
GANZ NOTES ON “O LITTLE TOWN OF BETHLEHEM” (1868)

Version: 9 December 2012; 11 December 2015; 14 December 2015; 13, 15 December 2020

TEXT

How beautifully the glorious message of Christmas is told in this well-phrased hymn by **Phillips Brooks (1835-1893)**, one of America’s most outstanding ministers of the past century. During a trip to the Holy Land in 1865,¹ Brooks went to the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem on Christmas Eve and worshiped there. He was deeply moved by this experience. Three years later, while pastoring the Holy Trinity Church in Philadelphia, Brooks desired to have a special carol for the children to sing in their Sunday school Christmas program. Recalling the peaceful scene in the little town of Bethlehem, Brooks completed the writing of the text in just one evening. He gave a copy of the words to his organist, **Lewis R. Redner**, and requested him to compose a melody that would be easy for the children to sing. On the evening just before the program was to be given, Redner awakened suddenly from his sleep with the present melody in his mind—and he quickly wrote it out. “O Little Town of Bethlehem” has been a favorite with children and adults around the world since that time.²

¹ The American Civil War (also the War between the States, or simply the Civil War) was a civil war **fought from 1861 to 1865** between the United States (the "Union" or the "North") and several Southern slave states that had declared their secession and formed the Confederate States of America (the "Confederacy" or the "South"). The war had its origin in the fractious issue of slavery, and, after four years of bloody combat (mostly in the South), the Confederacy was defeated, slavery was abolished, and the difficult Reconstruction process of restoring unity and guaranteeing rights to the freed slaves began.

²Osbeck, K. W. (1990). *Amazing Grace: 366 inspiring hymn stories for daily devotions*. Includes indexes. (370). Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel Publications.

Author: Bishop Phillips Brooks

Composer: Lewis H. Redner³

Tune: St. Louis (Redner) *Music:* St. Louis, Lewis H. Redner, 1868. Redner was Brooks' organist at Holy Trinity Church in Boston, Massachusetts. The tune came to him on Christmas Eve, and was first sung the next day.

Scripture: Micah 5:1-3

¹ *But you, Bethlehem-Ephrathah^a
 least among the clans of Judah,
From you shall come forth for me
 one who is to be ruler in Israel;
Whose origin is from of old,
 from ancient times.

² Therefore the Lord will give them up, until the time
 when she who is to give birth has borne,^{*}
Then the rest of his kindred shall return
 to the children of Israel.^b

³ He shall take his place as shepherd
 by the strength of the LORD,
 by the majestic name of the LORD, his God;
And they shall dwell securely, for now his greatness
 shall reach to the ends of the earth:

³ From DAHR (Discography of American Historical Recordings) website: "**Lewis Henry Redner (December 15, 1831, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania – August 29, 1908, Hotel Marlborough, Atlantic City, New Jersey)** was an American musician, best known as the composer of the popular Christmas carol "St. Louis", better known as "O Little Town of Bethlehem". Redner worked in the real-estate business in Philadelphia, and played the organ at four different churches during his life. **He spent 19 years as organist at the Church of the Holy Trinity, Philadelphia. While there, he set Pastor Phillips Brooks's poem of his recollection of a pilgrimage to Bethlehem to music on Christmas Eve, 1868, and the carol was first sung the next day.** Redner was very involved with local charities. He served on the first board of Sunday Breakfast Rescue Mission, a homeless shelter and soup kitchen, in 1878."

^{*} Salvation will come through a "messiah," an anointed ruler. The Book of Micah shares with Isaiah the expectation that God will deliver Israel through a king in the line of David. Bethlehem-Ephrathah is the home of the Davidic line.

^a Ru 1:2; 1 Sm 17:12; Mt 2:6; Jn 7:42.

^{*} These words are sometimes understood as a reference to Isaiah's Emmanuel oracle, given some thirty years earlier (Is 7:14). The Gospel of Matthew reports that the chief priests and scribes cite this passage as the ancient promise of a messiah in the line of David to be born in Bethlehem (Mt 2:5-6).

