



# Rejoice! Reflections on Four Seasonal Hymns

## SESSION 3: “O LITTLE TOWN OF BETHLEHEM”

*Rev. Phillips Brooks was so moved by a trip to Palestine that he penned the lyrics to this hymn around 1868. His Philadelphia church’s music director, Lewis Redner, wrote the music.*

### O Little Town of Bethlehem

O little town of Bethlehem,  
How still we see thee lie!  
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep  
The silent stars go by.  
Yet in thy dark streets shineth  
The everlasting light;  
The hopes and fears of all the years  
Are met in thee tonight.

For Christ is born of Mary;  
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 on earth.

How silently, how silently,  
The wondrous gift is given!  
So God imparts to human hearts  
The blessings of His heaven.  
No ear may hear His coming,  
But in this world of sin,  
Where meek souls will receive Him, still  
The dear Christ enters in.

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;  
O come to us, abide with us,  
Our Lord Emmanuel!



“The hopes and fears of all the years/Are met in thee tonight.” What two more fundamental, more potent emotions stir in competition for the human heart than hope and fear?

### Ode to a City

How unusual for the subject of a hymn to be a small town as opposed to a grand idea, but such is the case with this nineteenth-century favorite penned by Phillips Brooks, Episcopal minister of Holy Trinity Church in Philadelphia. So moved was Brooks by a trip to Palestine and a brief sojourn in Bethlehem that he penned the lyrics some time around 1868. It was his church’s music director, Lewis Redner, who added the music, as legend has it, just in time for that year’s Sunday school Christmas service. It is debatable as to whether the hymn would have become so popular if not for Redner’s contribution of the unrushed, irregular, almost dirge-like melody, rising ever so slightly mid-stanza before slipping back into a quieter mood that forces us to feel the weight of the words and the depth of their meaning.

### Biblical Wisps

Brooks’s paean to this little town that so enchanted him does not bludgeon us with biblical imagery, but

as we listen to the words the text is never far away. In fact, Brooks goes so far as to put us in Bethlehem, in the present tense, the biblical moment, as the evening's wonders are unfolding ("O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie") as suggested in Matthew 2:1. He then reminds us that it is nighttime ("Above thy deep and dreamless sleep / The silent stars go by"), which is an easy assumption for him to make, based on the fact that it was nighttime when the angels appeared to the shepherds to announce the coming of the child (Luke 2:8). In subsequent stanzas we sense the undercurrent of Luke's angels ("While mortals sleep, the angels keep / Their watch of wondering love"), Paul's assertion in 2 Corinthians 9:15 that the birth of Christ is a gift from God ("How silently, how silently, / The wondrous gift is given"), and the assertion from the Gospel of John (3:3–5) that through the Christ we can be born again ("Cast out our sin and enter in, / Be born in us today").

With Scripture as his foundation, Brooks's lyrics take on a sharp theological hue, as he offers us five specific dichotomies that point to this night in Bethlehem as profoundly life altering—both for the listener and for the world.

## Light and Dark

In the first stanza, when we sing "Yet in thy dark streets shineth / The everlasting light," we are underscoring the old theological verity that light is preferable to darkness, a symbolic contrast intended to remind us that wisdom is preferable to folly, awareness is preferable to ignorance, compassion is preferable to hardness of heart. It was God who created light and saw that it was good (Gen. 1:14–15). It was Isaiah (9:1–2), later echoed by Matthew (4:16), who called attention to people's growing awareness of God's love for them with the words "The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light." And it is in the First Letter of John where we are reminded that "Whoever says, 'I am in the light,' while hating a brother or sister, is still in the darkness" (1 John 2:9). In Bethlehem this fortuitous evening, Brooks is telling us, the wisdom and compassion of Almighty God will be brought into the world for all who are open to receive it. Or, in the words of Robert Browning, "Through such souls alone / God stooping shows sufficient of His light / For us i' the darkness to rise by. And I rise."<sup>1</sup>

## Hope and Fear

Later in the same stanza Brooks proclaims the full burden that will be borne by what happens in Bethlehem this night when he proclaims that "the hopes and fears of all the years / Are met in thee tonight." What two more fundamental, more potent emotions stir in competition for the human heart than hope and fear?

