

Lacey 3rd Ward – Dec. 22, 2024 Christmas Program

(Narration written by Daniel Cushman – suggestions for opening remarks at end)

NARRATION FOR SILENT NIGHT / JOSEPH SMITH'S TESTIMONY

In 1818 in Austria, the little church of St. Nicholas sat quietly in the cold afternoon, ready to welcome its congregation for Christmas Eve mass. But inside the quiet church there was chaos. The church organ—an old, temperamental instrument—had fallen as silent as the night around it; broken just mere hours before the most sacred service of the year. Joseph Mohr, a young and devoted priest, was overcome with desperation after many fruitless hours trying to repair the old organ. Music was essential for this holy celebration, and without it, he knew something vital would be missed.

With no other option, Father Mohr prayed for guidance. His mind turned to a simple poem he had written two years earlier when he had been inspired by a quiet walk through the snowy Austrian countryside. Pulling the forgotten poem from the back of his desk, he rushed through the frosted streets to the home of his friend, Franz Gruber—a schoolteacher and church organist. Together, under the ticking clock of Christmas Eve, the two men created something extraordinary.

Gruber read the priest's poem, feeling its heartfelt simplicity and reverence for the holy night of Christ's birth. Gruber picked up his guitar, a humble substitute for the broken organ, and began composing a gentle and improvised tune. By candlelight, the melody took shape: tender, unadorned, and deeply moving. It wasn't grand or complicated, but its beauty was in its simplicity.

Later that Christmas eve, in the flickering light of the church, Mohr and Gruber stood before the church altar. Accompanied by a small choir, they introduced their creation: "Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht"—"Silent Night, Holy Night." There the congregation heard the iconic song for the first time, the gentle strumming of the guitar filling the space where the organ should have been.

Little did they know that this humble performance would be the beginning of something miraculous. The song's journey would take it far beyond Oberndorf. From being shared by an organ repairman, to being performed by traveling folk singers, to inspiring soldiers on battlefields, "Silent Night" became a message of peace and hope heard around the world.

How fitting that a song about the makeshift and innovated circumstances around the birth of the son of God, would itself be a product of serendipitous innovation. That in place of a majestic palace, the savior of the world would instead be born in a lowly manger. As we listen to that same sweet melody now, let us return to that silent, snowy night. Close your eyes and imagine the glow of candlelight, the stillness of a village blanketed in snow, and the simple, heartfelt prayer of two anxious men who gave the world a song to remind us that the beauty of the Gospel, the good news of Christ, is not in its majesty, but rather in its accessibility and simplicity.

SONG - SILENT NIGHT / JOSEPH SMITH'S TESTIMONY –

<https://www.scoreexchange.com/scores/silent-night-testimony-of-christ-unlimited-copies-price-163575.html>

NARRATION FOR WE THREE KINGS

A beloved and enduring Christmas carol, “We Three Kings of Orient Are” tells a story as old as Christmas itself, celebrating the journey of the Magi who traveled far to honor the Christ child. Written in 1857 by John Henry Hopkins Jr., this carol captures not only the regal grandeur of the wise men but also the profound spiritual significance of their journey.

This classic carol draws from the biblical account in the Gospel of Matthew, where the Magi, guided by a brilliant star, travel from the East to present gifts to the newborn Christ. Tradition often portrays them as kings bearing symbolic treasures—gold for kingship, frankincense for divinity, and myrrh for suffering. Through its evocative lyrics, “We Three Kings” gives voice to the meaning behind these gifts, transforming them from mere symbols to expressions of worship and faith. These symbols are a reminder to us that the true gift of Christmas is not what we bring, but rather what we receive when we open our hearts to the Savior.

The Magi’s journey is shrouded in mystery and wonder. They are not merely figures of royalty but seekers of truth, compelled by a light they cannot ignore. The carol brings this search to life, weaving their story into a larger message of hope and discovery. Each verse delves into the spiritual significance of their offerings, culminating in a heartfelt chorus that invites all to join in their reverence: “O star of wonder, star of night, star with royal beauty bright...”

Musically, “We Three Kings” combines a regal yet meditative tone, mirroring the majesty of the Magi and the awe of their revelation. Its minor key lends a sense of mystery and anticipation, while the soaring melody of the chorus evokes the joy of encountering the divine. The song reminds listeners that the journey to Christ is both universal and deeply personal, one that requires faith, sacrifice, and an open heart.

This message of “We Three Kings” speaks to all who have ever felt the pull of something greater, who have sought light amid darkness. The Magi’s story becomes a reflection of every spiritual journey, reminding us that in seeking Christ, we often find our truest selves. They leave behind their comforts and certainties, guided by a star, and find the fulfillment of their deepest longings—a Savior whose love knows no bounds.

