmanuel," "Good King Wenceslas," and "Good Christian Men, Rejoice."

As we continue our advent journey, let us remember to celebrate Christ as the source of this blessed season, recalling the words of the second stanza of "Good Christian Men, Rejoice":

He has opened the heavenly door, and man is blest forevermore.
Christ was born for this! Christ was born for this!

December 6

Up on the Housetop

Did you hear that? Could that be Santa up on the roof? And what does Santa have to do with another famous gift giver in Church history?

The answers to these questions are found in the life of pastor and songwriter Benjamin Russell Hanby, who was born and raised in Ohio and followed in his father's footsteps as a United Brethren in Christ pastor.

In 1864, Hanby set out to pen a song for a Christmas sing-a-long at church. The result was the song "Up on the Housetop," which tells the story of a visit from Santa Claus and his reindeer. It may seem strange that a pastor would forsake a nativity theme to compose a song about Santa. It is not strange, however, when one considers that our modern-day Santa has his roots in the historical figure of Saint Nicholas, a bishop who gained notoriety in the third century as a secret gift giver.

Legend tells of a poor man in Nicholas's village who did not have money for a dowry for his three daughters. Without a dowry of money or belongings, the daughters would have a difficult time finding a husband. When the bishop learned of the man's plight, he tossed three bags of gold coins, one for each of the young women, down the man's chimney. As the years passed, Saint Nicholas was known throughout the village for using his inheritance to give anonymous gifts to the poor and needy. And as the bishop's fame spread beyond his hometown of Myra, so did his image of a kind man with a long, white flowing beard. It is the likeness of the real Saint Nicholas that over time has become the face of Santa Claus as we know him today.

After the success of "Up on the Housetop," Benjamin Hanby traveled to Chicago in 1865 to publish music. Unfortunately while there, he fell ill with tuberculosis and Reverend Hanby died in 1867 when he was only thirty-three years old. Despite his short life, he wrote over 80 songs, including the traditional song "Darling Nelly Gray" and the Christmas hymn, "Who is He in Yonder Stall?"

Today, you are more likely to hear Hanby's most famous song, "Up on the Housetop," on the radio rather than at church. We'll never know for sure, but perhaps Hanby wrote this song with the idea that it would spread beyond his congregation, bringing a message of joy and giving to all during the Christmas season. And if not, well, at least it would explain those strange noises up on the roof.

December 7
Hark the Herald Angels Sing

What does the invention of the printing press have to do with one of the most beloved Christmas carols of the season?

Charles Wesley was known as a great songwriter and poet. He and his brother, John, were also the leaders of a new movement in the Church of England known as Methodism. In 1739, he published a book titled *Hymns and Sacred Poems*. One of the lesser-known works in the volume, at least at that time, was a poem titled, "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing."

The poem might have been lost to obscurity had it not been for English musician William Hayman Cummings. As a teenager, Cummings was a member of a choir that performed composer Felix Mendelssohn's masterpiece "Elijah" at London's Exeter Hall. From then on, Cummings followed the great composer's career, a decision that would one day bring together the lyrics of Wesley with the music of Mendelssohn.

The event that inspired Cummings was Mendelssohn's "Festival Song Cantata," written in celebration of the invention of the printing press by Johann Gutenberg. Mendelssohn's composition honoring the invention was first performed in 1840 at a festival in Leipzig, Germany.

It would be another fifteen years before Cummings would pair the second chorus of the Festival Song with Wesley's "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing" to create the famous carol. Mendelssohn once said that his "Festival Song" should not be used as a basis for sacred music. Thankfully, Cummings ignored the composer's wish. The end result is a song that masterfully brings to life the words of the Old Testament prophets Isaiah and Malachi in its concluding verse:

Hail, the heaven born prince of peace!
Hail, the sun of righteousness.
Life and light to all He brings,
Ris'n with healing in His wings.
Mild, he lays his glory by,
Born that man no more may die.
Pleased as man with man to dwell,
Jesus, our Emmanuel.
Hark! The herald angels sing,
"Glory to the newborn King!"

Glory, indeed! Thanks to the words of Charles Wesley, the music of Felix Mendelssohn, and the genius of William Cummings, this great Christmas carol endures as a joyous story of our Emmanuel and His blessed birth.

December 8

How Great Our Joy

Peanuts creator Charles Schultz said that happiness is a warm puppy. But you don't have to own a dog to enjoy this popular Christmas carol.

