

Hymns of the Faith: “O Little Town of Bethlehem”

By [Dr. Bill Wymond](#)

*A Presentation of First Presbyterian Church, Jackson, Mississippi
with
Dr. Ligon Duncan, Dr. Derek Thomas, Dr. Bill Wymond*

Dr. Wymond: Good morning! This is “Hymns of the Faith,” brought to you by Jackson's First Presbyterian Church. The minister of the First Presbyterian Church is Dr. Ligon Duncan. Stay tuned for “Hymns of the Faith.” Here with “Hymns of the Faith” is Dr. Ligon Duncan.

Dr. Duncan: We’re delighted to be back on “Hymns of the Faith,” and I'm delighted to join Bill Wymond and Derek Thomas in a conversation about some of our very favorite Christmas songs.

It's been interesting over the last number of weeks as we've looked at hymns that still are widely known and appreciated in the English-speaking world that we've seen patterns that go like this: from Germany to England, to America; from the Netherlands to America; or, just from England to America. But we haven't seen anything go from America to England yet. Well, today this is a hymn that was written by an American that later became popular in England, in the old country. And it goes to show you how cross-fertilization happens in English-speaking hymnody. Though naturally because the United States is a younger culture you would expect more material to come our direction from the Continent and from England, every once in a while it goes back the other direction as well. And so this hymn that was written, *O Little Town of Bethlehem*, by a very famous minister from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and then later in Boston, Massachusetts, Phillips Brooks — not “Phillip” Brooks, but Phillips Brooks — became very popular probably thirty or forty years later in England, and is still sung to two different hymns commonly in English hymnody; and we'll talk about all of the tunes that are associated with this hymn.

But the story behind this hymn, Derek, is very moving. Phillips Brooks, this minister from Philadelphia, was in Palestine. He was visiting some of the sites associated with the history of Israel and of Christianity, and on an occasion he was near Bethlehem and actually out in the fields where once upon a time the shepherds saw the angels, and he has this very moving experience remembering all of the tremendous events. Tell us a little bit about the background to this song.

Dr. Thomas: Yes, 1867, when this hymn was written. Many of our listeners can

perhaps identify with having made a visit to Israel, or the Holy Land. I have been to Bethlehem three times, so I can imagine something of what he went through. Of course it's very different now, with the sight of Israeli forces in a garrison right at the entry to the little town, but you know as you travel from Jerusalem southwest for about five miles or so, you go up and down undulating hills. And then all of a sudden you come across a hill and down a valley, and up on the other side is Bethlehem. And if you come at it as I did in the late afternoon as the sun is going down and the lights are just beginning to come up in the windows and doors and so on, it still has—you know, I didn't want to be sentimental about it, but it still has that avocation of a small little town on a hill, and you can almost imagine there are sheep everywhere. You can almost imagine the shepherds on the hillsides outside Bethlehem.

Well, Phillips Brooks (I was listening to somebody speak about “Phillip” Brooks last week several times, and I wanted to say, “It's *Phillips* Brooks!”), an enormously clever man who went to Harvard University, tried teaching Latin and was a conspicuous failure; went to Virginia to study at the seminary and was offered all kinds of posts teaching at Harvard and other things, and then ends up as the Bishop of Massachusetts, and then eventually of course is in Boston. But he makes this journey to Bethlehem and composes this extraordinary little hymn. I think a lot of Christmas carols are just on the verge of sentimentality. It's hard not to be sentimental, I suppose, when you're writing about the nativity story, but this one...

“O little town of Bethlehem,
How still we see thee lie;
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by...”

Dr. Duncan: And one of the things that we'll notice, and we'll walk through some of the language here, the first three stanzas actually pile up theological truths, and then the fourth stanza calls on us for a response, and it's almost an intercession that's lifted up. But the language is, in comparison to songs that we have studied so far on this program, is very, very flowery, which is typical of the nineteenth century. And one of the ways that you can mark out a nineteenth century hymn is that it will be much freer, and it will be much more flowery in the kind of poetry that it employs.