This carol invites us to consider our own journey. What are we seeking? What “star” guides us toward truth and meaning? Just as the wise men found the Lord in an unexpected place—a humble stable—we are reminded that spiritual transformation often comes when we step beyond our expectations and open ourselves to the unexpected.

As we now sing “We Three Kings of Orient Are,” we are invited to reflect on our own search for Christ, to follow the light wherever it leads and that in our journey to find Christ, we in fact, will ultimately find ourselves in Christ.

WE THREE KINGS—CONGREGATIONAL HYMN (lyrics provided in printed program)

https://www.cpd.org/wiki/images/2/24/We_three_kings.pdf

NARRATION FOR O COME, COME, EMMANUEL

“O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” is probably the oldest Christmas carol still sung today, dating back as far as 800 AD. Its haunting melody and poetic lyrics carry a timeless message that transcends centuries, inviting worshippers to reflect on the coming of Christ as both an ancient promise and a present hope.

This hymn’s roots trace back to the 8th or 9th century in monastic communities, where it began as part of the O Antiphons—a series of liturgical chants sung during the final days of Advent. Each antiphon highlighted a name or attribute of Christ, drawn from Old Testament prophecies: O Wisdom, O Lord of Might, O Root of Jesse, O Key of David, O Dayspring, O King of Nations, and O Emmanuel. These titles encapsulated the Messiah’s role as the fulfillment of God’s promise to redeem His people.

The hymn itself is a paraphrase of the final antiphon, "O Emmanuel," meaning “God with us.” The Latin text, “Veni, Veni, Emmanuel,” was composed in the 12th century, weaving together themes of longing and redemption. It became a chant, sung to prepare the hearts of believers for the arrival of the Savior. The lyrics cry out for deliverance from sin and exile, mirroring the ancient Israelites’ hope for the Messiah and resonating with the human desire for restoration and peace. narration

The melody we associate with the hymn today is a French plainsong from the 15th century, simple yet profoundly moving. Its minor key evokes a sense of yearning, while its repetitive structure allows the words to sink deeply into the heart. This union of text and tune transforms the hymn into a prayer, uniting worshippers in the shared anticipation of Christ’s coming.

Centuries later, in 1851, Anglican priest and scholar John Mason Neale translated the hymn into English. His version, which begins with the familiar line, “O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel,” retained the theological depth and poetic beauty of the original. Neale’s work brought the hymn to a wider audience, and it quickly became a cherished part of Advent and Christmas traditions around the world.

The tune and text of this hymn weave together to make a prayer wherein we call out the Lord’s name and ask for him to abide with us. The slow, reverent melody becomes a prayer for deliverance, not just from the struggles of life but from the darkness within our own hearts. As the hymn progresses, its tone shifts from sorrowful longing to triumphant hope, reminding us that the promise of Emmanuel has been fulfilled: God is indeed with us. This hymn is more than a just song—it is an experience of Advent itself. It urges us to step into the waiting of Israel, to feel the ache of exile, and to rejoice in the knowledge that the Savior has come and will come again. Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.

O COME, O COME, IMMANUEL—VOCAL QUARTET

<https://www.free-scores.com/download-sheet-music.php?pdf=8677>

NARRATION FOR I HEARD THE BELLS ON CHRISTMAS DAY

The familiar melody of "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day" echoes throughout the holiday season, it carries with it a timeless message of hope, peace, and resilience. This hymn reminds us that even in the darkest of times, the promise of Christ continues to ring clear and true.

The lyrics were penned by the great American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow in 1863. The backdrop of its creation was the Civil War, a time when the nation was torn apart, families were divided, and despair often seemed to overshadow hope. Longfellow himself had experienced profound personal tragedy. Just two years prior, during the holiday season, his beloved wife Fanny died tragically in a fire, leaving him heartbroken. Then, in the midst of the Civil war, his eldest son Charles was severely wounded in battle. These personal sorrows, coupled with the widespread suffering around him, left Longfellow questioning the presence of peace and goodwill in a world so full of pain.

On Christmas morning, as the poet sat in quiet reflection, he heard church bells ringing out. The carols they carried proclaimed the enduring message of "peace on earth, goodwill to men," a refrain rooted in the angelic announcement of Christ's birth. Yet, for Longfellow, the contrast between the hopeful message of the bells and the grim reality of his time felt almost unbearable. He poured out his emotions in a poem initially titled "Christmas Bells," where he wrestled with his pain and anguish. For Longfellow, the Christmas season, despite its sweetness, was sobering as well.