^b Is 7:14; 11:1-2.

⁴ he shall be peace.* ⁴

Bethlehem is significant in two ways, as the town from which the great David sprang, and as a place very tiny to have produced so great a man. **The story of David's origin from an obscure town was no doubt true, but emphasis on it is in part due to a fondness on the part of Old Testament writers for the theme: reversal of fortunes, rags to riches.** Thus when Samuel told Saul he would be king, Saul replied (1 Samuel 9:21*): "Am I not a Benjaminite, from the least of the tribes of Israel? And is not my family the humblest of all the families of the tribe of Benjamin?" Similarly Gideon says: "How can I save Israel? My clan is the poorest in Manasseh, and I am the youngest in my father's house" (Judges 6:15*). **The theme gave pleasure as a satisfying narrative element, while at a religious level it expressed the working of *divine power contrary to human capabilities or expectations.*** The term "clans" (אַלְפֵי) refers to a basic and ancient feature of Israelite social organization, the "thousands," the troops raised from each tribal subdivision (מִשְׁפָּחָם) for military purposes. **It recalls the pre-monarchic times of Moses, Joshua, and the Judges, and thereby throws hearers of this prophecy back to the time before the coming of the first king.** ⁵

Wikipedia entry under "O Little Town of Bethlehem," notes how 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 he 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**

* *Peace*: he will not only symbolize but also bring about harmony and wholeness.

⁴ [New American Bible](#), Revised Edition. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Mic 5:1-4.

* ²¹ Saul answered, "I am only a Benjaminite, from the least of the tribes of Israel, and my family is the humblest of all the families of the tribe of Benjamin. Why then have you spoken to me in this way?" 1 Samuel 9:21 (NRSV)

* ¹⁵ He responded, "But sir, how can I deliver Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family." Judges 6:15 (NRSV)

⁵Hillers, D. R., Hanson, P. D., & Fisher, L. R. (1984). *Micah: A commentary on the book of the Prophet Micah*. Includes indexes. Hermeneia--a critical and historical commentary on the Bible (65). Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

the night hearing an angel-strain whispering in my ear, and seizing a piece of music paper I jotted down the treble of the tune as we now have it, and on Sunday morning before going to church I filled in the harmony. Neither Mr. Brooks nor I ever thought the carol or the music to it would live beyond that Christmas of 1868.”

THE CHRISTMAS PARDON OF 1868

The first Civil War amnesty proclamation was issued by President Abraham Lincoln on December 8, 1863. It offered pardons to any person taking an oath to support the Constitution and the Union and pledging to abide by all Federal laws and proclamations in reference to slavery made during the period of the rebellion. Six classes of persons were excluded from the benefits of the amnesty, including any persons known to have treated unlawfully black prisoners of war and their white officers.... **On May 29, 1865 after the war was over, President Andrew Johnson issued his first amnesty proclamation, citing the failure of many to take advantage of Lincoln’s earlier proclamation.** Under the new terms, Johnson incorporated Lincoln’s seven exceptions from the general amnesty with a few alterations and added seven more, including persons who had broken the oath taken under the provisions of the proclamation of December 8, 1863.... **And on this day in history, 25 December 1868, Johnson’s final amnesty proclamation (“The Christmas Pardon”) was extended “unconditionally and without reservation” to all who had participated in the rebellion.**”⁶

Musical performances: Will and Kate James, *Over the Rainbow* (2020) – this music for this was written by Bob Chilcott (who was one of the boy Choristers of The King’s College Choir, who then for twelve years after that was a member of The King Singers).

THE TEXT (ANNOTATED)

1 O little town of Bethlehem,
How still we see thee lie! ⁷

⁶ See: <https://legallegacy.wordpress.com/2015/12/25/december-25-1868-president-andrew-johnson-pardons-all-confederates/>.

