

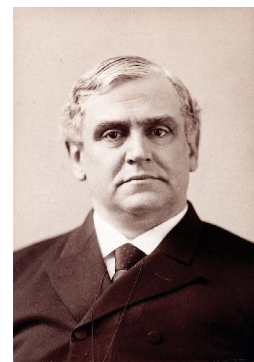
The Story Behind “O Little Town of Bethlehem”

Scripture:

“But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
Too little to be among the clans of Judah,
 From you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel.
 His goings forth are from long ago,
 From the days of eternity.”
 -- Micah 5:2 NAS

Background

Phillips Brooks (1835–1893), born in Boston, wrote the verses of “O Little Town of Bethlehem.” (Ref 1) After receiving a degree from Harvard, Brooks entered the Episcopal Theological Seminary in Alexandria, Virginia (Ref 2). He was ordained at the age of twenty-four, in 1859, and became a powerful preacher. It was Brooks, only six years into his ministry, who was called upon in May, 1865 to give the funeral message over President Abraham Lincoln. That solemn honor, in tandem with leading the congregation of Philadelphia’s Holy Trinity Church through the bloody years of the Civil War, had taken its toll. Worn out and badly needing a spiritual rebirth, Brooks took a sabbatical and left the United States to tour the Middle East (Ref 3).



Phillips Brooks

For almost a year, Rev. Brooks retraced the steps of Jesus and the Apostles. On Sunday, December 24, 1865, he rode on horseback from Jerusalem to Bethlehem and was present at the Christmas Eve service at the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem (Ref 3). During the services, which lasted from ten o’clock at night until three in the morning, Brooks was moved with emotion as he listened to hymns of praise, Scripture readings, and prayers. The impressions of this Christmas Eve in Bethlehem would remain with him throughout his life and, just a few years later, would become the backdrop for his beloved Christmas carol (Ref 2).

Phillips Brooks returned to his responsibilities as pastor at Holy Trinity Church in Philadelphia. Three years later, the children of the church were planning a Christmas program, and the Reverend wanted a new Christmas song for them to sing. Recalling the nativity story, and his Christmas in Bethlehem, he wrote five stanzas of the poem which became the verses for “O Little Town of Bethlehem.”

Rev. Brooks gave the verses to the church organist, **Lewis H. Redner** (1831-1908), saying, “Lewis, why not write a new tune for my poem? If it is a good tune, I will name it ‘St. Lewis’ after you.” (Ref 4)



Lewis H. Redner

Redner recounted the story of his composition:

As Christmas of 1868 approached, Mr. Brooks told me that he had written a simple little carol for the Christmas Sunday-school service, and he asked me

to write the tune to it. The simple music was written in great haste and under great pressure. We were to practice it on the following Sunday. Mr. Brooks came to me on Friday, and said, 'Redner, have you ground out that music yet to "O Little Town of Bethlehem"? I replied, 'No,' but that I should have it by Sunday. On the Saturday night previous my brain was all confused about the tune. I thought more about my Sunday-school lesson than I did about the music. But I was roused from sleep late in the night hearing an angel-strain whispering in my ear, and seizing a piece of music paper I jotted down the treble (*melody*) of the tune as we now have it, and on Sunday morning before going to church I filled in the harmony (Ref 1).

That night in December 1868, "O Little Town of Bethlehem" was sung for the first time by six Sunday school teachers and thirty-six children of Holy Trinity Church (Refs 2 and 4).

Brooks was so pleased with the tune that he did name it for his organist, changing the spelling to 'St. Louis' so to not embarrass him (Ref 4).

Rev. Phillips Brooks moved on the following year to become the pastor at Trinity Church in Boston, where he served from 1869 to 1891. Subsequent to that, he was appointed as the Episcopal Bishop for the churches in Massachusetts. In all his years of service he was honored and loved by those to whom he ministered. When the news of his unexpected death reached his parishioners, one little girl was heard to say: "Oh, Mama, how happy the angels will be!" (Ref 2)

The Timeless Truths website (Ref 7) provided the lyrics and score for "O Little Town of Bethlehem."

References:

1. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/O_Little_Town_of_Bethlehem
2. "Hymns of Faith & Inspiration," Ideals Publishing Corporation, 1990
3. Ace Collins, "Stories Behind the Best-Loved Songs of Christmas," Zondervan, 2001
4. Robert J. Morgan, "Then Sings My Soul," Thomas Nelson, 2003.
5. Phillips Brooks photo, Kentucky Digital Library, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=49011986>
6. Lewis Redner photo, <http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRid=10188681>
7. http://library.timelesstruths.org/music/O_Little_Town_of_Bethlehem/

Lyrics for “O Little Town of Bethlehem”

Verse 1:

**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.**

Verse 2:

**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!**

Verse 3:

**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.**

Verse 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.**

Verse 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;
Oh, come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel!**

The hymn lyrics for “O Little Town of Bethlehem” are in the public domain. These lyrics can be freely downloaded from the www.whitneytunes.com website. Please include this notice.

13Dec2016

O Little Town of Bethlehem

*Thou, Beth-lehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah,
yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel. Mic. 5:2*

1. O lit - tle town of Beth - le - hem, how still we see thee lie!
2. For Christ is born of Ma - ry, and gath - ered all a - bove,
3. How si - lent - ly, how si - lent - ly, the won - drous Gift is giv'n;
4. Where chil - dren pure and hap - py pray to the bless - ed Child,
5. O ho - ly Child of Beth - le - hem, des - cend to us, we pray;

A - bove thy deep and dream - less sleep the si - lent stars go by.
While mor - tals sleep, the an - gels keep their watch of won - d'ring love.
So God im - parts to hu - man hearts the bless - ings of His Heav'n.
Where mis - er - y cries out to Thee, Son of the moth - er mild;
Cast out our sin, and en - ter in, be born in us to - day.

Yet in thy dark streets shin - eth the ev - er - last - ing Light;
O morn - ing stars, to - geth - er pro - claim the ho - ly birth,
No ear may hear His com - ing, but in this world of sin,
Where char - i - ty stands watch - ing and faith holds wide the door,
We hear the Christ - mas an - gels the great glad tid - ings tell;

The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee to - night.
And prais - es sing to God the King, and peace to men on earth!
Where meek souls will re - ceive Him still, the dear Christ en - ters in.
The dark night wakes, the glo - ry breaks, and Christ - mas comes once more.
Oh, come to us, a - bide with us, our Lord Em - man - u - el!