

## *The 'Creedal' Carols at Christmas*

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Glen Ridge Congregational Church, Glen Ridge, New Jersey,  
*Preached on the First Sunday of Christmas (27Dec), 2009.*

### **Part I**

In my grandparents home in Bonham, Texas was my Aunt Betsy's piano. She was unmarried so her nephews and nieces were like her children. At Christmas we came to the parlor to sing as she played carols. In those days carols weren't as much listened to on iPods and CD players and in shopping malls as they were sung. It may have only been because the Saunders-Hill-Stinson clans were church goers, but we sang them as part of our holiday. Who is there among us who doesn't have a Christmas memory associated with music?

This year we began with Tom Mustachio's concert, *Welcome Christmas!* His choirs gathered us upstairs after an icy morning and sang and rang in the season. It was not enough that they performed for us—he made us sing as well. The audience sang seven (!) carols at the concert, and the singing was hearty. On Christmas Eve no one on the professional staff worked harder than Tom. The Spanish carol *Fum, Fum, Fum* the choir sang a capella at 8pm was marvelous. Your children's choirs and Andrew Dik's trumpet and Wynne Zalewski's piano music were highlights of the early service. At 9:30 I dragged myself home to fall asleep but you stayed and rehearsed a high school choir, flute players and a small band to welcome in midnight on Christmas Day. You must be tired! But thank you for what you brought to our celebration of Christmas this year, your first among us. As you have already heard, this morning's is one of the 'singiest' services we have at Glen Ridge Congregational Church.

It is hard to imagine Beacon Hill and Commonwealth Ave in Back Bay Boston without Christmas, but the Puritans for the first several centuries of Boston history did not celebrate this holiday. Eventually Jordan Marsh and Filene's triumphed over the harrumphs of the divines of that city, sometime around the middle of the Nineteenth Century and the Civil War. Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* was written and not banned in Boston. Following the Civil War, Phillips Brooks came to town to be Rector of Trinity Church in Copley Square and penned *O Little Town of Bethlehem*. After that Boston and all of America rediscovered Christmas.

It is even difficult for us to remember why Christmas was scorned. The early carols were mostly dancing tunes and the holiday, going back to its Pagan Solstice days, was just a wee bit scandalous to the English and Scottish Puritans. One of them, Hezekiah Woodward wrote a 1656 tract on the evils of Christmas celebration:

The old Heathen's Feasting Day, in honour to Saturn their Idol-God, the Papist's Massing Day, the Profane Man's Ranting Day, the Superstitious Man's Idol Day, the Multitude's Idle Day, Satan's—the Adversary's—Working Day... We are persuaded, no one thing hindereth the Gospel work all the year long, than doth the observance of that Idol Day once in a year, having so many days of cursed observation with it.<sup>1</sup>

The Puritans knew all the reasons Solstice Day had been baptized and connected with the Christian message of the incarnation of Jesus, but in their view the Paganish practices came to overshadow the birth of Jesus. To them Christmas had become more an excuse for partying and reveling and less a day to remember the savior. You still see some of this in rants by a few of us modern divines about the commercialization of Christmas. However, about one hundred fifty years ago some 'new' carols with the Christian message became popular and began to redefine the holy day. Though there is rather too much of *Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer* and *Santa Claus Is Coming to Town* for my taste, how do we explain Christmas without the music? I want to demonstrate what the church did to reclaim Christmas in the second part of my remarks as we look at two of the carols we sing this morning, *O Come, All Ye Faithful* and *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*. I call these two 'creedal' carols because of their explicit advocacy of orthodox teaching on the incarnation of Jesus.

## Part II

I argue that in the middle of the Nineteenth Century the reason Christmas was accepted back into Protestant churches was due to the intentional return of using the holiday to teach orthodox faith. Just as the early church recognized it would not be able to blot out Solstice celebrations and decided to transform the holiday to undergird faith, so by the 1800s a number of church musicians and clergy decided it was better to harness the holiday for Jesus—not fight it. Many new carols appeared during those years which were not only lovely to sing, but also taught a truer meaning of Christmas. At the 8pm service on Thursday night we added a new carol to our Christmas Eve worship: *Once in David's Royal City*. It was written by Cecil Frances Alexander, a Nineteenth Century Irishwoman and wife of an Anglican bishop. Her husband had written the lyrics earlier as a children's poem to illustrate one line of the Apostles' Creed: "I believe in Jesus Christ...our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the virgin Mary...." (It is beloved, of course, of every devotee of the King's College Chapel's Service of Nine Lessons and Carols.) Now through Tom Mustachio it has come to our church's annual celebration of Christ's birth. Something old, something new—just like Christmas itself: an ancient holiday with an old story but sung and celebrated each year to give new faith to a new generation.

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<sup>1</sup> *Oxford Book of Carols*. Edited by Percy Dearmer, R. Vaughan Williams and Martin Shaw. (London: Oxford University Press, 1928), xii.

We began this morning with *O Come, All Ye Faithful*. This carol is not as old as you might think. It was only written in the 1700s in Latin by John Francis Wade and called *Adeste Fideles*. It was translated into English in 1841 about the time of Christmas resurgence in Anglo-America. Wade made his living composing music for the Roman Catholic Mass. Our hymnal includes three verses of this carol and you see Wade's explicit advocacy for an orthodox view of the incarnation. "*Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing*" does not refer to Santa Claus! We sang a fourth verse this morning not in our hymnal:

God of God, light of light  
Lo! He abhors not the virgin's womb;  
Very God, begotten not created.

How can you sing this and not think of the Nicene Creed?

Certainly the intent to strengthen faith is discernable in Charles Wesley's and Felix Mendelssohn's *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*.<sup>2</sup> Wesley and his brother John were known for their innovative strategies to take the faith to the common people of industrial Britain. Singing hymns with catchy tunes was a favorite Wesleyan strategy. What draws us still to this carol is its unabashed Christian teaching of the incarnation. "*Veiled in flesh the Godhead see! Hail the incarnate Deity.*" I love that line! But more, Wesley's lyric borrows richly from many of the Hebrew prophets: "*Jesus our Immanuel,*"<sup>3</sup> "*Prince of Peace,*"<sup>4</sup> and "*risen with healing in his wings*"<sup>5</sup> all come from the Old Testament's expectations for a Messiah.

Many of the other marvelous carols we associate with the season date from this period in the mid Nineteenth Century,<sup>6</sup> and therein we see the way the church sought to reclaim the original purpose of the holiday. The church has long battled other forces to keep the day for Jesus. It is a tribute to our ancestors that they recognized music was key to popular acceptance of the holiday. Our church continues to utilize the carols to connect the rising generation to Jesus. As Wesley said in his carol of Jesus: he was 'born to give us second birth.'

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<sup>2</sup> It is said that Charles' friend George Whitefield did as much as the hymn writer to popularize this carol. Whitefield changed the carol from Wesley's *Hark, How All the Welkin Rings* to its present name—much more singable and felicitous.

<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 7:14

<sup>4</sup> Isaiah 9:6

<sup>5</sup> Isaiah 60 and Malachi 4:2.

<sup>6</sup> For example, James Montgomery's *Angels, From the Realms of Glory*; *Away in a Manger*; Christina Rossetti's *In the Bleak Midwinter*; Edmund H. Sears' *It Came Upon the Midnight Clear*; William Chatterton Dix's *What Child Is This?*; and Joseph Mohr's *Silent Night*.