⁷ It would appear that the author is **looking down on Bethlehem from above** (see the note above about Brooks getting the idea for this when on the hills above Bethlehem at night), for we are able

Above thy deep and dreamless sleep⁸
The silent stars⁹ go by¹⁰;
Yet in the dark streets shineth
The everlasting Light;¹¹
The hopes and fears of all the years
Are met in thee tonight.¹²

2 For Christ is born of Mary,¹³
And gathered all above,
While mortals sleep, the angels keep

to see the whole town lying before us. **However, our perspective is not from heaven, for we are invited to look up and notice the stars wheeling above.**

⁸ Obviously, we to whom the author is speaking are awake, which it appears makes us unusual among the inhabitants of Bethlehem. **The idea of “dreamless” suggests to me a people who have ceased to hope, who no longer dream, who are already deep inside a cultivated hopelessness. But “dreamless” also suggests in biblical culture a people who have lost their ability for divine revelation,** because that ancient Jewish culture (and not that one only) believed God spoke in dreams, and often when God wishes to convey something of particular importance. But also when a person is unable to dream, he or she will go mad.

⁹ This idea of “silent stars” may be a reference to how non-Judaic religions of the ancient world read meaning in the stars (thus the famous Magi of Matthew 2), understanding even that **the stars were actually gods.** So the fact that they are “silent” suggests that what is to happen in Bethlehem will permanently silence the stars, silent finally before the truth of the Christ.

¹⁰ Note that the “go by” inserts into the apparently motionless scene a sense of motion. The heavens are moving, as if to suggest that Heaven is in motion. **But this heavenly motion of “silent stars” also suggests a kind of dumb passing of stars through space, as if blindly in motion. As a result the idea from Matthew 2 (the Magi) that the “star stopped” is a powerful indicator of a force far greater than the stars is at work on this holy night.** Matthew 2:9 – “After their audience with the king they set out. And behold, the star that they had seen at its rising preceded them, until it came **and stopped over the place** where the child was.”

¹¹ This suggests to me that we are meant to see Mary and Joseph on the donkey, making their way through the streets, rejected at already crowded inns, both of them perhaps unaware of the “everlasting light” that Mary carries within herself. The feeling that I get from this opening scene is that of **the Glory passing by while, typically, humans are asleep, not noticing in “deep and dreamless sleep,”** not ready to receive so great a gift.

¹² It is not that hope meets fears in the streets this night; rather, Christ in the womb meets us as we are; that is, a mixed bag of hopes and fears. **We are “met” there,** just as we are, by God who comes, “God with us,” the Emmanuel.

¹³ The “for” here means “because”; that is, it is clarifying that God has come as one like us, born of a woman. That is, **BECAUSE** the second Divine Person becomes human, God is uniquely **ABLE** to meet us “in our hopes and fears of all the years.”

Their watch of wond'ring love. ¹⁴
O morning stars, together
Proclaim the holy birth,
And praises sing to God the King,
And peace to men on earth! ¹⁵

- 3 How silently, how silently ¹⁶
The wondrous gift is giv'n!
So God imparts to human hearts
The blessings of His heav'n. ¹⁷
No ear may hear His coming,
But in this world of sin,

¹⁴ Notice that this hymn invites us to notice what no one else is noticing. Everyone is asleep in Bethlehem, but the angels notice with *wondering love* (an interesting choice of participle – “wondering” rather than, say, “worshipping” or “knowing” love). It is a typical characteristic of humans; namely, that we are asleep when God comes, is active for us and for our salvation; we have other things occupying our attention. **This wonderful phrase “wondering love” reminds me of George Herbert in his *Love III* poem where he writes of “quick-eyed love” as that which Divine Love demonstrates toward me who is “unworthy to be here.”**

¹⁵ Only someone who knows the earliest time of the morning, when the stars come out, even before the birds begin to sing, can understand why **the delicacy of this starlight affixed in a sky that is just beginning to welcome the morning light** is like praise.