Dr. Thomas: Phillips Brooks, of course, was anything but flowery. He was 6'4" and a frame to match, and a powerful preacher. Would you concur with the accolades that have been made of his preaching?

Dr. Duncan: Oh, and certainly in his day and in his context. We were talking off air before we came on about the fact that many of the sort of hymnology background materials that are put together on this hymn and on his other works will indicate him sort of as a champion of Christian orthodoxy over against the prevalent kinds of Unitarianism that was floating around in his time, but certainly

in that place and time he would have been very evangelical in comparison to many of his contemporaries in the churches around him. And although I don't think he was ever a polemical kind of figure in that regard, but he certainly was known by his contemporaries for being very effective and powerful in the pulpit ministry.

Bill Wymond, there have been at least three tunes associated with this. The first is the American tune, and there's kind of a neat story behind the composition of the tune. Would you tell us a little bit about that tune?

Dr. Wymond: Phillips Brooks really promoted the Sunday School, and I understand that they started from a modest group, perhaps about 36, and in some years they built it up to about a thousand students at Sunday School.

Dr. Duncan: Tell them what a "Sunday School" meant in those days, because I think people in our day and time have a picture of Sunday School meaning primarily something for people in the church, and you're thinking of adults and children. But when Sunday School started, it was a very evangelistic kind of thing. What would he have been doing?

Dr. Wymond: That was their outreach to the unchurched of the city, and it was a clever thing to do, to bring the children in. All throughout history, to promote various aspects of the life of the church sometimes the ministers have addressed the children in order to address the parents. Calvin did that when he was trying to teach hymns to his congregation. He taught the children so they could lead the parents. But the superintendent of the Sunday School was named Redner, Lewis Redner; and Lewis Redner was also the organist of the church. And so Phillips Brooks had written this poem and he was going to introduce it in Sunday School, and so late in the week he went to Redner and said I'm going to do this, would you happen to have a tune that you could put to this? And so the story is that Redner thought about it on Saturday night, and the tune came to him in the night and he set it to the words. And so this tune was the tune first associated with this text, and it's the tune that we all know. "O little town of Bethlehem"—we've all sung it since we were children. [Plays tune.]

What I like about this tune is it is sort of Victorian, meaning that it is a little bit more dramatic than some of the more straightforward chorale tunes of the earlier centuries, but it follows along the drama of the text really well. It's an intensely emotional tune. Let me just continue on with it. In the second line it goes... [plays]. That's a very reaching interval right there in the beginning...that's a dramatic, emotional approach intervallicly. And then when he gets to a more dark theme... "Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light." You get a picture of the darkness, I think, as you enter into the minor mode... [demonstrates]. Right here you're in the key of D minor, and then you go back to resolution in the key of F, another emotional energy there, and a very far reach....

Dr. Thomas: Now, am I mistaken, Bill, that this sounds like a nursery rhyme? A nursery rhyme tune? You sort of imagine a mother singing this to her little child at bedtime.

Dr. Wymond: I think perhaps so. And it's hard to tell whether we associate it with nursery because we sang it as children or whether it just has that kind of appeal, but it is emotion laden.

And I have talked a little bit about this before, but it's true I think that intervals, certain intervals in music, have emotional baggage with them—or should I say just emotional qualities. And the Greeks were really aware of this. You know Plato wrote extensively about this in his *Republics*, about how certain modes should be used in education because they strengthen the youth, and how other modes would weaken their moral character. They even ascribed moral qualities to intervals and to modes and to tunes and so on like that. I do think that certain intervals have intensity that others don't. Others are comfortable intervals; some produce angst. You know in the Middle Ages the Roman Catholic church had certain attributes that they gave to intervals. They were very technical. And the one that they called the “interval of the devil” was an augmented fourth [demonstrates]. That's a very angst-producing interval, as you know, and composers in all ages have used that. *Danse Macabre* uses that interval a whole lot. Well, I carried on there a bit, but I think that's something to recognize.

Dr. Duncan: When this text came to Britain, it came with a different tune, and I think two tunes in particular have characterized the singing of this in English churches. One is FOREST GREEN, which has been in English hymnals since maybe the turn of the twentieth century, early days of the 1900's. And then there is the other tune that you were talking with us about this morning that Walford Davies associated with this text. Why don't you tell us about each of these tunes?