The song "How Great Our Joy" is a traditional German carol with a lively tempo. The carol describes the joy we find in the culmination of the Christmas season at the birth of the Savior:

While by the sheep we watched at night,
Glad tidings brought an angel bright.

There shall be born, so He did say,
In Bethlehem a Child today.

There shall the Child lie in a stall,
This Child who shall redeem us all.

This gift of God we'll cherish well,
That ever joy our hearts shall fill.

How great our joy! Great our joy!
Joy, joy, joy!
Praise we the Lord in heaven on high!

Just singing the words to the carol "How Great Our Joy" is bound to make you feel happier. But did you know that there are many scientists and pollsters dedicated to the study of happiness? Based on their research, we learn that about one-half of the general population describes themselves as "pretty happy." It seems that married people are happier than unmarried people, that middle aged and older adults are happier than younger adults, that people who live in the suburbs are happier than those who live in the city, that people who live in sunnier locations are happier than those who live in rainy or snowy places, and that people who worship regularly are happier than those who don't. There's even a survey that says we enjoy visiting relatives more than we like to admit, which is bound to make for a happier holiday.

The poet Robert Frost once said that, "Happiness makes up in height for what it lacks in length." Though the four weeks of Advent may seem brief, may your spirit soar higher than the mountaintops, and let the celebration of the season extend to every day of the year, filling your life with the great joy of the Christmas story.

December 9 **O Christmas Tree**

A tree with swinging toys and presents?

The earliest account of a Christmas tree written by the epic poet Virgil describes such a fanciful sight. Later accounts tell of the trees and decorations used by the Romans in their celebration of the god Saturn.

These accounts predate the carol “O, Christmas Tree,” as does the legend of Saint Boniface. The saint is widely credited with the tradition of associating an evergreen tree with Christmas. This tradition began when a fir tree grew in place of a tree called the Oak of Thor that the saint had chopped down in a protest against false religions. The credit for the tradition of decorating the home with a Christmas tree belongs to Martin Luther, who adorned a small fir tree with candles.

The song “O, Christmas Tree,” was originally written in German and was one of many German folk songs to honor the “tannenbaum” or fir tree. There are many variations of the lyrics to the song, making this carol as unique as Christmas trees themselves. While many trees are decorated with angels or topped with a star in a tribute to the nativity story, trees can also be found with a variety of decorations reflecting the creativity and personal expression of the individuals who trim their branches with ornaments and ribbons.

It is believed that Saint Boniface told those who saw the fir tree spring from the trunk of the fallen oak that just as the evergreen remains green even on the darkest days, so Christ is the constant light. Perhaps the anonymous songwriter of “O Christmas Tree” was paying tribute to the saint, as reflected in one popular rendition of the carol which states,

O Christmas tree, O Christmas tree,
Thy leaves are so unchanging;
Not only green when summer’s here,
But also when ‘tis cold and drear.
O Christmas tree, O Christmas tree,
Thy leaves are so unchanging.

The Scriptures remind us that Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Let those words be a comfort and an inspiration to you in this season of Advent and all year through.

December 10
Pat-a-Pan

Before there was the familiar “pa-rum-pa-pum-pum” of the Little Drummer Boy, there was the “pat-a-pat-a-pan” and “tu-re-lu-re-lu” of Guillaume and Robin, a pair of shepherds who played their flute and drum before the Christ child.

Their story is told in the song known as “Pat-a-Pan,” which originated in the French region of Burgundy in the seventeenth century. “Pat-a-Pan” tells the story of shepherds playing their songs at the nativity. “To the sound of flute and drum, shepherds to the stable come, we must play our music well, tu-re-lu-re-lu, pat-a-pan-a-pan, we must play our music well, to the Savior sing Noel.”

The song uses a peculiar literary device called onomatopoeia, which refers to a word that imitates the sound associated with it. Say the word “buzz” and listen to how it sounds like the noise a bee makes as it flies through the air. The same goes for “pat-a-pat-a-pan,” which sounds like the beating of a drum, and “tu-re-le-re-lu,” which sounds like the airy notes of a flute.

While the Bible tells us that the shepherds glorified and praised God for all they had seen regarding the birth of Christ, there is no specific reference to musical instruments in any of the Gospel accounts of this event. So how did the idea of shepherds playing the drum and flute come into being?

Perhaps the answer is best revealed in the Old Testament book of Psalms, where worshipers praise the Lord with the trumpet, stringed instruments, harp, tambourine, flute, and cymbals. The legend of shepherds playing their flute and drum echoed the actions of worshippers throughout the ages who offered their worship through music, one of our most personal human expressions.

