

Songs OF CHRISTMAS

DECEMBER SMALL GROUP SERIES

SESSION 1: ANGELS WE HAVE HEARD ON HIGH

Welcome, and blessed Advent! This month for our small group series, we will be looking at the history and lyrics of two familiar Christmas carols. For our session today, we'll learn more about the song, *Angels We Have Heard on High*.

In Luke 2, we read the account of shepherds in the fields watching their flocks overnight. On the night Jesus was born, an angel appeared to these shepherds to tell them of the birth of the Savior. *And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!"* (Luke 2:13-14).

French shepherds in the 18th century traditionally called out to each other on Christmas Eve, "Gloria in excelsis Deo," the Latin translation of "Glory to God in the highest." This was their way of sharing their holiday joy with one another throughout the hills and valleys as they did their work. The melody that they most likely sang these words to also included the lyrics, "Angels we have heard on high." Eventually, the melody and lyrics of this Christmas carol came together and was published in 1855. Originally a French carol, this hymn was translated some years later into English, and updated in the early 1900s to become the song we sing today during the Christmas season.

In reading the lyrics of the four verses, we see the story in Luke 2 begin to unfold. The first verse is from the perspective of the shepherds: *Angels we have heard on high, sweetly singing o'er the plains and the mountains in reply, echo back their joyous strains*. The shepherds have heard the good news of the angels that Jesus Christ, the Savior, was born.

In the second verse, the perspective shifts to an unknown narrator. This person, a witness to the joy of the shepherds as they receive the angels' news, asks, *Shepherds, why this jubilee? Why your joyous strains prolong? Say what may the tidings be which inspire your heav'nly song?*

The third and fourth verses are the shepherds' response to these questions: *Come to Bethlehem, and see Him whose birth the angels sing; come, adore on bended knee Christ the Lord, the newborn King. See within a manger laid Jesus, Lord of heav'n and earth! Mary, Joseph, lend your aid, with us sing our Savior's birth*.

To understand the news that the angels shared, the shepherds had to go to Bethlehem to see what was happening. When they found Mary and Joseph with Jesus lying in the manger, they glorified and praised God *for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told them* (Luke 2:20). And in the Christmas carol, the shepherds tell this unknown narrator the same thing, "To understand our joy, you must come and see. Come and see the Lord of heaven and earth! Come and adore Him!"

During this Christmas season, we, too, are encouraged to come and see. We can only understand the joy and light of Christ when we open ourselves to His presence and experience Him. And when we do see Jesus Christ in our lives, we can echo the same refrain of the angels and shepherds: "Gloria in excelsis deo." *Glory to God in the highest!* This hymn stirs us to be convinced of the wonder of God. For all He has done, and for the sending of His Son to the world, He is deserving of our unending praise.

SESSION 2: SILENT NIGHT

Welcome to our final small group discussion for this year. In this session, we'll turn our attention to perhaps the most famous Christmas carol ever written, *Silent Night*. Let's begin by taking a brief look at the history of this beloved carol.

Silent Night - or *Stille Nacht* in the original German - was written in 1818. Joseph Mohr, a Catholic priest at the Church of St. Nicholas in Oberndorf, Austria, needed a carol for the Christmas Eve mass the next evening. With a lack of quality Christmas hymns at his disposal, Mohr decided to create his own hymn. Only hours before it was to be sung for the first time, he visited the church's organist, Franz Gruber, asking him if he could set to music a poem that he had written depicting the night of Christ's birth. Gruber obliged, and quickly composed a melody to go with Mohr's lyrics. Because the church organ was broken, he arranged the song to be played on a guitar. That evening at Midnight Mass, both Mohr and Gruber led the congregation at St. Nicholas in the first rendition of *Silent Night*. The hymn made a deep impact on those who heard it that evening, even as it has on succeeding generations. The passing of time seems to only add to its appeal. It endures in part because it brings a sense of inner calm to the often-overwhelming hustle and bustle of the Christmas season. Given all of the noise surrounding Christmas and throughout the year, the title of the song in and of itself speaks to people. We desire and seek after moments of silence and stillness; moments of isolation and meditation.

Whether the night of Christ's birth can be accurately described as silent or not, however, is perhaps in question. After all, in Luke 2 we read of a crowded inn, hurrying shepherds, flocks of sheep, and a multitude of the heavenly host praising God. What can't be questioned is the holiness surrounding the birth of Jesus, beautifully summarized in Matthew 1:21-23: *And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name JESUS, for He will save His people from their sins. So all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying: "Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel," which is translated, "God with us."*

God came to earth in the person of Jesus Christ to save us from our sins. He, the sovereign King of King and Lord of Lords, the One exalted above all and to whom every knee must bow, was born in the humblest of circumstances. As it says in Philippians 2:7, *He made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant*. This was indeed a holy night.

If we take a deeper look at the lyrics for "Silent Night," we quickly see that Mohr understood the holiness surrounding Christ's birth. In the first verse, for instance, the virgin birth is alluded to, and Christ is described as holy: *All is calm, all is bright 'round yon virgin mother and child. Holy infant, so tender and mild*. In the second verse, three separate events illuminate the holiness of the Savior's birth - the shepherds quaking at the sight of it, the glories that stream from heaven afar, and the heavenly hosts singing alleluia. In the third verse, Mohr leaves no doubt when it comes to the holiness of Christ and of His birth - *Son of God, love's pure light, radiant beams from Thy holy face, with the dawn of redeeming grace*. This isn't just any baby - this is the Son of God. And this isn't just any birth - this is a birth that signifies the dawn of redeeming grace. With sin comes death, but with Christ comes grace. Paul's words in Romans 6:14 encapsulate the significance of this new dawn of redemption: *Sin is no longer your master, for you no longer live under the requirements of the law. Instead, you live under the freedom of God's grace* (NLT translation).

God gave us the greatest gift in Jesus Christ. He came into the middle of our noisy world, and brought us everlasting hope, love, joy, and peace. In the remaining moments of this Advent and Christmas season, let us continue to see clearly the unparalleled value of this great gift.