

A GIFT FROM THE HEART:
CHRISTMAS EDITION



**2020 Christ the King Devotional
honoring the 12 Days of Christmas**

December 25, 2020



Joy to the World

Text: Isaac Watts

Music: English melody, 18th cent.; arr. Lowell Mason

Based on: Psalm 98, Luke 2:11

My selection of “my favorite Christmas hymn” was not a simple one. I do love so many of the hymns with which I grew up. But my mind went to one of the Sundays at Christ the King where we did “Hymn Sing Sunday” during Advent. I loved hearing the stories of others who had such rich memories of why a particular hymn was special.

I thought back to being maybe 12 or so at Trinity Lutheran Church in Alamogordo, NM. It was a Missouri Synod church and my grandfather (who died 6 months before I was born) was a LCMS pastor. So, I am one of those “cradle to grave” Lutherans, and migrated to the ELCA when I married Paul.

My dad had a deep, rich bass voice. I always like to sit next to him and tried to follow along with what he sang, albeit an octave higher, I am sure.

So that day at CtK, “Joy to the World” popped into my head, as in this song, towards the end of each verse, the bass line is the echo line, and I always try to do that—to this day, all these many years later. Then a few years later, when we did this same thing one Sunday, David Wylie (who sang bass in our choir here), came running over to me to sit next to me when that hymn was sung. We sang those line together, and we both shed some tears.

Jigger Staby



December 26, 2020



How Glad I Am Each Christmas Eve or *Jeg Er Saa Glad Hver Julekveld* was a song that I grew up with in Decorah, Iowa. Coming from a Norwegian community in Northeast Iowa, the Norwegian heritage, language and customs were an integral part of my upbringing. As a little girl with Norwegian grandparents, our Lutheran church was an important part of my life. Singing in the church was particularly important and it started very early in Sunday School. One of the songs we practiced in our annual Christmas program was How Glad I Am. Of course, we had to learn it and perform it in Norwegian. Many of us had heard it in our homes from our grandparents, parents and aunts and uncles before we ever started Sunday School.

I also learned that “Of the few Scandinavian hymns that crossed the ocean and was remembered into the next generation, this Christmas tree hymn from Norway ranks among the top, along with & quote; Children of the Heavenly Father. Written to be sung on Christmas Eve when the tree was being decorated, it tells parents, especially mothers, how they should teach their children about the faith as they decorate the tree. Composed by Peder Knudsen with lyrics by Marie Wexelsen in 1859. The first stanza of the text is well known in Norwegian yet in America. This hymn first appeared in the Nynorsk Salmebog of 1926. It very quickly appeared among the Norwegian Americans and was translated by P.A. Sveeggen, for inclusion in The Concordia in 1931.”*

As Christmas approached and we practiced diligently singing this simple and beautiful song, the smells of lefsa, krumkake, potato dumplings, sand bakkels and other Norwegian foods permeated the house.

Christmas Eve our large Sunday School class stood in front of the congregation and in Norwegian sung:

*Jeg er så glad hver julekveld,
For da ble Jesus født,
Da lyste stjernen som en sol,
Og engler sang så søtt.*

As I looked into the audience, I saw many teary eyes as relatives remembered their own ancestors and the beautiful memories of Christmas past.

[Link to full version, lyrics and history of this hymn](#)

Wanda Ellingson

December 27, 2020



When James Chadwick, Bishop of Hexham and Newcastle, penned the words to “**Angels We Have Heard On High**” in 1862, I doubt if he envisioned his sacred song being used as background music to the Claymation Christmas Special of 1987. Think of all the Christmas stories that have been written during the 125 years which separate those two dates! And the movies that have been made! When the amorous advances of an overweight walrus on ice skates ends up terrorizing a waddle of penguins, well, let’s face it, that’s not in the same league with Dickens’ “A Christmas Carol” or “Miracle on 34th Street.” Surely, we need more than a cartoon to inspire us during the dark close to the difficult year that is 2020. We need songs and stories of magnificent miracles, the kind of miracles which bring tears of joy to the eyes of all Christians everywhere.

Still...