Dr. Wymond: FOREST GREEN...a folk song of England. We really should, I guess...

Dr. Thomas: ...Vaughan Williams...

Dr. Wymond: Yes, Vaughan Williams is the one who found it and popularized and arranged this particular folk song, and I think it's worth mentioning that Vaughan Williams and Gustolf Holtz early in the twentieth century put together a very large book of carols, for which we are all indebted. They used folk songs; they used traditional carol tunes that had come down even from the Medieval period, and it's just a wealth of Christmas music that a lot of people have been using now to create anthems, and some of our carol tunes that we use have come out of their compilation. But this is a lovely folk song, so gentle...as are the British, of course. [Plays.]

A nice harmony there, thanks to Vaughan Williams, but a wonderful tune. So I

guess that's what you used when you were a child.

Dr. Thomas: And that's the one I'm most familiar with, and I think of carols from Cambridge as soon as I hear that tune.

Dr. Duncan: And I think I became aware of that tune in association with this text when in college I came across the carol books that Oxford University Press produced, that Sir David Wilcox and others were involved in compiling. And that would have gone back to that English folk song edition from the beginning of the century that had been collecting and using these materials. And I've always loved that tune for this. I think sometimes when you sing a particular tune that's only associated with one song over and over, it's nice to have an alternative tune so that you don't lose the special-ness of the text, and I like the idea of using both of those tunes. But then you also mentioned this Walford Davies tune.

Dr. Wymond: Yes, we have in our hymnal an alternative tune that is done by Walford Davies. Of course that has Welsh...

Dr. Thomas: *Sir* Walford Davies, I should remind you! [Laughter] He was Welsh!

Dr. Wymond: Yes, and I know Derek may want to tell us something about him. This tune is to me the most beautiful and creative. I will confess that it is not congregation-friendly; it works better with choirs or soloists, but it is a rich and wonderful tune. I'm just going to play a little bit of that... [plays]...kind of drama here.... [continues] ...gets very intense as you go, at this point. [continues]...resolution. So that's a beautiful tune, I think. Tell us about Walford Davies.

Dr. Thomas: Very English, though, not a trace of Welsh in it! [Laughter] Yes, he was born in Oswestry on the Welsh border in North Wales, the seventh of nine children. I was fascinated as I was reading this just a few minutes ago that he studied under some of the great composers of the time, Hubert Parry and Charles Stanford, who's made a great comeback in the world of classical music in the last few years. And Stanford has Irish connections, so when I was in Belfast his music was played a great deal. And Walford comes from this Non-conformist background, being Welsh, but ends up in the very height of establishment at Windsor and the Royal College of Music in London.

Dr. Wymond: "Non-conformist" meaning what?

Dr. Thomas: Meaning not an Anglican...

Dr. Duncan: ...not in the Church of England...

Dr. Thomas: ...or not in the Church of Wales. But he would have been either a Congregationalist or a Presbyterian. I doubt that his family were Baptist. But

you're either Anglican or Non-conformist, and most of Wales would be Non-conformist.

Dr. Wymond: And it was really impressive to me that he got the place at St. George's Windsor as a boy. He was in that choir. Because that's a royal establishment, and they've always had top musicians there training the boys, and what a privilege it is in England — or was, more so than now — for these boys to go to these college choirs...

Dr. Thomas: And you can hear something of the boys' choir in that tune. It would take a good boys' choir to sing that well, I think. Unknown to me, I'm ashamed to say, he was a Professor of Music at my alma mater, at Aberystwyth University.

Dr. Duncan: And that tune...you're speaking of it taking a good boys' choir — it has some really tough intervals, especially right at the end.

Dr. Wymond: Yes, the third line, which goes... [plays], that really reaches and goes up very high. Congregations today, as we've said before, struggle with high notes or these big intervals because they don't sing. They don't sing in school and they don't sing as much in church, and so these are real challenges to them. I always advocate putting hymns in comfortable keys, as long as it doesn't make the low notes too low.

