

Favorite Christmas Carols

O HOLY NIGHT
Luke 2:8-14; 1 Corinthians 1:26-29

In the mid-1840s, the priest of a small village in France went to the commissioner of wines in that village and asked him to write a poem for Christmas Eve. Now, this commissioner was not known as a good church member, but he was known as a good poet. He was honored by the request and he decided to give it a try. He reflected on the Christmas story from the Gospel of Luke, that I read earlier, and he wrote the poem while he was riding in a stagecoach to Paris. When he finished, he looked at it and said, “This is good. This needs to be set to music!” So he went to a friend who was a well-known composer, a member of the Paris conservatory, and he asked him to set his poem to music.

On Christmas Eve, 1847, the song was performed at the little village church. And it debuted to rave reviews. The people in that little church were deeply moved by the song, and before long it spread to other churches all over France. It’s a great song because it’s very worshipful, and it explains so clearly the meaning of the birth of Jesus. But then the church hierarchy found out that the man who wrote the words was a socialist, and the man who wrote the music was Jewish – and they banned the song from the Catholic Church in France. They said it was unfit for worship.

Meanwhile, over here in America, there was a pastor in Massachusetts named John Sullivan Dwight who was a graduate of Harvard Divinity School, and he had some problems. He had agoraphobia, which is fear of crowds – he was afraid to leave the house. And then he suffered from panic disorder, and sometimes he would have panic attacks while he was preaching. So he finally had to step down from the pulpit and find something else to do. He started a music magazine called *Dwight’s Journal of Music*. He would find new music and publish it in his magazine. Well, one day he came across this Christmas song that was still in French – and he was mesmerized by the lyrics. He loved how it told the story of Christmas, and he especially liked how it talked about the breaking of chains and the freeing of slaves, because this was right before the Civil War, and John Sullivan Dwight was an abolitionist.

So, this *broken man* who published a magazine because he had to step down from being a pastor, took this song written by *two outsiders* – a song that had been *cast out* by the church – he took this song that talks about hope for the broken, and freedom for the oppressed – and he translated it into English, and introduced it to America, and now “O Holy Night” is one of the most dearly loved Christmas hymns of all time.

The story behind “O Holy Night” is a story of outsiders, outcasts, and broken people. And you know what? That’s also the story of Christmas!

Picture in your mind a traditional nativity scene. You’ve got Mary and Joseph, with the baby Jesus lying in a manger. You’ve got shepherds with their shepherd’s crooks and their sheep. You’ve got the Wise Men with their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Keep that image in your mind, and then think about this: God has a thing for broken people.

Think about Mary and Joseph. Remember that Mary got pregnant before she was married. I mean, yeah, she was a virgin, but as far as anybody else knew, she was just another unwed teenage mother.

And then, think about why Mary and Joseph had to go to Bethlehem in the first place. They were oppressed. They were under the thumb of the Roman Empire. The Romans had come in as a brutal, conquering force, and taken over their land, and now the emperor decided everybody had to go back to their hometown to get registered to pay taxes. So Joseph puts Mary on the back of a donkey and he walks, and they travel 80 miles over rocky desert terrain, living outdoors, sleeping on the ground. It takes over a week, and Mary's nine months pregnant. When they get to Bethlehem, nobody will take them in. Mary and Joseph were oppressed. Oppressed people are at the manger.

And then you have the shepherds. Shepherds were outcasts. Polite society looked down on Shepherds. They were dirty and smelly. They were suspected of being thieves and robbers, and they probably were. Their testimony was not permissible in a court of law, because nobody trusted them. Shepherds were outcasts. Outcasts are at the manger.

And then you have the wise men – or actually, the real term is magi. The magi were magicians from the royal courts of Persia. They were outsiders. They were strangers. They had strange beliefs and strange customs, and they practiced astrology, which was a big no-no for the people of Israel. And yet here they are, strange customs and all. The magi were strangers. Outsiders are at the manger.

So, who's at the manger? The oppressed. The outcasts. The outsiders. The poor. The hurting. People who are broken. And maybe that's how you feel right now.

Maybe you feel oppressed by problems that have you under their thumb—depression...anxiety...a chronic illness. Maybe you've lost your job and you're dreading Christmas because you don't have the resources to celebrate the way you want to. Maybe you've lost a loved one and you're dreading Christmas because it's just going to be painful.

Maybe you feel like an outcast because a relationship you're in is falling apart. Your husband or wife doesn't love you anymore. Your boyfriend or girlfriend broke up with you. A good friend won't give you the time of day.

Maybe you feel like an outsider because everybody else is looking forward to time with family and you don't have a family—or your family is so dysfunctional that you can't stand being with them.

Oppressed. Cast out. An outsider. Maybe that's how you feel today. And you're hurting. You're broken.

If that's you, rejoice! *You get to come to the manger!* You get to be in the presence of Jesus! Jesus has come to heal you, to comfort you, to strengthen you, to guide you and walk beside you—Jesus has come to love you with an unbounded, unlimited, unconditional love.

Look at what Jesus has already done, and he's still a baby. He's turned the world upside down. Dirty, smelly Shepherds are serenaded by the angels of heaven. Magi who practice a different religion are some of the first people invited. And an unwed, pregnant teenager becomes the mother of God.

God has a thing for broken people.

Now think about who's *not* at the manger.

King Herod's not there. He's sitting in his huge palace, surrounded by wealth, counting his money, thinking about how rich he is.

Caesar Augustus is not there. He's back in Rome looking over his armies, planning the next conquest, and thinking about how powerful he is.

The religious leaders aren't there. They're in Jerusalem doing their religious rituals, arguing over the religious doctrine, and thinking about how good they are.

The rich, the powerful, the religious – they're not there. It's not that God doesn't love them. It's just that they're not interested.

And maybe that's you today. Maybe you don't see the need to come to the manger. You're OK without God. You don't need any Jesus to save you.

Well my friend, because I care about you, I have to tell you the truth: You're just as broken as everybody else. And the sooner you realize that, the sooner you embrace your brokenness, the sooner you can come to the manger and experience the unconditional love of God.

Because God has a thing for broken people.

And early church leader named Paul knew this. Listen to what he wrote to one of his churches:

²⁶ *Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. ²⁷ But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. ²⁸ God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, ²⁹ so that no one may boast before him.*

(1 Corinthians 1:26-29, NIV)

So here's the thing. If you're foolish, weak, and lowly—you get to come to the manger! If you think you're wise, and you think you're strong, and you think you've got it all together—well, you're also invited, but it's gonna take an attitude change before you're able to come.

God's funny that way. God chooses the foolish to shame the wise. He chooses the weak to shame the strong. He reaches out to the lonely and the hurting, the sick and the poor—the oppressed, the outcasts, the outsiders—

You just can't get around it. God has a thing for broken people. And if you're broken, God has a thing for you.