



Christmas Morning Carol Sing Service
Entertaining Angels: More Hospitality

Prelude

Gathering— On this day when the baby is lying in the manger, doing what one-day-old babies do (which is not much except eat, sleep, and cry, we will hear a scripture that refer to angels and hospitality to strangers. This is an important connection. Jesus would grow up to make hospitality to strangers one of his main preaching points. He made these points with his life and his words—practicing what he preached around tables where he invited the most unlikely of guests. On this Christmas Day, we are called to remember all those who may feel like strangers today—people who need our hospitality for their lives to be #more hopeful, #more peaceful, #more joyful, #full of more love.

A Time of Prayer— Incarnate One, we bow before you on this day to celebrate the coming of your presence among us. You are the fulfillment of God’s ancient promises, a living testimony to God’s faithfulness. We thank you for your life-transforming love: you are a gift of sustenance to souls who hunger and thirst; you are balm to the wounded and strength to the lame; you are the very light of God, shining for all the nations to see. With all creation, we rejoice at your coming, as we worship before your manger...

The Lord's Prayer (unison)—Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

We Hear God’s Word *Hebrews 13:1-2 (adapted from The Voice Translation)*

And now, we hear from the Book of Hebrews in the Second Testament that says: “Let mutual affection continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.”

Carol Stories

“I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day,” by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and John Baptiste Calkin

By the mid-1800s, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was a household name, and his poems, like “The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere” and “The Song of Hiawatha” were memorized and quoted all over America.

But in 1863, it had been many years since he’d written an original verse. Longfellow was weary after years of hardship. His beloved wife had died in a tragic fire, causing him to fall into a deep depression. That Christmas, he wrote in his journal: “How inexpressibly sad are all holidays.”

A few years later, despite his deep conviction against violence, his oldest son, Charley, left this note in his house after stealing away to join the Union Army: “I have tried hard to resist the temptation of going without your leave but I cannot any longer.”

Less than a year later, on December 1, 1863, Longfellow received a telegram that every parent during wartime dreaded: Charley had been injured in a skirmish with Confederate troops and was currently in a Virginia hospital. Knowing the poor conditions of battlefield medical stations, Longfellow immediately left his Boston home to search for his son.

After arriving, he spent three days searching the incoming wounded arriving at the train station, passing up and down the line of bleeding, bandaged men, limp on pallets packed into boxcars, until he finally saw a familiar face: Charley, the prodigal son, alive, but barely breathing.

After being rushed to medical care and stabilized, Charley was eventually allowed to return home to Boston. On Christmas Day, with his son still shivering with fever, possibly never to recover, Longfellow struggled with the terrible reality of the war that had torn his country apart... and began to write a poem.

With each line, he built a picture of darkness—and in the midst of it, hope.

*And in despair I bowed my head;
 “There is no peace on earth,” I said;
 “For hate is strong and mocks the song
 Of peace on earth, good-will to men!”
 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, good-will to men.”*

Charley did eventually recover, and he and his father were reconciled, but this wartime Christmas poem-turned-song still rings out a story of the triumph of hope over despair even today.¹

“O, Holy Night,” by Placide Cappeau and Adolphe Adam

The hauntingly beautiful “O, Holy Night” was an instant hit, but was banned by the French church soon thereafter. In 1847, a French parish priest asked a local poet to write a Christmas carol, even though the poet’s church practice was a bit shaky. The poet wrote the beautiful lyrics and asked a composer friend to create the music. The magnificent carol quickly spread throughout France, however, the local Church soon discovered that the author was a socialist and the composer Jewish, and banned the song for a time. But the people continued to sing it, and in 1871, on Christmas Eve during the Franco-Prussian War, a French soldier ran out of his trench unarmed and began to sing this carol. Silence fell across the battlefield, and when he was finished, a German soldier came out and sang a favorite German carol. A Christmas ceasefire followed.²

“Go Tell It on the Mountain,” an African American Spiritual

“Go, tell it on the mountain” provides the opportunity to tell the story of how singing African American spirituals saved a university. The Fisk Jubilee Singers (drawing their name from Leviticus 25—the year of jubilee) were founded as a ten-member touring ensemble to raise funds for debt-ridden Fisk University. [For those who don’t know Fisk University is a Historically Black University and was founded in 1866, by members of the American Missionary Society, for the education of freedmen in Nashville, TN. Fisk was one of several schools and colleges that the association helped found across the South to educate freed slaves following the Civil War. The American Missionary Society was supported by predecessors of the United Church of Christ, and Fisk still has ties

¹ <https://www.crosswalk.com/special-coverage/christmas-and-advent/beloved-christmas-carols-and-the-true-stories-behind-them.html>

² <https://media.ascensionpress.com/2019/12/23/the-stories-behind-our-most-beloved-christmas-carols-%EF%BB%BF/>

with the UCC.^{3]} The Fisk Jubilee Singers, taking the entire contents of the University treasury with them for travel expenses, departed on October 6, 1871, from Nashville on their difficult, but ultimately successful eighteen-month tour, a triumph that is still celebrated annually as Jubilee Day on the campus. Though not the original repertoire of the group, by the time they reached New York in December of that year, their concerts grew to include more and more spirituals, until their program consisted primarily of choral arrangements of spirituals or, according to African American scholars C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya, “anthemized spirituals.”

They have been credited with keeping the Negro spiritual alive. Spirituals scholar Sandra Jean Graham places this development in context: “The students were at first reluctant ambassadors for the songs of their ancestors. As [Jubilee] singer Ella Sheppard recalled, ‘The slave songs were never used by us then in public. They were associated with slavery and the dark past and represented the things to be forgotten. Then, too, they were sacred to our parents, who used them in their religious worship . . . It was only through persuasion that the students sang their spirituals privately for [the University’s treasurer, George L.] White [who was a white man], and through White’s coercion that they sang them in concert.”

Taking the spiritual to white and black audiences in the United States and Europe earned the school and the spiritual an international reputation. The small ensemble of two quartets and a pianist grew to a full choral ensemble. Other historically black colleges eventually followed the same pattern, including Howard University (Washington, D.C.) and Tuskegee Institute (now University, Tuskegee, Alabama).

UM Hymnal editor Carlton R. Young notes African American theologian James H. Cone’s interpretation of this spiritual. Dr. Cone states that “the conquering King, and the crucified Lord . . . has come to bring peace and justice to the dispossessed of the land. That is why the slave wanted to ‘go tell it on de mountain.’”⁴

Carol Sing

Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany Songs are #152-249
Please, call out the song and page number.

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fisk_University

⁴ <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-go-tell-it-on-the-mountain-1>

We Respond to God's Word with Our Giving

Invitation—In Jesus Christ, we received the greatest gift of God’s love born into this world, into our lives, into our hearts. In response to that holiest, most sacred gift, we bring our gifts that God might use them to plant more love right here on earth.

December Benevolence—Christmas Fund

Doxology

We Give Thanks—God of boundless love, we offer these gifts so that they may be transformed into your good news for the sake of the world. Amen.

Benediction—As you head back out into the world this day, remember those strangers you meet, might just be angels, so carry with you a spirit of hope, peace, joy, and love, as you serve Christ the newborn King.

Postlude