An old Swedish proverb proclaims, "Fear less, hope more"; Brooks is not downplaying the tension between the two when he includes his line. He is not only anticipating that the birth of Christ will give us hope, he is acknowledging as well that fear is nevertheless a constant companion. By this time in the Christmas story Mary has already sung her Magnificat in Luke 1:46 ("My soul magnifies the Lord"), but we can have no doubt that as a young woman of simple means she was also terribly afraid of what the future held. Likewise the shepherds to whom the angel appeared ("and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified" [Luke 2:9]), who, by evening's end, would experience something too wondrous to have ever been considered in their humble existence as tenders of sheep.

That Christ was to be born would of course be a symbol of hope, an attestation that God was coming into a broken and bleeding people. But his birth would soon be followed by flight to Egypt because his life was in danger. Years later, the ruling elite would be fearful of his ministry and would arrest him because of it. Peter's fear for his own safety would lead him to deny his association with Jesus. The point Phillips is driving home in this verse is that since fear will always push against hope, it is up to the believer to trust that despite any immediate evidence to the contrary, the latter can prevail over the former.

## Sleeping and Waking

The second stanza brings us this assurance: "While mortals sleep, the angels keep / Their watch of wondering love." What is important here is to understand the focus of the angels' attention. They are not watching over us, they are keeping vigil over the child. The Prince of Peace, God incarnate, is a fragile idea in a boisterous world. It must be nurtured and cared for because that which it offers is easily missed or passed over. We who are observing the little town in the present, pre-birth



Whatever heartwarming images this carol stirs in us, we would be remiss if we didn't take stock of what the little town of Bethlehem is like today. . . . As evidenced in Bethlehem as starkly as anywhere else on earth, the work that Christ came to do is not yet done. So we *must* hope. But we also must work.

moment do not yet understand the significance of what is going to happen to us. For this reason it falls upon the angels to safeguard the promise.

It is all right for us to be at rest as the Son of God is about to come to us, but after that it will be our time to waken, to receive the gift of love but also to protect it from all of the mortal influences that will want to corrupt it, or dishonor it, or ignore it. As Jesus would one day preach, "Do not give what is holy to dogs; and do not throw your pearls before swine" (Matt. 7:6), by which he means divine love cannot be laid before those who would abuse it to sanctify unholy actions.

## Sin and Forgiveness

As the hymn progresses toward its conclusion, Phillips shifts his focus from Bethlehem to the Christ child ("Cast out our sin and enter in, / Be born in us today") so that with his birth we are "born" also. We have moved from anticipation to supplication; from awaiting God's love to humbly bowing before the manger and receiving it. Here the purpose is revealed to us. By receiving God, our sin will be cast out and we will be new beings.

This isn't to say we will no longer sin. Rather, it is to remind us that God's love overcomes our sin, that we are loved despite our sin, and that this love will never leave us. Nor does it mean that God's love for us has somehow qualitatively changed. It has always been unconditional, always been immutable, always been eternal. However, in the life, death, and resurrection of this child now before us we will come to know three things about that love. In his life—his teachings and his healings—we will learn about its content and texture. In his death—willfully chosen to exemplify the ends to which God will go for our benefit—we will see exhibited its unconditional

nature. And in his resurrection—the victory of life over death—we will be reminded that this love is more powerful than even those forces we most fear. Through this we are made wiser, more compassionate, and less fearful of our fates, and these are the contours of the new being.