As you hear the song Pat-a-Pan and other sounds of the season, take a moment and reflect on what gift you bring today to the Christ Child. In the words of poet Christina Rossetti,

“What can I give Him, poor as I am? If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb. If I were a wise man, I would do my part, yet what can I give him? Give my heart.”

December 11
O Come, All Ye Faithful

You may have heard of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's famous "Sonnet to the Portuguese," but did you know that there is also a "Portuguese Hymn?" We know this song by at least two other names.

The Christmas carol "O Come, All Ye Faithful" is also known by its Latin name, "Adeste Fideles." Because it was sung at the Portuguese embassy in London in the late 1700's, the song has also been called the "Portuguese Hymn." The carol is commonly attributed to Englishman John Francis Wade, who spent his life copying and distributing church music, particularly Latin music.

Whether you call this song by its English or Latin name, there is little doubt that it has become a popular Christmas standard. Its words are majestic in both languages and invite us to humble ourselves in worship before the Christ child.

Adeste fideles
Laeti triumphantes
Venite, venite in Bethlehem
Natum videte, Regem angelorum

Venite adoremus
Venite adoremus
Venite adoremus
Dominum

O come, all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant,
O come ye, O come ye, to Bethlehem.
Come and behold Him, born the King of angels;

O come, let us adore Him,
O come, let us adore Him,
O come, let us adore Him,
Christ the Lord.

Continue your Advent journey by coming faithfully and opening your heart to Christ. As famed spiritual writer Henri Nouwen once said, "If we create space in which God can speak and act, something surprising will happen."

December 12

It Came Upon a Midnight Clear

We see them in art and sing about them in many Christmas carols. So what role did angels play in the nativity and what Christmas song tells their story?

Like many Christmas carols, “It Came Upon a Midnight Clear” began first as a poem, and then later, as a song. The poem was written by Edmund Sears, a Unitarian pastor from Massachusetts, who was inspired as he warmed himself by the fire on a snowy December day. The words to the poem were first published four days after Christmas in 1849 in Boston’s Christian Register.

Strangely, it was a student of Felix Mendelssohn, the composer of the tune to “Hark the Herald Angels Sing,” who would provide the melody for yet another hymn about angels. The student, Richard Willis Storrs, composed a tune titled Carol in 1850. The melody was paired with Sears’s published poem to form the famous Christmas song, “It Came Upon a Midnight Clear.”

The song tells the story of the angels, who play on their golden harps a beautiful melody, exclaiming “peace on the earth, good will to men, from Heaven’s all gracious King.” Most people understand that the song refers to the nativity story, but some people also believe the last stanza of the song foretells the events of the last days and that the “prophet bard” of the final verse is the Old Testament prophet Isaiah.

Those familiar words, “when peace shall over all the earth its ancient splendors fling,” may be a reference to Isaiah’s prophecy about the judgment of the nations, when “they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation...”

One thing is certain. The Gospel of Luke clearly reveals the role of the angels in the nativity, when they gathered as a multitude to worship the newborn king and proclaim peace throughout the land.

The Bible also tells us that we should love others and be kind to strangers, as we may be entertaining angels without our knowledge. As you hear or sing this beloved Christmas song, keep your eyes and ears open. Who knows? An angel just might be watching!

December 13 I Saw Three Ships

They might not have been the *Nina*, the *Pinta*, or the *Santa Maria*, but these three ships that came sailing in on Christmas Day have become part of a festive, and puzzling, yuletide song.

We know very little about the origins of the traditional Christmas carol “I Saw Three Ships.” The earliest printed version of the carol can be traced to England in the 1600s. A variety of lyrics have appeared over the years, each interspersed with the simplistic yet hypnotic use of the phrase “on Christmas day in the morning.” The song is light and joyful and is a favorite for children’s choirs, perhaps because its words are repetitive and easy to memorize.

There are two mysteries surrounding this popular traditional Christmas song. The first is the debate of what the three ships represent. Some have speculated that the trio of vessels refers to the three wise men and their gifts brought to the newborn king. Other historians point to an old Scottish song called “As I Sat on a Sunny Bank” that mentions a sailing ship containing Saint Michael, Saint John, and the Lord. The most common belief about the carol is that the ships represent Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus. However, the mystery deepens when the question is posed in the third stanza of the song as to what is in those ships all three on Christmas day, on Christmas day. The answer, “the Savior Christ, and his lady,” equals only two people, and not three.

