***THE WORLD REJOICES!***

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The events of that first Christmas night end with the shepherds returning to the fields glorifying God for what they had seen and heard. While Mary ponders the events of the night and tries to get some rest, the shepherds are filled with awe-inspired praise at what has happened. Like Mary we may quietly ponder the miracle of Jesus’ birth, but we are called to go out with the shepherds and share the good news with the world. That is what Matthew and Luke have done for us in their Gospels – told us the story so that we too may believe and then go and tell it on the mountain, over the hills and everywhere! Across the centuries and around the world, Christians have offered their praise for the birth of Jesus in songs that have come down to us as Christmas carols. Many of them are as familiar to us as any song that we sing. They are gifts from other times and places. Today we take a little time to join our voices with those of our global ancestors in faith as together we rejoice in the birth of our Savior.

In the bulletin this morning you will note that each carol we sing today is marked by a time and place from which it came. The oldest is from the 14th century and the newest is just 20 years old. Today we join our voices with the faithful of other times and places to adore him who is Christ the Lord!

Our first hymn, *‘Twas in the Moon of Wintertime*, is the oldest Canadian hymn that we have – perhaps the oldest in the New World. It is attributed to Father Jean de Brébeuf, a Jesuit missionary who worked among the Huron people, and was probably first sung about 1641. It was written in a language the Huron people understood to tell the story of Jesus’ birth in images that made sense to them. It was sung for only about eight years before the Iroquois invaded, drove out the Hurons, and tortured Father Jean at the stake. Some of the Hurons who escaped carried the song with them, and a century later another Jesuit priest, Father de Villeneuve, heard the carol and wrote down the words. It was then translated into French and finally into English in 1926. It reminds us that the child who is born in Bethlehem is truly the savior for all people in all places in all times.

*‘Twas in the Moon of Wintertime*

A century or so later in the mid 1700s the French carol *Angels We Have Heard on High* was sung in France. The author and composer are unknown, and it did not even appear in print until the 19th century. It was translated into English here in America about the time of the Civil War. Its Gloria, still sung in the Latin, is dearly beloved, and because it combines two languages – originally French and Latin and now for us English and Latin – it is called macaronic or mixed-language text. In any language the glory shines through!

*Angels We Have Heard on High*

*Silent Night* may be the most familiar Christmas carol in the world as you might have guessed since its first verse appears in our hymnal in four different languages. It was written in 1816 by Joseph Mohr for a Christmas festival at St. Nicholas Church, Oberndorf near Salzburg, Austria. The story is told that the organ of the church was not functioning the day of the service, so Mohr decided to write a new hymn that would not require organ accompaniment. He took the text to his friend Franz Xaver Gruber and asked him to write a suitable tune that could be sung with guitar. That is how it was first sung. A musician by the name of Karl Mauracher came to repair the organ and Father Mohr gave him a copy of the hymn. As Mauracher traveled from town to town repairing church organs he shared the hymn with others and its popularity grew. German-speaking immigrants brought the hymn to America where the first English version appeared in an 1849 Methodist hymnal. Today all around the world in a multitude of languages Christians gather to sing *Stille Nacht*, *Noche de Paz*, *Silent Night*.

*Silent Night*

The first truly American Christmas carol, *It Came Upon the Midnight Clear,* was written in 1849 by Edmund Hamilton Sears, a Unitarian pastor in Massachusetts. According to William Reynolds writing in *Songs of Glory*, “hymns stressing the social message of Christmas – peace on earth, good will – are distinctly American.” This was the first such carol from the pen of an American poet. The tune was actually composed for a different hymn, the ever-popular *See Israel’s Gentle Shepherd Stand*, but was adapted in 1860 to its present cherished form for this American carol which we have now sung for over 150 years!

*It Came upon the Midnight Clear*

The last of these hymns on this global tour was written just 30 years ago, and thus may be less familiar than most of those we’ve sung. *Who Would Think That What Was Needed* was written by John Bell and Graham Maule for the Iona Community in Scotland. Iona is a small island on the west coast of Scotland through which Christianity came to our Scottish ancestors. The Christian community there continues to be a source of spiritual strength and worship for Christians around the world. John Bell is a leader in the worship life of that community and has contributed 18 different songs for our new hymnal. In writing of this hymn, the editors of our hymnal note: *Hindsight is nearly always clearer than foresight, and with gentle good humor this Christmas hymn points out how great was the gap between human expectation and God’s actual way of providing a means of salvation for us. God’s ways continually exceed our claims to comprehend them*. All our Christmas carols were new at one time. Who knows whether this will be an old familiar carol for future generations who continue to sing Christmas praise!

*Who Would Think That What Was Needed*

The whole world rejoices in the birth of the Savior – and we rejoice with them. We are grateful for all those from around the world who gave us words to sing our praise and tunes with which to sing them. We are grateful for voices to raise our songs in joyful praise! But most of all we are grateful for the one who gives us reason to sing, the one who is the Savior, the Lord, the babe born in Bethlehem! Gloria in excelsis deo! Amen

Note: Much of the background information on the hymns and authors is from *The Presbyterian Hymnal Companion,* LindaJo H. McKim, Westminster/John Knox Press: 1993