## Silence and Sound

Finally, the wait now over and the burden now lifted, it is our time to celebrate. We have moved from the hushed anticipation of stanza 1 ("Above thy deep and dreamless sleep / The silent stars go by") to the heraldic song from above in stanza 4 ("We hear the Christmas angels / The great glad tidings tell"). Note that it is the Christmas angels we hear, and that what they are telling us is of the great glad tidings echoed in Luke 2:8 ("I am bringing you good news of great joy"). God has come to live with us, they are telling us. "O come to us, abide with us, / Our Lord Emmanuel." We need no longer be silent, either in anticipation, the way a child has long awaited a promised gift (that which we have been anticipating has been realized), or in timidity, the way a religious people long subjugated to a pagan power find that the voice of their own faith has been silenced.

The sound is indeed the sound of Immanuel—"God with us"—and it is to be met with rejoicing.

## What's Different?

It's a curious moment, both for the audience of the first Christmas and for those of us who, through this carol, experience it as if we are there. Materially, nothing has changed. The mother is slowly closing, healing, enduring the pain and glory of childbirth and its aftermath as women had for centuries and would for centuries still. The child is hungry and helpless, the father elated over the birth of his son and at the same time heavily weighted with all of the responsibilities that fatherhood implies. The shepherds will go back to their sheep, the magi to the palace, and the animals in the manger will wonder when their home will be vacated by these interlopers.

Rome still rules with an iron fist, the taxes still must be paid, the poor are still poor, and outside of this small, eclectic group, nobody in Israel knows what has transpired in the little town of Bethlehem. By all appearances it continues to lie still above the dreamless sleep, and in a few short hours the people of the town will begin to rise and go about their daily routines.

Though the coming of God has been experienced as an interruption by the lucky few, it will be a slow unfolding for the rest of the world, as it often is for us. God's love will be slowly revealed through this child who will grow to be a man, first at the temple where he will interpret the words of Isaiah, later at Cana where he will perform his first miracle, then on the mount where he will deliver a sermon that will shake his audience to their very bones. Later still this love will be revealed in Pilate's court, in Gethsemane's garden, and on Golgotha. Finally, it will receive its culmination not in Christ's presence but in his absence, in the tomb that is empty. This is how the story will unfurl itself, but nobody knows this. All they know is that a child has been born—one among many—and there is work to be done.

And so it is for us, of course, that this love does not necessarily sweep us off our feet but slowly envelops us, over time and tribulation. We pay our taxes and feed our children and tend to our sheep without fully appreciating how God will be made known to us or what difference it will make in our lives. But as long as we are not deaf to the story or blind to the beauty, we will see how God has gently come into our lives and pitched a tent among us. The boy's story will speak to us; we will have our temple moments and our miracle moments and our moments of doubt and pain and triumph.

When Christ comes into our lives, nothing has changed—the glories and drudgeries of life are still what they have always been—but everything has changed, because we begin to understand life as the ultimate affirmation that we are of God, and that this is a God whose love is greater than the forces of Rome, stronger than death, more incomprehensible than the "silent stars that shi-

neth"; it is indeed, as Brooks would put it, an everlasting light.

## Bethlehem Redux

Whatever heartwarming images this carol stirs in us, we would be remiss if we didn't take stock of what the little town of Bethlehem is like today. It is a Palestinian city that is ever under the watchful eye of the Israeli armed forces that have invaded the city twice. The traditional site of the birth of Christ, it is also the birthplace of the second intifada which, in 2001, destroyed much of the economy and infrastructure of the town. There is widespread poverty there, as with much of Palestine, and movement from the city into Israel and vice versa is not easy. Indeed, if Mary and Joseph had to make their pilgrimage today they would pass through ten Israeli checkpoints. All parties and all nationalities pray for peace to come to this hallowed place but there are so many forces at work to stifle those prayers.

All of this is to remind us that all these years later the world is still awash in hopes and fears. As evidenced in Bethlehem as starkly as anywhere else on earth, the work that Christ came to do is not yet done. So we must hope. But we also must work. Advent is not a time simply to sing of hope. It is a time to actualize it.

## About the Writer

*Erik Kolbell is a United Church of Christ minister and author, most recently, of The God of Second Chances.*

## Endnote

1. Robert Browning, *The Ring and the Book*, VII, Pompilia (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2004).