

## **Singing The Christmas Story**

### **Carol of the Bells**

There are no biblical records of bells ringing when Christ was born. The gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John do not mention the use of bells in the manger. Paul never shared the news of ringing bells in any of his letters either. There is actually only one reference to a bell in the entire Bible, and that is found near the end of the book of Zechariah.

Yet in spite of the fact it was not chronicled by Gospel writers, there is a story handed down by the early Christians that some accept as true.

The tale goes that on that first Christmas, every bell on the face of the earth magically chimed at the same time to welcome God's Son. The narrative further states that never had the earth heard such a majestic melodious refrain. It seemed the bells rang in perfect harmony, their tones joining in a joyous song of hope and wonder. And supposedly, as the whole world heard those harmonic strains, millions paused to consider the power behind them, while acknowledging the birth of the new king.

In 1916- the most popular composer in the Ukraine penned what would become the basis for a song celebrating the sounds made by the tolling of the first Christmas bells. Mykola Dmytrovich Leontovych was 39 and a national celebrity in the Ukraine & Russia when he sat down to compose the music for what has become one of the world's most recognizable Christmas carols. He intended not to be a holiday song but rather a choral piece that celebrated the awakening of God's people to the beauty that could be found each day in God's creation. When he wrote this piece, the world experiencing chaotic change, the Russian royal family was overthrown, Lenin & communism rose to power, the war to end all wars brought the globe to the brink of destruction.

### **O Little Town of Bethlehem**

Philip Brooks was an American preacher and abolitionist who gained national renown after giving the funeral message for President Abraham Lincoln. In 1865, he 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.

### **Good King Wenceslas**

In 1853, John Mason Neale combined words with a Renaissance tune to tell a story based on historical fact about a king who braves winter storms during Saint Stephen's Day (December 26) to help his poorer neighbors. During the Dark Ages, King Wenceslas of Bohemia was renowned for his act of Christian kindness and charity. Some believe he was role model for the guy in the red suit that we know as Santa Claus. He took shared everything from firewood to food with

those in need and urged those blessed with wealth to reach out to the less fortunate. Centuries before gift giving became a part of the holiday tradition, Wenceslas embraced the joy of sharing his bounty with others inspired by a sincere spirit of compassion. In 929, on his way to church for his daily prayers, he was assassinated by his younger twin brother. Falling to his knees on the church steps, the dying ruler looked up and whispered, "Brother, may God forgive you." Then he died. Upon hearing those words, the brother repented and embraced the faith that had guided his brother's life and rule.

In the final verse of this carol, the King reminds the page that when a person is alone, life is dark and bleak. But when a person reaches out to others – like Christ reached out to those in need – then that person never walks alone. Christ and those who have been touched by kindness are there to make each step of the journey easier and brighter. Just as the page's walk was made easier by following in the King's footsteps, so the King's way was made easier by following in the steps of Christ.

### **The Christmas Alphabet Song – C-H-R-I-S-T-M-A-S**

In 1949, during a phone call, Eddy Arnold a.k.a. The Tennessee Plowboy and another popular radio and recording star at that time Jenny Lou Carson decided to write a song using the 9 letters in the word Christmas. Tossing ideas back and forth, the pair began to put together the basis for what came to be known as the "Christmas Alphabet Carol". This simple song reflected the faith of two entertainers and their desire to express the true meaning of Christmas.