

December Hymn of the Month

Just as picturesque scenes can bring peace and calmness to the soul, so does beautiful music

The Hymn



Every year at Christmas time, as we hear the familiar account of the Savior's birth, it is natural to try to picture the scenes and wonder what it would have been like to be

there. The hymn "O Little Town of Bethlehem" is an effective aid in our wondering and seems to transport us back in time.

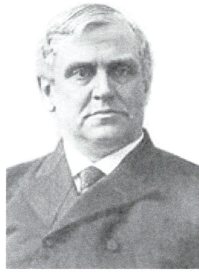
The hymn is the outcome of reflections on a Christmas Eve visit to Bethlehem by the author, Phillips Brooks, and although the town was very different 1865 years later, it is reported that being there in person, riding on horseback through the traditional shepherd's field, and singing hymns in the Church of the Nativity, affected him deeply and this is conveyed to us in his beautifully descriptive verses.

The words of this well-loved Christmas hymn are so very familiar we may not realize the depth of the poetic language they contain.

The first verse paints a verbal picture of an ancient town at night with the words 'still,' 'silent,' and 'dark.' Quiet stillness is a theme mentioned throughout the text. It is interesting to note the scientific significance of 'dreamless sleep' that supports the idea of stillness. During this stage of sleep, a person's breathing and heart rate are slower and they are relatively still, as compared to the stage where dreams occur. Thus the author's use of 'deep and dreamless sleep' is much more effective than 'deep sleep' alone in conveying the extent of the stillness.

The language used in the hymn is

The Author



Phillips Brooks was born to William and Mary Phillips Brooks in December of 1835 at Boston, Massachusetts. It seems logical that he was given his mother's family name. It is said that many of his

Puritan ancestors had been Congregational clergymen. His parents became connected with the Evangelical wing of the Episcopal Church and he was reared in a very strict atmosphere.

It is reported that one of the family customs would have a meaningful impact on his future life. Every Sunday each of the children were required to recite a hymn they had learned, and a record was kept. By the time Phillips went to college he could recite about two hundred hymns. The sacred language of the hymns learned in his childhood remained with him and was said to often appear in his sermons. The hymns were one of the means through which he came to know the Savior.

Young Phillips received what was then known as a typical Boston education. He attended the Boston Latin School and then Harvard University, graduating in 1855 at the age of 20. It is reported that he then spent a few unsuccessful months as a teacher in the Latin school. He decided to enter the ministry and attended the Episcopal Theological Seminary in Alexandria, Virginia.

Four years later he became rector of a small church in Philadelphia, The Church of the Advent, where he served from 1859 to 1862. It is said that his sermons began to draw attention and he was then called to be Rector of The Church of the Holy Trinity, Philadelphia, where he served until 1869. It was during his service here that he wrote

The Composer



Lewis Henry Redner was born to Lewis and Catharine Redner in December of 1830 at Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Lewis was one of several children.

Little is known of his life, but he evidently developed a talent for music which he balanced with a business aptitude. He is reported to have served as an organist for several churches during his lifetime, while maintaining a successful real estate business.

It is likely that he was of the Episcopal faith as his service at The Church of the Holy Trinity, Philadelphia, was noted to also be as a teacher and leader as well as an organist.

It is said that his last minute composition of the ST. LOUIS tune was in large part due to lack of time as a result of his other duties. It is understood that he and Phillips Brooks collaborated on other songs during their time together at the church, but the best known is "O Little Town of Bethlehem."

Lewis is said to have been devoted to improving the music and teaching of the Episcopal Sunday School, and also was a financial benefactor to the church.

It is reported that he never married, but he appears to have been devoted to his family. The 1880 census shows that he headed a household that included his mother, two siblings and others.

Lewis passed away in Atlantic City, New Jersey, in August of 1908, at the age of 77, of causes incident to diabetes. He was buried in Philadelphia.

figurative as well as literal. The everlasting light that shone in the dark streets can refer to both the physical light of the star and more significantly, the symbolic light of Christ himself, who is the 'everlasting light' mentioned in Isaiah. The phrase used in the hymn parallels both Isaiah and the New Testament verse in Second Corinthians chapter four, "For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."

The sleep of mortals mentioned in the second verse can be interpreted as both the literal sleep of those in Bethlehem that night and the figurative sleep, or lack of awareness, in all the world to the wonderful events taking place.

The angels who kept watch and proclaimed the holy birth are associated by the text with 'morning stars,' which also sang together at the creation of the earth, as recorded in the Book of Job. It is significant to note that 'morning stars' literally are the brightest stars that are still visible as dawn approaches. The Savior refers to himself in the book of Revelation as "the bright and morning star." This reinforces that 'morning stars' are not ordinary. The author suggests that only those who were aware were witnesses to the great events surrounding Christ's birth by contrasting the praises sung by the 'morning stars' with the "silent stars go by" above sleeping Bethlehem.

We might ask, what are the universal hopes and fears that do not change throughout history? What are 'the hopes and fears' that were met, or matched and provided for, in Bethlehem that night by the coming of Christ? Likely possibilities are the hope of love and life which are present in the promise of eternal life given by the Savior's teachings and resurrection, and the fear of death and pain which are addressed in His atonement.

The silence referred to in the giving of the gift of the Savior has layers of meaning and can refer to the absence of public fanfare rather than literal silence. We know that the angels were not silent when they appeared to the shepherds. However, many spiritual gifts that come to

"O Little Town of Bethlehem. "

Phillips is known to have sent letters to his father from his travels to the Holy Land in 1865, and it appears he remained close to his family. It is important to note that the year 1865 marked the end of the American Civil War. Phillips Brooks has been called one of the most famous and influential clergymen of his time and was an advocate for abolition of slavery.