And if that wasn’t confusing enough, the song then asks, “Pray whither sailed those ships all three on Christmas day, on Christmas day?” According to the carol’s lyrics, the ships sailed into Bethlehem. However, this is impossible since the city is positioned in the hill country of Judea, a land best known for livestock rather than fishing. Bethlehem is well inland from either the Mediterranean or the Dead Sea and is 2,500 feet above sea level, ruling out the possibility of a literal ship sailing into a bustling port city.

While some parts of the song may remain a mystery, its final stanzas are easy to understand. They tell us of the joy to come when all the bells on earth shall ring, and all the angels in heaven shall sing on Christmas Day in the morning.

As we reach the halfway mark of our Advent journey, let us examine our hearts and lives and make sure that they are in “ship shape” to receive the greatest Christmas gift of all.

December 14

The First Noel

Would you be afraid if you saw an angel? Maybe, at least according to the shepherds, whose story is told in a traditional Christmas hymn.

As with many carols, the exact roots of “The First Noel” are unknown. Some believe that the word “noel” is a French word meaning a shout for joy. Others believe that it is derived from the Latin word “natalis” meaning birth, or from the word “novella” which means news. Some scholars have also speculated that an English variation of the word “nowell” is a shortened version of the phrase “now all is well.” Any of these explanations are appropriate to the message and meaning of the song.

“The First Noel” follows the story of the shepherds and wise men on the evening of the nativity. The song accurately reflects the account we find in Scripture of a star in the east that moved across the sky until it stood over the place where the young child lay. We know from the account of the nativity in the Gospel of Matthew that the wise men followed this star, and that upon reaching the baby Jesus, they humbled themselves before him and presented gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

The song also tells us that this first noel was to “certain poor shepherds” of the arrival of their newborn king. But why would God choose shepherds as the first people to hear the good news of Christ’s birth? At this time in history, shepherding was not a desirable profession. It involved wandering the hills of the Judean countryside, working alone in rainy or cold conditions. Shepherds were held in little esteem, as we discover from the story in Luke’s Gospel, where we are told that those who had heard the news of Christ’s birth from the shepherds wondered about the truth of this message. Perhaps it was their lowly status in life that moved God to bless the shepherds with the first news of His son, or to pay tribute to them later when Jesus described himself as the Great Shepherd.

Regardless, “The First Noel” reminds all of us that just as the “certain poor shepherds” received the announcement of their King, so we today can be certain that God is continually sending a message of good news to the world.

December 15
Jolly Old Saint Nicholas

Shhhh...can you keep a secret? So could another famous saint in church history known for his secret gift giving.

The origin of the song Jolly Old Saint Nicholas is unknown. But while the author of the song may be anonymous, its central figure is well known as a benevolent saint named Saint Nicholas who became the model for our modern Santa Claus.

As we learned from the story of the carol “Up on the Housetop,” we know Saint Nicholas secretly gave to others, which is the focus of the song. But even the title tells us something about the life of Saint Nicholas. In the early church, most saints lived a difficult life before dying young as a martyr for the faith. This was not the case for Saint Nicholas, who enjoyed a sizeable inheritance, a steady career in the church, and a long life that ended with the saint passing away in his sleep.

Countries around the world celebrate the legend of Saint Nicholas. Perhaps the most famous festivities occur in the Netherlands, where children leave shoes outside their doors. Sinterklaas or one of his assistants fills the shoes with candy and toys, and there are parades, gift giving, and merrymaking as the Dutch celebrate the birthday of Saint Nicholas. In Italy, young brides are given gifts before their marriage in honor of Nicholas’s act centuries ago of providing a dowry to a poor man’s three daughters.

But, in some nations, old Saint Nicholas is not so jolly. In Switzerland, the saint puts bad children into a sack and threatens to turn them loose in the Black Forest or dump them in the river. In some European nations such as Austria, France, and Croatia, disobedient children receive a rod instead of gifts, and in some extreme cases, the parish priest dressed in the garments of the saint, visits the home of unruly children, threatening to use the rod for correction.

As you give gifts this Christmas, remember the spirit of Jolly Old Saint Nicholas and the excitement in a young child’s eyes at the sight of presents under the tree or stockings filled with treats. Let the joy of these moments remind you of the greatest gift of all and the reason that we celebrate the Advent season.

And children, be good– you never know who’ll come knocking!

