

A Holy, Joy-Filled Night

1. This Sunday, the last before Advent, we will look at the theology in two more carols. The first one has an interesting history – and a place in history.
2. “O Holy Night” is a staple for choirs at Christmas but a struggle for nonprofessionals due to its range. It has been covered by hundreds or even thousands of singers over the years. Everyone from Maria Carey, Celine Dion, Josh Groban, Martina McBride, and the cast of Glee...
3. The words were inspired by a French poem, attached to the tune we know well and translated into English by 1855. That date is important. You will see why in a moment. The song is truly a tour de force both melodically and linguistically. The first verse sets the stage magically: “O holy night! The stars are brightly shining. It is the night of the dear Savior’s birth. Long lay the world in sin and error pining, ‘Til He appeared and the soul felt its worth.”
4. Here, not quite through the first verse, we need to emphasize the fact that far too few souls have felt their worth in our present world. They try to measure worth by money, talent, beauty, sex, likes on social media, joining the right crowd, and more. The only thing more tragic than them not knowing how much they are worth is when Christians treat them as if they had no, or lesser, worth.
5. We are not in the world to judge it. We are in the world to spread the good news by word and deed – and attitude. How much is that soul worth? It is worth a trip across the universe from well beyond the borders of human imagination to a tiny inn in Bethlehem. If God judges that to be true, who are we to argue?
6. The first verse continues: A thrill of hope the weary world rejoices for yonder breaks a new and glorious morn.” As Paul said, the whole creation groans in anticipation for its rebirth. (Romans 8:19-21,24)
7. At the realization of the love of God made real among us, the rest of the verse exclaims: “fall on your knees! O, hear the angel voices!” Remember: the story of Jesus is good news. Evangelists should be

spreading good news, not end of the world fantasies and endless rules and denunciations.

8. The next verse is also lovely: “Led by the light of faith serenely beaming, with glowing hearts by his cradle we stand. Here come the wise men from Orient land, the King of kings lay thus lowly manger, in all our trials born to be our friend.” The theology in this is deep and perfect. The history...not so much. Yet, this was in a gospel that was in wide use until the 1500s. We believe now that the wise men arrived at least 1 and up to 2 years later but...let's not quibble.
9. Here is a king that is also our friend and who will go through our trials with us. Note: he doesn't save us from having to go through them. He doesn't sweep them from the path in front of us. He goes on them with us as our friend (a call back to John 14-16?).
10. And then comes the 3rd verse, a verse that caused all kinds of uproar in America. Tensions over slavery had already reached the point where people were being shot in the street and their homes burned down in violent clashes between abolitionists and slave holders. Just one year after this song was published, Representative Preston Brooks of South Carolina entered the Senate Chamber and beat Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts into unconsciousness.
11. While Sumner would survive, he bore scars the rest of his life. Both men became heroes to their constituents. War drums were already sounding across the nation. And “O Holy Night”? It took sides. “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.”
12. Solid theology here, right from the short book of Philemon where Paul declared that slaves were our brothers and were to be treated with grace and as if they were our own family. While Roman law forbade the freeing of slaves, Christians were told that the old ways were over and, while they could not lawfully free them, they were to elevate them and share equally with them as with their own flesh and blood.

13. Both anti-slavery and pro-slavery churches claimed that God was on their side but a reading of the Gospels and Philemon makes it plain that this song, which helped change attitudes and enflame a nation, had it right.
14. Let's take a very quick look at another carol: Joy To the World. In its first verse, it says "Joy to the world, the Lord has come. Let earth receive her King. Let every heart prepare Him room and heaven and nature sing."
15. Loaded with theology, this verse announces that the true king of the earth is Christ and Christ alone. We, unlike the inn keeper, are to make room for him (although the inn keeper gets harsh treatment by the telling of this story, he likely had no room and did all he could).
16. Our daily struggle is to have Christ as our king, to make room for Jesus in every exchange with another, every dollar spent, every word uttered, every journey made. Make room for Jesus. If only Christmas commercials and corporations would make room for Jesus! (He is not to be seen in Disney Christmas parades or the Macy's parade)
17. Phil. 2:9,10. As our king, his first task is revealed in the second verse: "No more let sins and sorrows grow nor thorns finest the ground; He comes to make his blessings flow far as the curse is found." He came to reverse the curse in Genesis. He is shutting down the curse and bringing us freedom, grace and forgiveness.
18. And, of course, verse three: "He rules the world with truth and grace and makes the nations prove the glories of his righteousness and wonders of his love." I ask you to consider this to be your daystar and goal, your New Year's resolution: you will prove the glories of his righteousness and the wonders of his love every single day in 2023.
19. Patrick leads us in "Joy to the World"