

“Asleep on the Hay”

A sermon in the Advent/Christmas sermon series

**“Tidings of Comfort & Joy—God’s Incarnation
Expressed in Beloved Christmas Carols”**

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- Luke 2:1-20 (Good News Translation) “...And while they were in Bethlehem, the time came for her to have her baby. She gave birth to her first son, wrapped him in clothes and laid him in a manger – there was no room for them to stay in the inn” (vv. 6-7)
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: From the very beginning Jesus was in need of a home. And even today Jesus wants to live with you.

For the past four Sundays preparing us for tonight, I have had us take another look at some of the most popular and most beloved songs of Advent and Christmas. In addition to their function of putting us in “the Christmas spirit,” we asked what messages the carols give us about the meaning of the Incarnation – that is, the Nativity event when God came among us in human flesh.

Just two days ago we looked at “Joy to the World!” which I called “the accidental Christmas carol.” You can go to our website to find out why, or to learn more about the carols “Rise Up, Shepherd, and Follow” and “It Came Upon the Midnight Clear” and “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.” At our website you can read, print or listen to those messages.

But tonight let’s consider the Christmas carol that was probably the first one you learned as a child: “Away in a Manger.”

We don’t know who wrote the words to “Away in a Manger.” We only know when the words were first published: its original first two verses were published in 1885.¹ A third verse was added by someone when the text was published in different book seven years later.²

How quickly did “Away in a Manger” become a popular carol? About fifty years later, in the year 1945, a music librarian wrote an article listing *forty-one* musical settings that had been composed for the lyrics of “Away in the Manger.”³ It’s customary for composers to give a name to the musical settings of church hymns and carols. Of those forty-one melodies, the tune we’re most familiar is called “Mueller.” It was written by a

¹ “Little Children’s Book for Schools and Families”

² “Gabriel’s Vineyard Songs”

³ *Not So Far Away In A Manger: Forty-One Settings of an American Carol* by Richard S. Hill, Music Library Association “Notes”, December 1945, Second Series, Vol. III, No. 1. Cited at

https://www.hymnsandcarolsofchristmas.com/Hymns_and_Carols/away_in_a_manger.htm, accessed 12/23/2019.

fellow named James R. Murray. Murray was just twenty-two years old when he composed his first song in 1863 while he was a soldier in the Union Army encamped in Virginia.⁴ Murray would later become a music teacher and an editor for music publishing houses. He was probably in his forties when he wrote the tune that we know best for “Away in a Manger.”

If you looked in our hymnal you’d see that “Away in a Manger” appears twice. That’s done because in Great Britain “Away in a Manger” is usually sung to a different melody that’s called “Cradle Song” – when we sang the carol tonight, we sang the middle verse to that other tune. Ironically, that British favorite was composed by an American from Philadelphia. William J. Kirkpatrick started out as a furniture maker but became an accomplished church musician, and probably wrote his tune “Cradle Song” when he was in his mid-thirties.⁵

Perhaps the reason “Away in a Manger” is so beloved is because the sentiment expressed is simple, child-like:

- Who can’t relate to a baby laying down his head for a peaceful nap, whether back then on a coarse wool blanket spread over a cradle of straw or nowadays on the quilted padding that lines an infant car seat?
- Who can’t imagine a sleeping baby being startled awake, whether in that holy stable by the lowing of cattle or in recent days by a delivery person’s sudden loud knock at the door?

The text even speaks from the point of view of a child. At first, the child is quietly watching as an amazing scene unfolds: young parents admiring their sleeping newborn placed in a make-shift cradle; cattle routinely eating or resting, seemingly unconcerned about the presence of three unfamiliar new stablemates. Then starting halfway through the second verse the text becomes a child’s simple prayer: *Stay close by me, Lord Jesus; bless all children.*

And perhaps that simple prayer is why this carol is so powerful. These lyrics don’t try to take on heady academic theological discussion. The carol doesn’t try to cover every possible point of debate raised by God’s surprising, unique act of Incarnation.

The carol’s sweet lullaby-melody cuddles us like the comforting protection of a loving parent’s secure embrace. The beloved carol “Away in a Manger” assures us that we are always – *always!* – under the nurturing care of a God who watches over us like a skyful of stars looking down where the baby lay... asleep on the hay.

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⁴ https://hymnary.org/person/Murray_JR accessed 12/23/2019

⁵ https://hymnary.org/tune/cradle_song_kirkpatrick accessed 12/23/2019