December 16
Angels We Have Heard on High

According to writer and philosopher Martin Farquhar Tupper, “A babe in the house is a well-spring of pleasure, a messenger of peace and love, a resting place for innocence on earth, a link between angels and men.” This truth echoes in the lyrics of an angelic Christmas carol.

The words to the song “Angels We Have Heard on High” derived from a traditional French carol of the angels in the countryside and is usually sung to a tune called “Gloria” composed by American organist Edward Shippen Barnes.

The carol describes the joy of the angels at Christ’s birth.

Angels we have heard on high
Sweetly singing o’er the plains.
And the mountains in reply
Echoing their joyous strains.

The chorus of “Angels We Have Heard on High” exclaims “Gloria in excelsis Deo!” which means, “Glory to God in the highest.” The word angel in Latin means messenger, which is confirmed by the Gospel account of the angels bringing tidings of great joy to the shepherds abiding in the fields. The Scriptures also tell us of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace, good will toward men.”

Of course, the angels of the Bible differ greatly from how we might imagine them today, thanks to their portrayal in books, television, and movies.

It has been said that if you have trouble hearing the songs of angels with your ears, try listening with your heart. That’s good advice for Advent and all year through.

December 17 **Joy to the World**

What does the tune to a beloved nursery rhyme have in common with a renowned Christmas song?

The carol “Joy to the World,” was written by Isaac Watts, often called the father of hymn writing who produced many classics including “O God, Our Help in Ages Past” and “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross.” The melody is credited to two composers: George Frederic Handel, famous for his epic oratio “The Messiah,” and Lowell Mason, a banker, composer and educator who established the first Sunday School for African-American children and wrote the tune for the children’s rhyme, “Mary Had a Little Lamb.”

Watts based the words to the song on Psalm 98, which reflects the beauty of an adoring creation:

Make a joyful noise unto the Lord, all the earth: make a loud noise and rejoice, and sing praise. With trumpets and horns make a joyful noise before the Lord, the King. Let the sea roar . . . Let the waters clap their hands and let the hills be joyful together.” It is this invitation to sing a new song to the Lord that we find contained in the carol’s second stanza.

Joy to the world! The Savior reigns;
Let men their songs employ;
While fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains
Repeat the sounding joy,
Repeat the sounding joy!

Psalm 98 ends with a promise that the Lord is coming to judge the earth in righteousness. It is this assurance of a second Advent, not of a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes in a manger, but of a ruler King, that is eloquently restated in the closing stanza of the famous carol:

He rules the world with truth and grace,
And makes the nations prove
The glories of his righteousness,
And wonders of His love,
And wonders of His love.

“Joy to the World” is a unique Christmas carol in that it can be sung year around. While its words are timely during Advent, its enduring message of hope, joy, and love is always in season.

December 18

Jingle Bells

Could it be that one of the most famous Christmas songs worldwide is actually about...Thanksgiving?

Listen carefully to the words of “Jingle Bells” and you won’t hear a single reference to Christmas. So how did the song get to be a holiday standard? According to tradition, composer James Lord Pierpont wrote the song to be performed originally at a Thanksgiving program at his church. It is said that the congregation loved the catchy tune and performed it again at Christmastime, and from that time on, it became a yuletide favorite. What we definitively know about the song is that it was copyrighted in 1857 under the name “One Horse Open Sleigh” to Pierpont, who was at that time serving as an organist in a Unitarian church in Savannah, Georgia.

The song “Jingle Bells” recalls the mid 19th century, years before automobiles were affordable or readily available. At this time, sleigh riding was a popular form of travel and entertainment. Modern listeners less familiar with this mode of transportation are often puzzled by the song’s famous phrase “bells on bob tail ring,” which does not refer to the horse’s name as some people believe, but instead to the trimming or “bobbing” of a horse’s tail to keep it from getting caught in the reins.

The song “Jingle Bells” is often compared to another light Thanksgiving tune, “Over the river and through the woods, to Grandmother’s house we go.” One can easily picture a family dashing through the snow on their wagon or sleigh, merrily singing these two songs as they ride.

As for James Pierpont, the song “Jingle Bells” was perhaps his greatest achievement in a colorful life, in which the musician also served as a sailor, a merchant in California during the gold rush, a photographer, and a Confederate soldier. In honor of the success of “Jingle Bells,” Pierpont was inducted in the Songwriters Hall of Fame in 1970.

Today, “Jingle Bells” is played and sung as an invitation to the fun and frivolity of the holiday season. It is a perfect song as we near the end of Advent because it reminds us of the joy we share with family and friends as we decorate the tree, bake cookies, wrap gifts, and prepare for the celebration ahead.

