
“O LITTLE TOWN OF BETHLEHEM” (1868) BY BISHOP PHILLIPS BROOKS

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

Author: Bishop Phillips Brooks

Composer: Lewis H. Redner³

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.

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**

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.
²Therefore 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
³He 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:
⁴he shall be peace.*⁴

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.

* *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.

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" (בְּלִיָּוֹת) refers to a basic and ancient feature of Israelite social organization, the "thousands," the troops raised from each tribal subdivision (מִשְׁפָּחָה) 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 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.**"

*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.

Musical performances: Will and Kate James, *Over the Rainbow* (2020) – this music for this was written by Bob Chilcott.

TEXT

1. O little town of Bethlehem,

How still we see thee lie!

Above thy deep and dreamless sleep

The silent stars go by.

Yet in thy dark streets shineth

The everlasting Light;

The hopes and fears of all the years

Are met in thee to-night.

2. For Christ is born of Mary,

And gathered all above,

While mortals sleep, the angels keep

Their watch of wondering love.

O morning stars together,

Proclaim the holy birth,

And praises sing to God the King,

And peace to men on earth!

3. How silently, how silently,

The wondrous gift is given;

So God imparts to human hearts

The blessings of His Heaven.
No ear may hear His coming,
But in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive Him still,
The dear Christ enters in.

4. O holy Child of Bethlehem,
Descend to us, we pray!
Cast out our sin and enter in,
Be born in us today.

We hear the Christmas angels,
The great glad tidings tell;
O come to us, abide with us,
Our Lord Emmanuel!