In 1987 our youngest son was eleven. This would be our third Christmas with our adopted son. He was not a joyful child most of the time. But when he saw and hear The Claymation Christmas version of Angels We Have Heard On High, he giggled, then laughed, then guffawed through the entire walrus and penguin slapstick rendition of that particular hymn. Who except God hears the sound of a child’s laughter in a closed-up home on 22 isolated acres? Well, who except God would hear any sound His own son made, in Bethlehem long ago? And who except God would care deeply about either one?

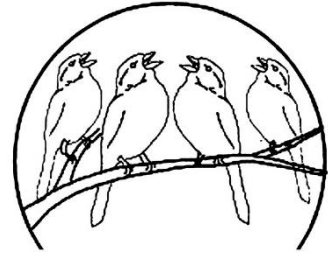
I don’t know if the singular memory of my son’s sudden joy is a miracle. I do know that the laughter of a sad child speaks loudly to the Almighty who loves *all* His children, in ways we cannot begin to imagine.

Tim Williams



December 28, 2020

Silent Night



My favorite Christmas hymn is “Silent Night”. As a young, child after the church Christmas Eve service we always had a family celebration at our house before opening the presents. We sang songs, read the Christmas story from Luke then ended with “Silent Night”. That meant we could tear into the presents, yea!

After all my siblings were through college and working, we began the tradition of gathering at mom and dad’s house for Christmas. Sure enough, the old tradition was reinstated at these gatherings. “Silent Night” brings back all the wonderful memories that accompany our “together times” of food, family and conversation.

Paul Staby



December 29, 2020

It Came Upon a Midnight Clear



In my book, we can't sing this hymn enough, and considering it doesn't mention the Christmas miracle or even a baby, we could sing it anytime. It's always been a favorite of mine largely due to the last two lines of the third verse:

*When peace shall over all the earth its ancient splendor fling
and the whole world give back the song which now the angels sing.*

I found out that this hymn was written in the years leading up to the American Civil War, a time of tremendous acrimony and a pervasive desire to divide the country. Perhaps we are here again. Can you imagine the whole world in unison – spiritually, fraternally, literally – singing about the same peace that the angels were describing on that beautiful night? Sounds impossible, but that's what God does.

Ann Duft



December 30, 2020



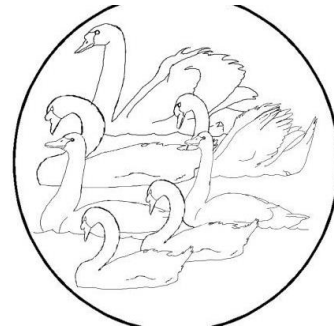
As a musician, I have a special place in my heart for Christmas songs. The harmonies, the miraculous subject matter. I sang them with Joyful Noise in church and in various other locations in Durango for twenty years. But one moment from one Christmas clearly stands out in my memory.

We were providing music for the Manna Soup Kitchen Christmas Dinner which, that year, was held at the La Plata County Fairgrounds. It was difficult, at first, to feel connection to the audience in that huge, cavernous building. We were positioned on an elevated platform. A first for us. The line of people waiting to be served ended up passing right in front of us. We were singing John Lennon's "**Happy Christmas** (War Is Over)." Part of the way through the song, we looked down and there we saw a mother, father and child dancing in front of us. They were transported by the music as they waltzed past us. For me, it was the first time in over forty years of performing that anyone was moved spontaneously to dance to the music I was playing. I can't really say why this was so important to me. I only know that my heart was filled with joy and love, just what one would want to be feeling on Christmas morning.