¹⁶ **The author at this point begins to feel a grace of wonder blooming within him.** The grace that he has been beholding now starts to strike him with force, to affect his understanding of God who gives so awesome a gift in such stillness, in such an understated and delicate way. Who is God, and what is He like to proceed in this way? Notice also how this stillness of God, inside of which He moves, contrasts with the stillness of Bethlehem—“how still we see thee lie.” **The former stillness is an expression of the majesty and effortless effectiveness of God; the latter stillness is that of inattention and sin.**

¹⁷ **Heaven is not a place but a kind of relationship.** In this case, it is the establishing of a relationship between God and human beings, initiated by God. The Old Testament refers to “**salvation**” as the restoring of a “right relationship” between God and human beings. **So, “heaven” is all that we experience of blessing and peace and hope and love when we sense that our relationship with God is real, perfectly matched to the way we actually are.** This relationship requires no “performing” on our part, because God meets us where we are and walks with us, showing us how to love him, showing us what our hope has always known.

Where meek¹⁸ souls will receive Him, still, ¹⁹
The dear Christ enters in. ²⁰

4 O holy Child of Bethlehem!
Descend to us, we pray; ²¹
Cast out our sin, and enter in,
Be born in us today! ²²
We hear the Christmas angels
The great glad tidings tell; ²³

¹⁸ The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**meek**” – “Not proud or self-willed; piously humble; patient and unresentful under injury or reproach; (esp. of a woman) demure, quiet. **Frequently connoting the gentleness (esp. towards the weak, the humble, and the poor) consonant with a Christian virtue; cf. post-classical Latin *mansuetus* (Vulgate), Hellenistic Greek *πραῖος* (New Testament).** Use of *meek* as a noun is predominantly in this sense: see branch [B](#). The distinction between this and sense [A. 2b](#) is not always clear, since more or less similar qualities of meekness have often been regarded as laudable in certain contexts (as in Christian humility, or, formerly, in women's or servants' characters) but as weak or effeminate in others.”

¹⁹ This adverb “**still**” is significant. By it, the author clarifies that Christ’s coming—the incarnation of God for us and within our context—ceases to be merely historical (as those in sin affirm or assume); Christ’s coming never ceases in those who are “meek” before him.

²⁰ The use of the adjective “**dear**” emphasizes that **the author has had a personal experience of Christ**; he knows Christ enough to know that “dear” is a perfectly appropriate adjective describing him.

²¹ **The author now moves from vision to prayer**; he activates the relationship with Christ by speaking to him, but not at any point in Christ’s earthly life but at that point in his divine life when he first appeared as “one like us in all things but sin.” It is through an experience of the incarnation—“how silently the wondrous gift is given!”—that the author feels the desire for Christ to come to him afresh. However, it is significant that this grace that he is feeling is not a “Jesus and me” narcissism – “descend **to us**, we pray”, for he prays this prayer as if speaking for all of us, even and especially us who are asleep—“O come to us, abide with us.”

²² As my novice Director, Fr. Gordon Moreland, S.J. was fond of saying: “It is not that we ask God for too much, and then are disappointed that God fails to answer our prayer. Rather, it is that we ask for too pathetically little of God.” Notice the importance of the “**Be born in us today**.” The author is asking, boldly, for everything possible to ask; namely, for Christ himself to be born in us, *now*. **In this regard, the poet is asking for us the grace of Mary at her Annunciation, the grace of saying a YES like hers.**

²³ This is a great moment when suddenly at least some of us have awakened in the night to hear the angels singing—“**We hear!**” I should mention here that hymns are themselves sacramental; that is, they cause the grace their words and music put before our attention. **In this case, we who sing the carol find ourselves, by the hymn’s end, awake and listening. Perhaps the present-day “angels” are the believers who with me are singing this Christmas carol.**

O come to us, abide with us,
Our Lord Immanuel! ²⁴

BIOGRAPHY OF BISHOP PHILLIPS BROOKS²⁵

Phillips Brooks (born Dec. 13, 1835, Boston, Mass., U.S.—died Jan. 23, 1893, Boston), American Episcopal clergyman renowned as a preacher.