Dr. Duncan: But you have used that tune with our children, and they sing it pretty well. We've done that in the children's Christmas carols a couple of years, and the kids do it well. And the tune gets in your head, and the harmonizations sort of get in your head, and it's catchy. You know, you find yourself sort of walking around humming it to yourself.

Dr. Wymond: I think so, and I don't mean to sound braggy in any way, but our children do sing here, not only in choirs but in school, so it's not difficult for them to do something like this.

Dr. Thomas: It's also fascinating — you know, a book needs to be written on "The Omitted Verses of Great Hymns," because there's a stanza in here, and you can understand why it was omitted. Phillips Brooks was a bachelor, even though he loved children, but it says:

Where children pure and happy pray to the Blessed Child;
Where misery cries out to Thee, Son of the mother mild;
Where charity stands watching, and faith holds wide the door,
The dark night waits, the glory breaks,
And Christmas comes once more.

And that is omitted from most renditions of this Little Town of Bethlehem, thankfully! [Laughter]...It wasn't his best moment, I don't think.

Dr. Duncan: Well, you do find this even in the great hymns. There will be a sifting of the text to... really, in a way, it would be hard for the author to make those decisions that have been made communally over the course of several hundred years of people singing it, and we've gotten down to the best of the text. I'm thinking now of the Isaac Watts *Joy to the World!* rendering of whatever Psalm that is...Psalm 98 or Psalm 72, whichever it is. And really the stanzas that we sing are the very best of his renderings. And the others, they're OK, but they're not up to the same standard. And these are four really good lines here. Bill?

Dr. Wymond: We do know that in the Wesley hymns especially there were many verses, eighteen or twenty sometimes, and so most hymnals have sifted out to about four stanzas. In our hymnal we have sometimes six stanzas on the hymns, but a lot has been sifted out already.

Dr. Duncan: Again, though the poetry is flowery, the substance is really strong in the four stanzas that we have in this particular text:

“O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie;
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by:”

Now, the whole language of “stillness” and “deep, dreamless sleep” and “silent stars” and “dark streets,” though it may seem to be overly dramatic or sentimental or flowery, it's interesting that the hymnologists comment on the fact that — and you commented on this, Derek — that even when you go to Bethlehem today and things turn to twilight and nightfall, Bethlehem is not a hopping town. I mean, the lights go out and it's like this. And so Brooks is actually drawing on an experience he would have no doubt had, especially in the day when there would have been no electrical lights, there wouldn't have been cars in the streets, and there wouldn't have been Israeli garrisons outside the entrance to the city. It would have been like this, and you can see him thinking about, boy, this is a city caught unawares in a hugely significant event...the most significant event in the history of humanity...the incarnation of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Dr. Thomas: You know, Bethlehem even today is a nowhere place. There's nothing great or significant about it. It's just a little town. And there the Son of God came incarnate. And there's something awesome about that.

Dr. Duncan: And I think that's just the wonder that pervades the lyrics of this song. Bill, let's hear *O Little Town of Bethlehem*...Yes, go ahead?

Dr. Wymond: I was just going to say I love this third part of the stanza, “How silently the wondrous gift is given.” Christ did not crash in, but came in an unexpected way. And then everything is summed up, I think, in the last verse where the Christ now is asked to come and be with His children and to abide with

them, and then He's called Christ, the Emmanuel. That means, of course, "God with us." So it's an appropriate prayer.

Dr. Duncan: Let's hear this song.

Dr. Wymond: Let's do, and we may hear two tunes here. This morning Victor Smith will be singing these two versions of *O Little Town of Bethlehem*.

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 tonight.

For Christ is born of Mary; and gathered all above,
While mortals sleep, the angels keep their watch of wond'ring love.
O morning stars, together proclaim the holy birth!
And praises sing to God the King, and peace to men on earth.

How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is giv'n!
So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of His heav'n.
No ear may hear His coming, but in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive Him still, the dear Christ enters in.

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 tells;
O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel.

Dr. Wymond: This has been "Hymns of the Faith," brought to you by Jackson's First Presbyterian Church.

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