Aurora Rose

December 31, 2020

Oh Come All Ye Faithful - A Christmas remembrance

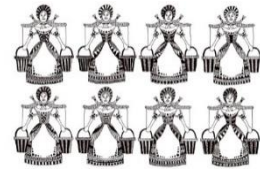


I grew up in Denver. My family attended a large church there, Augustana Lutheran. From the time I started going to school, I got to be part of the annual Candlelight service, along with all of the other girls from the church. We practiced for two or three Saturdays before that night, directed by a lady (very old, I thought at the time). We each held a flashlight “candle” and proceeded up the center aisle, youngest girls first, singing all of the verses of Oh Come All Ye Faithful. We lined up in front of the railing to continue to sing. When we were seniors in high school, we got to be part of the cross, a special honor. As seniors, we each carried two candles and formed a cross on the steps of the sanctuary at the front of the church. We sang many Christmas carols, first by ourselves and then with the congregation. To this day, whenever I hear or sing Oh Come All Ye Faithful, I remember walking up the aisle and then standing there, looking out over the congregation through the glow of my candle. Although I don’t remember the names of the various other carols, once I begin singing them, I can recall all of the words.

Lynn Mitzlaff



January 1, 2021



I am out of practice now, yet while growing up, I am quite certain I could have been a world class air drumming champion! When I was home alone, music cranked up sitting on the couch I knew the drumming parts to every one of my favorite songs and I drummed my heart out! Every instrument contributes something beautiful to every band, large and small, and still, it is the drums that grab me every time. Oh, how I love a really good beat.

There are so many beautiful Christmas songs, each with its own memory, yet one stands out for me. I love the beat of this song and I could go on and on about a favorite version!

Pa rum pum pum pum

Rum pum pum pum

Rum pum pum pum

As good as the beat is, the love of this song, does go deeper. The fondness for this song started as a youngster with the old stop-motion animated cartoon, listening to the voice of Greer Garson narrate the story of a boy named Aaron. Remember the classic **Little Drummer Boy**?

Aaron was a young orphaned Jewish boy who found his sole and soul enjoyment playing his drum for his friends Sampson the Donkey, Joshua the Camel and Baba the lamb. I can still see the little animals keeping time as they all marched to Aaron's drum.

For years, I did not miss the broadcast of the show. In short, at one point, Baba gets hit by a chariot, leaving Aaron feeling even more lost and alone than he already was following the death of his parents. As I write about the story, I sense the tears that would inevitably well up in my eyes and slowly run down my cheek as I hear Aaron's desperate cries, ringing in my ears. "Baba, Baba!" Aaron takes his dying friend to the Magi who confess they cannot help, but that maybe the baby can. With no material possessions to offer as a gift, Aaron decides to be the gift and plays his drum for the baby Jesus, who then gives new life to Baba.

This is an unsophisticated story, yet one complete with value and significance for me. We have all been blessed with a gift, a talent to share. Creating music, writing, preaching, teaching, cooking, sewing, woodworking, listening, drawing, painting, research, accounting, graphics, website design, networking, photography, video creation, providing humor, healing, sign language, planning, leadership, reading, fund raising, story-telling, volunteering, the list could go on and on. What is your talent, your gift to share?

In a year when we have been isolated, missing needed hugs and handshakes from friends, have lost our ability for in person worship, have watched friends and family pass away without being able to be with them in their final days, and so many more devastating losses, many of us feel like we have been run over by a chariot. And still, there is hope! We have witnessed over and over this year, the many talents we all have shared to bring light into a dark time.

I pray we all continue sharing our God given gifts and our hearts in the New Year as we look forward to joyous reunions with family and friends!

Holly Landgren

January 2, 2021



Be near me Lord Jesus
I ask Thee to stay
Close by me forever
And love me, I pray

Bless all the dear children
In Thy tender care
And fit us for heaven
To live with Thee there

Red shag carpet under foot, twinkling Christmas tree lights reflecting in the window, holding hands 'round the dining room table, singing this final verse of **Away in a Manger**. A vivid childhood memory from my grandparents' home.

We didn't dare leave the table before asking permission to be excused, and once our request was granted, we only stood after putting our napkin back in the napkin ring holder and joining family in the after-dinner prayer, which at Christmastime meant singing the final verse of a carol.

