# Stories behind Carols: First Sunday after Christmas

The month of December—in the church, in our communities, in our homes—is a notoriously busy month. With so much attention focused on Christmas Eve and Day, attendance on this Sunday is usually lower than the rest of the month. This can make the first Sunday worship service after Christmas Eve a challenging one for which to muster energy. That makes it a perfect opportunity to enjoy the Christmas season, short as it is in the church year, with carols and stories.

While few churches still cling to the tradition of not singing carols until Christmas Eve, many congregations use carols sparingly during Advent in order to give attention to the prophetic scriptures and themes of the season of preparation. That leaves little time, however, to enjoy singing Christmas carols—which recount an important part of our story of faith—together as a congregation. Additionally, behind many of our favourite carols there are stories of great faith and witness, which when shared can help connect our celebrations with the gospel message.

This liturgy is a family-oriented service that gives the congregation a chance to hear the promises of God as articulated by the prophet Isaiah, to sing joyfully a host of carols together, and to hear the origin stories of four of them: a transformational pilgrimage, a benevolent local hero, a call to live charitably and peaceably, and a song of humble devotion. The basics of each story are included here but can certainly be expanded upon.

This liturgy can and should be adapted to suit local customs around this season. There are a few places where a duet or solo are indicated as possibilities, but this doesn’t have to preclude a less formal atmosphere. In fact, for at least one carol (“Good King Wenceslas”), assigning singing parts impromptu can be a lot of fun. The four carols whose stories are shared here have been chosen for the variety they reflect, but so many of our familiar carols have inspirational or touching stories associated with them that liturgists should feel free to make their own choices. In addition to what can be found online, a helpful starting point is *Stories Behind the Best-Loved Songs of Christmas* by Ace Collins (Zondervan, 2001).

## Gathering in God’s Name

### \*Carol

“Joy to the World,” VU 59

### Opening Prayer

Praise the Living God! Praise God from the heavens:

**Sun and moon and shining stars, praise the Living God!**

Praise God’s Holy Name,

**whose word speaks all things into being,**

**who is present in the expanse of the universe,**

**and in the voices of children.**

Praise the Living God, our rescuer and deliverer,

**whose wonder is found in the heavens and in all creation,**

**who comes in innocence, and with mercy.**

O God, our light, our beauty, our rest:

With the appearance of your Son you have brought us

into your new creation.

**Form us into your people, and root our lives in you;**

**through Christ, the Living Light.**

### \*Passing the Peace

### \*Carol

“Go, Tell It on the Mountain,” VU 43

## Hearing God’s Word

### Isaiah 35:1‒10

**Carol**

“O Little Town of Bethlehem,” VU 64

**Story**

*In 1865, the famous preacher and abolitionist Phillip Brooks rode on horseback from Jerusalem to Bethlehem and participated in the Church of the Nativity's Christmas Eve celebration. In response to his experience there, he wrote the now-famous carol “O Little Town of Bethlehem,” which was first performed by the children’s choir of his church a few years later. Unlike many Christmas carols, the lyrics of this reflective and hopeful song are set in the present tense rather than the past. The author’s experience of wonder and awe are palpable and cover the seemingly great distance between the birth of Christ then and our experience of it now.*

*The worship leader can determine to what extent this and the subsequent stories will serve as the basis for deeper reflection during worship. If the stories include more reflection, they will want to draw attention here not only to the violence and despair in present-day Bethlehem and the surrounding region but also to stories of the hope and resilience of the people. Alternatively, if deeper reflection does not follow the story, the Prayers of the People can include petitions for peace.*

*A number of tunes have been composed for these words. The most familiar is ST LOUIS, though FOREST GREEN is equally beautiful (and set slightly lower, making it easier to sing). Popularized by Welsh boy soprano Aled Jones, the anthem setting by Walford Davies would suit a solo performance of this carol very well.*

### Isaiah 11:1‒9

### Carol

“Good King Wenceslas” (lyrics and music can be found online)

### Story

*Though the tune is taken from a much older madrigal, John Mason Neale’s “Good King Wenceslas” (1853) is about a man who braves winter storms during Saint Stephen’s Day (December 26) to help his poorer neighbours. The story it tells is based on a real person—Wenceslaus I, Duke of Bohemia—who was assassinated by his own brother and had been adored by his subjects. His charity and popularity eventually led to his being named the patron saint of the Czech Republic.*