Plus, as we’ve just discovered, the song goes great with turkey, too.

December 19 **Away in a Manger**

You may have heard the expression that “hay is for horses,” but did you know it was once for the Christ child, too?

We do not know who composed the Christmas carol “Away in a Manger.” Some have attributed the carol to Martin Luther because it was published at one time along side Luther’s “Cradle Hymn,” but scholars today do not believe he wrote the song.

Despite its unknown origin, this Christmas carol reminds us of the lowly conditions in which Christ was born. We know from the account of the nativity found in the Gospel of Luke that Joseph and Mary were on their way to Bethlehem to pay taxes as ordered by Caesar Augustus. The city was flooded with visitors following the ruler’s command, and so the inns were full. For this reason, Joseph and Mary took cover in a stable and it was there that Mary gave birth to the Christ Child, as the song proclaims:

Away in a manger,
No crib for a bed,
The little Lord Jesus
Lay down His sweet head.
The stars in the sky
Looked down where he lay.
The Little Lord Jesus
Asleep on the hay.

The word manger comes from a Latin word meaning “to chew” and refers to a wooden box or trough used to feed livestock and wild animals. Hay is a popular manger food for horses, sheep, and goats, especially when animals are kept in a stable as they would have been during the winter at the time of the nativity.

Today, hay is still an important food for these animals, sometimes comprising one hundred percent of an animal’s diet. The production of hay has changed since the time of Christ, so that now it is made into squares or large round bales by a machine instead of being loosely stacked in a stable.

As you see livestock in the fields or barn, reflect on God’s gift to mankind, born in a stable and laid in a manger, and remember that just as the animals need their food, so we need our food, the Bread of Life, given to us on a winter’s night long ago.

December 20
What Child is This?

How did Shakespeare and an insurance salesman influence the development of a popular Christmas carol?

“Greensleeves” was a folk song in the time of William Shakespeare. Some people believe that King Henry VIII of England penned the song, which was written about a beautiful woman named Lady Greensleeves. This idea may have originated when Henry’s daughter Elizabeth danced to the tune, though many scholars today believe that this theory is false. We do know that the references to the song were made popular by Shakespeare’s play “The Merry Wives of Windsor.” At one point in the play, a trio of traitors is hanged while musicians play this joyful melody. Also, in act five, the song is referenced when Falstaff says, “Let the sky rain potatoes; let it thunder to the tune of Green Sleeves.”

As with many popular folk songs, the melody of “Greensleeves” was paired with updated lyrics to create the modern carol “What Child is This?” The man responsible for the transformation was Englishman William Chatterton Dix, an insurance agent who also wrote hymns including another Christmas classic, “As With Gladness Men of Old.”

It is easy to imagine a song such as “What Child is This” offered as a soothing lullaby, one as well suited for a newborn baby today as it would have been for the new life born in a lowly stable in Bethlehem. The carol’s words invite listeners to imagine the manger scene:

What Child is this who, laid to rest
On Mary's lap is sleeping?
Whom Angels greet with anthems sweet,
While shepherds watch are keeping?

This, this is Christ the King,
Whom shepherds guard and Angels sing;
Haste, haste, to bring Him laud,
The Babe, the Son of Mary.

So bring Him incense, gold and myrrh,
Come peasant, king to own Him;
The King of kings salvation brings,
Let loving hearts enthrone Him.

Raise, raise a song on high,
The virgin sings her lullaby.
Joy, joy for Christ is born,
The Babe, the Son of Mary.

Just as a lullaby quiets a crying babe, so the words of this carol can soothe the weariest soul with its message of hope and joy. As Christmas nears, let your heart enthrone the Christ child as your King, for Advent and always.

December 21
God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen

This song is a favorite of carolers and choirs at Christmas, but it was despised by one of the most famous fictional characters in history.

The song “God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen” is a traditional song whose origins are unknown. Certainly its bright melody and staccato rhythm has made it the perfect song for carolers and acapella singing groups. Of course its lyrics, which tell the main events of the nativity story, also contribute to its popularity.

While we may not know who wrote the tune or the lyrics to “God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen,” we do know that Charles Dickens wrote about the song in his literary classic, “A Christmas Carol.”