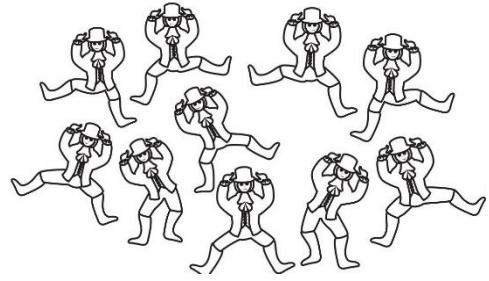
Fast forward 35 years. I must sheepishly admit the tradition of an after-dinner prayer has completely vanished from my routine. And any sort of daily mealtime prayer is rare. My prayers tend to be spurred by an immediate need for myself or a loved one, or prompted by a moment of overwhelming thankfulness, and occasionally, I consider asking God to let me know His plan. Despite my inconsistency in chatting with God, I know I can count on him, from small concerns to grand hopes.

As the sun was setting tonight, it dawned on me that my keys were no longer in my sweatshirt pocket. While repeatedly asking God to please, please help me find my keys, I tried to remain calm, retracing my steps across a half mile of wooded terrain the dogs and I had just hiked. Once God focused my mind on the memory of tripping over a tree stump and falling face first onto a forest floor of fallen leaves, I felt certain I would find my keys. As I walked back to our cabin, keys in hand, with a happy heart and giddy grin, I felt a bit embarrassed by my desperate plea. What a silly thing to pray about, considering all that's going on in the world today.

Keeper of the stars, I am grateful for your listening ear. Whether it be my longing for a multiple sclerosis cure, my deep desire to thank you for my many blessings, or simply helping me find a shiny object in the midst of your vast creation, you are always there for me and love me no matter what. Father in Heaven, hear my prayer, keep me in thy loving care, be my guide in all I do, bless all those who love me too. Amen.

Beth Stelz

January 3, 2021



The song that is a special twinge for me is “**O Christmas Tree**”, German “O Tannenbaum”, probably because I love the decorating and preparation. Going to my hymnal to find the hymn, I found it isn’t there. I remember singing it even in German as a kid. When I think of the stories Martin Luther putting candles on the tree and trees decorated by family and friends. Memories of my mom making the Chrismon ornaments for the tree for our church in Iowa, when I was 10. Wikipedia says “The *Chrismon tree* was first used by North American Lutherans in 1957.” I visited Israel in January 2019 seeing the 90 ft Christmas tree outside of the Basilica of the Annunciation and in Bethlehem we visited the Nativity church to participate in the Orthodox Christmas Night Mass where trees stood on each side of altar. There are at least a dozen English versions of this carol, all by unknown authors, but all are based on the German original.

O Christmas Tree

How green thy branches ever! Thou still art green when summer wanes and
wintry winds sweep o’er the plains.

Thy verdant branches please me. The sight of thee at Christmas time doth make
me sing a joyful rhyme.

Thy dress so green would teach me: Fair hope, in trouble and distress, is felt to
be a sweet caress.

What golden lights adorn thee! Like stars they shine in beauty bright, to fill
each heart with pure delight.

How loving hands have decked thee! Thus, God's own love will make of me for
Paradise a shining tree.

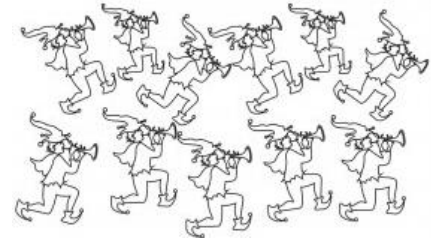
I think of all the ways God has used trees throughout the Bible, whether in Eden or on Calvary each show us his love. O make of me for paradise a shining tree.

Found in the 1930 American Lutheran Hymnal - Hymn 618

Ronnie Zaday



January 4, 2021



Oh gosh I wish I could remember how old I was. 10? 11? Could have been 12. Well, it was around that age. I was in the children's choir of Lexington Presbyterian Church. I loved that choir. My Presbyterian friends and I would walk from school to church every Wednesday for rehearsal. Mrs. Phillips was the director, and her rule was that you didn't *have* to memorize the music, but if you recited the lyrics to her assistant, Mrs. Brittigan, you got to wear a silver cross over your choir robe. It was always my goal to get that cross. Do you know how many Hallelujahs there are in the soprano part of the Hallelujah Chorus? I do. I still count on my fingers every time I get the chance to sing it.