Phillips Brooks has been described as having been large of stature and possessed of a brilliant mind, a tremendous capacity to work and a great personal influence over men. He was said to be deeply consecrated to Christ's service. He is not known to have married, but was reported to have loved children and would get down on the floor with them and play.

It is reported that repeated calls led him to return to his home town and in 1869 he began serving at Trinity Church, Boston where during the ensuing 22 years he became very well-known and participated in the building of the historical church that still stands in the Back Bay.

Begun in 1870, the new Trinity Church took six years to build, and is recognized as one of the most significant architectural buildings in America. It is said that the architect, H. H. Richardson, sought with his unconventional Greek Cross plan to give architectural form to the spellbinding preaching of his friend, the Rector Phillips Brooks, which was described as "bold, fresh, and vital." A statue of Phillips Brooks can be seen today on the church grounds.

In 1891 Phillips Brooks was elected Bishop of the Diocese of Massachusetts, a position he would hold for only a short time. In January of 1893 at the age of 57 he succumbed to a heart attack after a brief illness. The essence of who he was remains with us in the text of "O Little Town of Bethlehem."

His music lives on every Christmas as we sing his inspired melody with the words to "O Little Town of Bethlehem."

O Little Town of Bethlehem

Text as found in the 1985 LDS Hymnal

us through Christ are literally silent, and private. The subsequent phrases are similar, "So God imparts..." or, in like manner God gives his blessings. Silently and without public acclaim, they come to those who seek and will receive the Spirit of the Lord, whose coming is not heard with physical ears.

The original text is understood to have been written with five verses, however, only three are commonly sung today. Verses four and five are included below. It is said that in response to criticism the author changed the wording of the fourth line of the fourth verse which originally read "Son of the undefiled," and then removed the verse from future publications.

4. Where children, pure and happy,
Pray to the blessed child:
Where misery cries out to thee,
Son of the Mother mild;
Where charity stands watching,
And faith holds wide the door,
The dark night wakes, the glory breaks,
And Christmas comes once more.

5. 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.

It is understood that the author did not complete the hymn text until several years after his visit to Bethlehem, and that he wrote it for the children of his Sunday-school. At the time Philips Brooks was Rector of the Holy Trinity Episcopal Church in Philadelphia, and he commissioned the church organist, Lewis Redner, to compose a tune for it. It is reported that the composer did so the night before it was to be first performed at the church Sunday School service on Christmas Day of 1868. The composer is reported to have said that he was awakened in the night hearing an "angel-strain" whispering in his ear. He quickly got a piece of music paper and wrote down the melody. He then filled in the harmony before church that Sunday morning.

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 wond'ring love.
O morning stars together
Proclaim the holy birth,
And praises sing to God the King,
And peace to men on earth.

How silently, how silently
The wondrous gift is giv'n!
So God imparts to human hearts
The blessings of his heav'n.
No ear may hear his coming;
But in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive him, still
The dear Christ enters in.

It is said that neither the author nor the composer thought that the piece would ever be used again. However, a local bookseller published it on leaflets, and six years later the Rector of All Saint's Church, in Worcester, Massachusetts, Rev. Dr. Huntington, requested permission to publish the work in his Sunday-school hymn and tune book, *The Church Porch*, 1874. It is believed that the tune name, ST. LOUIS, was coined by Dr. Huntington, who named it, with a variation, after the composer. See photo below of the 1874 publication

Christmas.
No. 43. ST. LOUIS. L. H. REBER.

I O MA - DE MORN of Beth - le - hem! How still we see thee lie.

A - bode thy deep and dream - less sleep. The sil - ent stars go by!

Yet in thy dark streets shin - eth The liv - ing - ing light!

The hopes and fears of all the years, are met in thee to - night. A MEN.

2 For Christ is born of Mary,
And gathered all above,
While we - ttle sleep the angels keep
Their watch of wondering awe,
O'erwatching us together
Till dawn the first light,
And peace to us on earth,
And peace to us on earth.

3 Hear silently, how silently,
The wondrous gift is given,
So full of peace to human hearts,
The knowledge of His love,
No ear may hear His coming,
The world is all asleep,
The meek and lowly King of peace,
The near Christ enters in.

4 O holy Child of Bethlehem,
Dressed to us, we pray,
Cut not our sins into water here,
Be born in us to - day,
We hear the Christmas angels,
The great glad tidings tell,
O, come to us, abide with us,
Our Lord Emmanuel! A MEN.

The Sunday-school Christmas song 'O Little Town of Bethlehem' eventually found acceptance as a hymn, although hymnologist critics of the time considered it to have been written more in the metrical style of a ballad than a traditional hymn. It became widely used and is said to have been published in over eight hundred hymnals. The text was set to an alternate tune, FOREST GREEN, composed by Ralph Vaughn Williams and published in England in 1906, where it has also been widely used.

The ST. LOUIS tune by Lewis Redner is associated with the text in the United States, and the hymn was included in the 1948 edition of *Hymns, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, (LDS Hymnal). The music in 4/4 time was published in a slightly lower key and with a few variations from the 1874 version. The subsequent 1985 edition of the LDS Hymnal added only

minor changes to the bass clef notation.

"O Little Town of Bethlehem" remains a favorite Christmas hymn over 140 years after it's first performance. Its timeless message combines the wonderful account of Jesus' birth with poetic symbolism of his gospel and its efficacy in our lives today.



Information in this article came from:

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