In the story, a young man appears to the miserly Ebenezer Scrooge, attempting to cheer him with a Christmas carol. "God bless you merry, gentlemen! May nothing you dismay!" Then, according to the story, “Scrooge seized the ruler with such energy of action, that the singer fled in terror, leaving the keyhole to the fog and even more congenial frost."

Of course, it wasn't long before the ghosts of Christmas past, Christmas present, and Christmas future visited Scrooge, melting his heart of stone into one of compassion and kindness. And by the end of the story, not only was Scrooge able to wish others a merry Christmas, but it was said that even his own heart laughed. He found the redemption and joy found in the first stanza of the famous carol:

God rest ye merry, gentlemen,
Let nothing you dismay.
Remember Christ our Savior
Was born on Christmas Day,
To save us all from Satan's pow'r
When we were gone astray.
O tidings of comfort and joy, comfort and joy,
O tidings of comfort and joy.

As you sing this carol, maybe your song, too, will reach the most hardened scrooge and bring a merry heart to someone you know this Advent season. As Dickens said at the conclusion to his story, “keep Christmas well” and may “God bless us every one.”

December 22

O Holy Night

This song is a favorite of sopranos and tenors around the world, but did you know it was also the first song to be played on the radio?

The song “Cantique de Noel,” translated in English as “O Holy Night,” originated in France in the mid 1800s. The words were written by poet Placide Cappeau and were later set to music by composer Adolphe Adam. Though Adam was well known in his day for writing ballets and comic operas, he is best remembered for writing the music for this beautiful Christmas classic. The song’s fame grew as “O Holy Night” was translated in English by Unitarian minister John Sullivan Dwight in 1855.

“O Holy Night” has earned two special footnotes to history. The first occurred on Christmas Eve, 1870, during the Franco Prussian War, when a French soldier emerged from the trenches, singing this native carol. The Prussians ceased fire, and soon one young German soldier emerged from his trench, replying by singing a Christmas hymn penned by Martin Luther. The second time the song made history was on Christmas Eve, 1906, when Canadian Reginald Fessenden played “O Holy Night” on the violin during the first AM radio broadcast.

The song “O Holy Night” is lovely both in lyrics and melody. It perfectly describes the nativity story, beginning with the shining stars of the night of the Savior’s birth and ending with the newborn hope of a weary world, the Lord Jesus Christ. The carol invites us to fall on our knees, to listen to the angel voices and to the news of Christ’s birth.

Then, the song extends beyond the Bethlehem story. It tells us of the Savior that is a friend in trial, a Savior that knows our needs. It tells us of a God that teaches us to love each other, to live a Gospel of peace, to break the bonds of slavery and oppression, to join together in praise.

As “O Holy Night” takes us deeper into the Scriptures, it also increases in its intensity, so that by its final notes, many singers erupt in a crescendo of voice and emotion. As the final lines declare, “Christ is the Lord! O praise His name forever. His power and glory evermore proclaim. His power and glory evermore proclaim.”

December 23
O Little Town of Bethlehem

How did a New England pastor bring the sights and sounds of Bethlehem to millions worldwide through a simple song?

Phillips Brooks achieved much in his lifetime. He was an Episcopal priest who pastored historic churches in Philadelphia and Boston, became a bishop in Massachusetts, preached and taught at Harvard, and was fondly remembered and deeply mourned when he passed away in 1893.

Phillips Brooks loved Christmas and fully embraced the joy and celebration of the season. He also loved children. Though he did not have a family of his own, Brooks always kept toys in his church office and could be frequently found entertaining young visitors. One year, he wanted to write a new song for the children to sing at Christmas. He thought back to a trip he had taken years before to the Holy Land and drew deep from the well of that experience to pen what has become a Christmas classic.

As he wrote, perhaps Brooks imagined life on an ordinary day in Bethlehem: the smell of fresh baked bread, the coolness of life-giving water poured into simple clay pots, the brays of donkeys and neighs of horses, the laughter of friends at mealtime spilling out into the streets, and the coos of a satisfied child cradled in his mother's arms. Perhaps he recalled from his own experience how the day melted to night as the town settled into its deep and dreamless sleep. And perhaps, in his mind, Brooks traveled back to an ordinary night long ago in Bethlehem, when the miraculous happened, and the city awoke to the presence of the Everlasting Light, Emmanuel, God with us.

Brooks turned over the lyrics for his new song to church organist Lewis Redner, who wrote the music for the song we know today as "O Little Town of Bethlehem." When Brooks heard the completed version, he remarked that the song was "a gift from heaven."