*This carol is beloved by many, in large part because of the evocative story images and the possibility for performance. Traditionally, the part of the Page (the king’s assistant) is sung by a treble voice, while the King is sung by a bass voice. However, in a congregational setting, the same could be achieved by assigning a part to higher and lower voices, or children and adults, or one half of the church and the other, with everyone joining together for the non-dialogue parts. The whole thing is quite a bit of fun, especially since the opportunities to sing this simple Christmas story are so few.*

### Isaiah 9:2‒7

### Carol

“It Came Upon the Midnight Clear,” VU 44

### Story

*Written by Massachusetts Unitarian minister Edmund Sears, this pastoral-sounding carol carries a much deeper meaning than simply retelling the birth of Jesus. Sears hoped to offer an uplifting message amid the great poverty he was witness to and to remind people that God, in the form of a child, had entered a world sorely in need of love and peace. Richard Storrs Willis’ tune, CAROL, paired with the words only a year later, gave the carol its lasting appeal and one of its two most common tunes, the other being NOËL.*

*A very fine movie made in 1992,* A Midnight Clear*, tells the story of American and German soldiers laying aside their weapons on Christmas Eve of 1944. The story ends tragically, as miscommunication causes hostilities to resume. Yet, the powerful third verse of the carol, with its invitation to hush the noise of battle in order to hear God’s “love song” to the earth and all people, is a strong one. This carol speaks gently, yet powerfully, God’s word of peace amid strife and weariness.*

### Isaiah 63:7‒9

### Carol

“Silent Night, Holy Night” VU 67

**Story**

*In 1816, Father Joseph Mohr wrote the poem “Stille Nacht! Heilige Nacht!” while stationed at a pilgrim church in Mariapfarr, Austria. Two years later, now at St. Nicholas’ church in Oberndorf, he asked Franz Gruber to set the poem for guitar and choir, which the two performed on Christmas Eve of 1818. Since then, a legend has grown around the circumstances of this collaboration, beginning with a broken organ at St. Nicholas’ and ending with a dramatic, last-minute musical setting for the now-familiar carol. To what extent the legend of the carol’s origins is true is perhaps less important than its beauty and simplicity.*

*For this service of worship, try to have a duo of singer and guitar perform the carol and have the congregation join in. If the duo is comfortable singing in German, so much the better. Have the congregation join in either for the last verse (if performed in English) or for all three verses in English (if performed in German).*

## Responding to God’s Word

### Community at Prayer

As you have drawn us to your cradle of wondrous love, O God,

draw us together in this place, that we might

pray for your people and your world.

Today, we give you thanks for the gift of your child, Jesus Christ,

who in birth, life, death, and resurrection revealed

your unending love for all people and opened to us

the purpose and promise of life together.

We give thanks also for the gifts of this season:

hope for the vision of justice you promise, even in the midst of despair;

for peace within and among your people, even in the midst of conflict;

joy found in reunion and celebration, even amid the challenges of this life;

and love, with the power to transform and heal all things, even in the midst of brokenness.

We pray for those who still long for these, your gifts, God of Love:

for those who will spend this season alone or anxious…

for those who grieve an empty place at the table this year…

for those who are ill, in body or in spirit…

for those in hospital and in care…

for those who endure the terror of conflict and oppression…

for those who will go hungry this day, and who long for the simplest of creation’s gifts…

for your people and your world, we pray, O God.

Let us listen to the angels’ song again, your song of love for this world.

Move us to return that song in what we say and do,

that we may be instruments of your hope and peace and joy and love.

We pray these things in the name of Jesus, who became the Christ,

and who taught us when we pray to say, Our Father…

### Invitation to Offering

In the gifts of word and song,

we hear the story of your gift of life, O God.

Here, we offer what we can of ourselves,

we who are part of that same story.

### \*Offering Refrain

“In the Bleak Midwinter,” VU 55 (v. 4)

### Offering Prayer

Receive these gifts, God of All, for the work of your kingdom.

May our words become witness, and our witness become work,

for your people, in your world. Amen.

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