Anyway... as I was saying, I loved that choir. Mrs. Phillips would work on our musical ears during warmups by singing our names and we'd have to sing it back - perfectly, before she'd move on. Oh woe unto Scott Pugh who never could... hence Mrs. Phillips instituted her first ever, in decades of directing this choir, three strikes rule. I always aimed to sing my name back to her just right, striving to match not only pitch but timbre and even amount of vibrato.

So, no one was very surprised when I, the complete music nerd, was chosen to sing the first verse of *Once in Royal David's City*.

Singing this song as the processional hymn to the annual Lessons and Carols Service dates back to 1919. A boy soprano would stand at the back of the church and sing the whole first verse, a cappella. No accompaniment. Then the organ and the rest of the choir and the congregation joins in on the second verse. OOOOOOOO *very prestigious to be chosen! How wonderful! I thought. I'll make my family so proud.*

What I didn't know was how difficult it actually is! Singing a cappella is easy when no one will ever know if you're singing the right notes. But if you sing the first verse of this song off-key - the second verse is right behind to immediately tell the world if you stayed on key or not. So there you stand, in the dark, up high on the back balcony, all by yourself, because the acoustics are better up there, and everyone else has to be down below in the front hall, ready to process in on the first beat of verse 2. You got your starting note about a half hour ago in the rehearsal room. Then you got it again through the teeth of Mrs. Phillips. Then you were sent upstairs to the balcony about 10 minutes before go-time. Your ears are bombarded with sounds of talking and laughter from the congregation as they enter and are seated. You see your family arrive and your breathing gets a bit shallower and a lot faster. Bill McCorkle enters the choir loft at the exact opposite end of the church and takes his seat at the organ. It's almost time. You try to hum the starting note. Nothing much comes out. You breathe deeply and try again, but you produce something akin to the sound of a Mongolian Throat Singer. Bill McCorkle turns around from the organ and gives you the one-minute sign. Suddenly your bladder is very full and your mouth is very dry. The lights dim. The congregational noise slowly dies down. You take a deep breath, and...

I can't really remember what happened. Might've been good, might've been bad. Was probably somewhere in between. But I kept auditioning for solos after that, so it can't have been traumatic. I even got to sing it again in college, standing again alone in the back balcony of the chapel. And I still really love the song. Years ago, when I was directing the CtK Jesus' Sparks choir, I had Brianna Wilhaus (née Sandhaus) sing the solo and it was lovely, bringing back nothing but sweet memories. So, I don't want to know if I stayed on key that Christmas Eve 30-some-odd years ago, and I never want to lose the Pavlovian clench of the stomach every time I hear it. **Once in Royal David's City**, ELW #269

Mandy Gardner

January 5, 2021



O Little Town of Bethlehem

Many church memberships ago for me, a Rev. Phillip Gangsei was our Sr. Pastor who would draw upon the lyrics of this hymn for his Christmas Eve message. He thought the hymn said it all perfectly and, as such, he didn't need to expand much upon it for his sermon: humble, unlikely Bethlehem; hope in a dark night; God's unexpected, undeserved gift; forgiveness; God abiding with us; messengers, etc. Many boxes checked for the point of Christmas.

As I think back to how Pastor Phil loved this song, I remember it was on the roster of every Christmas service at that church. In fact, I remember he requested it sung in the Advent weeks leading up to the Christmas services. "But Pastor Phil," many long-time members cried, "*It's not Christmas yet! We can't sing this on December 10th!!*" And with an ease that comes from a go-to response, he'd explain that we are EASTER people. Christmas has happened! We are in the time of living beyond that first Christmas and we can sing those songs anytime.

And one year he didn't stop there. NAY! – he encouraged it sung through December and beyond! -- even one Sunday smack in the middle of Lent, which was a little weird to pull that off, but when we remembered the link between Easter and Christmas, we could sing it with even more gratitude.

So here we are at Epiphany and the start of another year, a HAPPIER year. (*Fast away the old year passes, indeed!*) Break out the Christmas tunes again!

*O come to us, abide with us
Our Lord Emmanuel*

Ann Duft