Indeed, it was. For while theology and knowledge of the prophecies concerning Christ's birth led Phillips Brooks to Bethlehem, it was his faith that carried him to the heart of a child in a manger, and to the hearts of children and adults each year who sing his beloved Christmas hymn.

December 24 Silent Night

We may not know what he looks like, but we will forever celebrate the accomplishments of a parish priest who wrote the Christmas song heard around the world.

The song “Silent Night” is one of the most beloved Christmas carols and has been translated into over three hundred languages. Father Josef Mohr, a priest who was also known for his charitable work for poor children and the elderly, wrote the original words in German. However, there are no existing photos of Father Mohr. The best description we have of him comes from a bishop who wrote that the priest was “a reliable friend to mankind, toward the poor, a gentle, helping father.”

Father Mohr gave the words of “Silent Night” to church organist and teacher Franz Gruber and asked him to compose an arrangement of the song for guitar. It was this version, with Father Mohr playing the guitar, which was first performed on Christmas Eve, 1818 in the Church of St. Nicholas in Obendorf.

Today, many worshippers sing “Silent Night” as part of a Christmas Eve candlelight service. There are two sources of the carols by candlelight tradition. The first was from a hired band of singers who would travel by candlelight from house to house throughout a village, singing carols on Christmas Eve. These singers were called “waits” after the shepherds who waited in the field for the Messiah’s birth.

The second source, which contributed to the modern popularity of candlelight services, sprung from the performance of the first “Nine Lessons and Carols” service in 1918 by the choir of King’s College of Cambridge, England. The service tells the nativity story by combining Scripture reading with the singing of carols and was performed to celebrate the end of World War I. Since then, churches around the world have continued the tradition of carols by candlelight.

On this day before Christmas, take a moment to quiet your heart and to reflect once again on the arrival of Christ to the world.

Silent night, holy night,
Son of God, love’s pure light.
Radiant beams from Thy holy face
With the dawn of redeeming grace.
Jesus, Lord, at Thy birth.
Jesus, Lord, at Thy birth.

December 25
I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day

What does a popular Christmas song about peace on earth have to do with Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer and the deadliest conflict in American history?

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow had it all: a promising writing career, a beloved wife, and five adoring children. But everything changed on a summer day in July of 1861 when the author's beloved wife, Fanny, died after her dress caught fire by the blowing flame of a candle.

Longfellow was devastated by the loss, and when Christmas arrived that year, he wrote in his journal, "How inexpressibly sad are all holidays." It seemed the next year was equally disheartening, for in his Christmas day journal entry, Longfellow wrote, "A merry Christmas say the children, but that is no more for me."

The author was certainly not alone in his brokenness. The nation was being torn at the seams by the Civil War, and it seemed tragedy visited many families during that dark time. The war would touch the Longfellow household as well, when the family received news that oldest son Charles had been shot in the shoulder on November 27, 1863 during the Mine Run campaign. The boy lived, but his injuries caused great distress, so much so that Henry did not even record a journal entry that Christmas.

It wasn't until the following year that Henry found the courage to pour out his soul on paper. The result was a poem titled, "Christmas Bells."

I heard the bells on Christmas day
Their old familiar carols play,
And wild and sweet the words repeat
Of peace on earth, good will to men.

And thought how, as the day had come,
The belfries of all Christendom
Had rolled along the unbroken song
Of peace on earth, good will to men.

Till ringing, singing on its way
The world revolved from night to day,
A voice, a chime, a chant sublime
Of peace on earth, good will to men.

Sound familiar so far? We know these stanzas today as the lyrics to the song, "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day." It was first set to music by British organist John Baptiste Calkin, and then by American Johnny Marks, who also composed the music to "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer." But what few people know is that Longfellow

wrote the poem "Christmas Bells" about the American Civil War, as the next two verses reveal.

Then from each black, accursed mouth
The cannon thundered in the South,
And with the sound the carols drowned
Of peace on earth, good will to men.

It was as if an earthquake rent
The hearth-stones of a continent,
And made forlorn, the households born
Of peace on earth, good will to men.

The rest of the poem answers the question of whether peace on earth can be found in a time of war and suffering.

And in despair I bowed my head
"There is no peace on earth," I said,
"For hate is strong and mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good will to men."

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
"God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;
The wrong shall fail, the right prevail
With peace on earth, good will to men."

At last, on Christmas Day, 1864, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow had found peace, both for his grieving heart, and for an embattled nation. As you reflect on the blessings of the season, may you, too, find peace on Christmas day and all year through.