A member of a wealthy old Brahmin family of New England, Brooks attended Harvard University (1851–55) and taught briefly at the Boston Latin School before attending the Episcopal Seminary at Alexandria, Va., being ordained there on July 1, 1859. The following month he began his ministry at the Church of the Advent in Philadelphia, where his impressive personality and eloquence won crowds of admirers. Three years later he became rector of Holy Trinity in the same city. Except for a year of travel abroad in 1865–66, he remained there seven years, during which he finished the lyrics of his famous Christmas carol, “O Little Town of Bethlehem” (music by Lewis H. Redner). In 1869 he accepted the rectorship of Boston’s Trinity Church, the nation’s stronghold of Episcopalianism, and retained that position until he became bishop of Massachusetts in 1891.

In *Lectures on Preaching* (delivered at Yale University in 1877), Brooks offered his most influential essay of his profession, **defining preaching as “the bringing of truth through personality,” by which he meant a kind of radiant optimism.** His own eloquence was matched by his commanding, handsome figure, standing six feet four inches tall and weighing (in his prime) 300 pounds. His charismatic preaching became so renowned that he was invited in 1880 to preach at Westminster Abbey in London and at the Royal Chapel at Windsor before Queen Victoria. In 1890 he conducted an acclaimed series of services at Trinity Church, New York City. Several volumes of his sermons were published during his lifetime and posthumously.

²⁴*Logos Hymnal*. 1995 (1st edition.). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

²⁵ "Phillips Brooks." *Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica Online Academic Edition*. Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., 2012. Web. 09 Dec. 2012.
<<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/81281/Phillips-Brooks>>.

BIOGRAPHY OF LEWIS H. REDNER, ORGANIST

Lewis Redner falls into a class of composers known for a single work associated with Christmas, a single work so popular as to eclipse the fame of its creator. Like Katherine K. Davis and John Henry Hopkins, Jr., composers of, respectively, "The Little Drummer Boy" and "We Three Kings of Orient Are," Redner is viewed as a largely marginal figure in American music, despite the popularity of his Christmas carol "O Little Town of Bethlehem." Many will assert, of course, that although Redner wrote other music -- largely forgotten fare -- he was obviously not an outstanding composer and thus deserves his lesser status. Perhaps so. The apparently modest Redner himself would probably not have objected to such an assessment, as he was an organist first and composer second. Redner's lone hit, however, will undoubtedly keep his name from falling into total obscurity, as well as continue to serve as inspiration to other lesser composers.

Lewis Henry Redner was born in Philadelphia on December 15, 1831. Relatively little is known about his life: it seems he was a talented keyboard player in his youth, and eventually began playing the organ for services in the Episcopal Church.

Redner's primary occupation in his adult years, however, was not musician but real estate agent. On the side, he was chief organist at four churches during his career. The most enduring and important of these posts was at the Church of the Holy Trinity in Rittenhouse Square, Philadelphia, where he served for 19 years.

It was during his stint there, in 1868, that Redner wrote his famous tune, which turned out to be the product of a last-minute scramble. The rector of Holy Trinity, Rev. Phillips Brooks, had written a poem for children about his then-recent Middle Eastern trip to Bethlehem and asked Redner to compose a tune for it for that year's Christmas service. Redner apparently stumbled in his initial efforts, but finally penned the famous melody on Christmas Eve. Incidentally, the tune to the famous carol is generally known as St. Louis. ("O Little Town of Bethlehem" is sung in the U.K. to the tune Forest Green in an adaptation by Ralph Vaughan Williams.)

Redner also worked with the church's Sunday school program and seems to have devoted much of his life to religious worship in general. He was never married. Redner died in Atlantic City, NJ, on August 29, 1908.²⁶

²⁶ Taken from <http://www.allmusic.com/artist/lewis-redner-mn0001649579>.