So, too, will many Christmases be for us. I speak of Christmases and other days in our individual and collective lives, that for whatever reason, may not be very happy, or seem to be a season to be jolly. For many people in many places this year, this December, this Christmas, may not be an entirely happy time. A Christmas not filled with complete joy because of the circumstances facing a family or loved ones. Or perhaps that was the case another Christmas, in another year, which brings a painful memory every time they put up the Christmas tree. Or perhaps, heaven forbid, this may be the case in some future Christmas when unexpectedly and seemingly undeservedly something goes terribly wrong. When there is some public or personal tragedy in which we, like Longfellow in his poem of pain, mourn that hate is strong and mocks the song of peace on earth good will to man. However, in a moment of triumph, Longfellow's penned frustrations flowed into faith. The turning point is heard in the hymn we now sing:

*"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, goodwill to men.'"*

This Christmas let us not forget that beyond the joy of the manger, was also the pain of Gethsemane and Golgotha. Let us remember that lying among the gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh were also a crown of thorns, a makeshift royal robe and a Roman spear. That in his birth and his death, Christ triumphs over all; and through him, and by him we too can conquer the pain and hate that we face.

I HEARD THE BELLS ON CHRISTMAS DAY— CONGREGATIONAL HYMN #214

NARRATION FOR O HOLY NIGHT

The story of *O Holy Night* is as extraordinary as the song itself—a tale of inspiration, controversy, and perseverance that began in a small French village in 1847. It started when a parish priest approached Placide Cappeau, a local poet to write a poem for Christmas mass. Though not a devout churchgoer, Cappeau took the task to heart. Imagining the night of Christ’s birth, he composed a moving poem titled *Cantique de Noel*.

Recognizing it needed music to truly shine, Cappeau turned to his friend, Adolphe Adams, a renowned composer. Adams, a man of Jewish heritage who did not celebrate Christmas, was nonetheless inspired by the poem’s beauty and composed a melody that matched its emotional depth. The song premiered at midnight mass that Christmas Eve and quickly captured the hearts of many.

But their church’s approval didn’t last. When Cappeau distanced himself from the church and Adams’s Jewish ancestry came to light, *Cantique de Noel* was denounced as unfit for worship. Yet people continued to sing it amongst themselves, keeping its tune and message alive and strong. Years later, the song crossed the Atlantic, where John Sullivan Dwight, a Unitarian minister and abolitionist, discovered it. Struck by its powerful lyrics—particularly, the line “*Chains shall He break, for the slave is our brother*”—Dwight translated the song into English with its new name, *O Holy Night*. The song spread far and wide, where it resonated deeply with the American people, especially for slaves during the American Civil War. The message of Christ freeing all of mankind from slavery rang powerfully both spiritually and literally for a people grappling with the desire for freedom.

Meanwhile, back in France, the song’s legacy continued to grow during the Franco-Prussian War. On Christmas Eve in 1871, amidst bloody war trenches, a brave French soldier sang the opening lines of *O Holy Night*. This inspired other soldiers from both sides of the conflict to join in chorus, resulting in a brief, but truly miraculous Christmas ceasefire.

And then, in 1906, the song reached even greater heights. On Christmas Eve, Reginald Fessenden, a Canadian inventor, made history by broadcasting the first-ever radio transmission. After reading from the Gospel of Luke, he played *O Holy Night* on his violin, making this the first song to ever be transmitted over radio airwaves.

Born from a priest’s plea, a poet’s imagination, a composer’s brilliance, and an enduring spirit *O Holy Night* has become one of the world’s most beloved carols. As we hear it now together, let us remember the song’s journey. Remember the inspired multicultural collaboration that created it. Remember those faithful folk singing this forbidden song to keep its message alive. Remember the hope of slaves in America as they heard this song. Remember the earnest tune of a soldier singing in middle of a battlefield.

Remember the first song to ever be played across space and air. Remember this message that unites us all: the Savior is born to bring peace and freedom to all of mankind.

O HOLY NIGHT— SOLOIST & CONGREGATION (written for soloist, choir & congregation)

<https://defordmusic.com/song-list/oh-holy-night/>

SUGGESTIONS FOR OPENING REMARKS –

I always spend a moment at the pulpit prior to starting the narration: pointing out the places in the program where the congregation sings, emphasizing that the narrator will only speak when movement/transitions between musical numbers is over, asking for prayers for the Spirit to flow freely, thanking accompanists, participants, etc.

Additionally, this time I gave some insight into this chosen format, which serves two purposes...

1. Learning more of the history surrounding the origins of each piece, along with the intentions of the composers and the circumstances in their lives when each was written, can give us a much greater appreciation of the messages. Opening up our hearts to a more transformative experience when we hear and sing the words this way invites a powerful spirit of worship and reverence.
2. With so much about our church that sets us apart from other Christian faiths, those differences are often what commands the most attention. However... there is also something wonderful about really focusing on what we have in common with the rest of Christendom: a belief in Christ as the Son of God and our Savior, and a desire to worship together in celebration of His birth. Being able to actively share our faith in Jesus Christ with millions around the world doing that same thing - through music that has been sung for hundreds of years by countless other believers now long gone - will unite us and bless us this time of year like nothing else can.