

Pioneer of Peace

Hebrews 2:10-18

For twenty-five years William Studwell would take one Christmas carol a year and research into its origins, its meaning, the circumstances around its creation and the impact it has had on our culture. He published these essays each year and was considered one of the experts on Christmas carols. Studwell died this past summer and so 2010 is the last year one of his essays will be published. Before his death, he gave his daughter the notes to his research and she typed them up, brought them back to the hospital where he was and had him review them. The next day he died. The carol for this year is “We Wish You a Merry Christmas.” She felt like this year’s carol was just for her from her dad.

Studwell revealed some fascinating things in his twenty-five years of chronicling carols like the “Carol of the Bells” is a Ukrainian melody or “I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day” (written by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow) was more of an anti-war poem deploring the violence of the Civil War than it was a Christmas song. He revealed that the tune used for “Hark the Herald Angels Sing” was written by Felix Mendelssohn in honor of the 400th anniversary of the Guttenberg press. Those famous three notes in “Hark” that we now sing “Joyful all” were originally “Guttenberg.” Mendelssohn was once asked if the tune would ever be used in church and he stated it could not possibly work in a worship setting. This year some of us may be ready to slap the person who wrote, “I’m Dreaming of a White Christmas.” Another interesting fact Studwell noted was that “Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer” (introduced in 1949) was the first new Christmas character to be introduced since 1822 when “Twas the Night Before Christmas” introduced Santa Claus.

The carols we sing, both religious and secular, bear the rich history of cultures and people. Carols were introduced into the life of the church during a fairly austere time. Gregorian chants were more the style for worship during this time. Carols were dance music – music of the neighborhood. They were often gaudy, catty, off-color, fun. People loved them because they had tunes you could hum along to. They had melodies that were catchy. They made you want to move and dance and

sing. Gregorian chants are beautiful but they don't exactly get your toe tapping. So this is one of those times the church looked around and said, "You know what. We're missing something here." So creative people began to write new words to popular songs and Greensleeves became "What Child is This?" Hark the Herald Angels Sing replaced Guttenberg. And slowly the songs of the people and the songs of faith began to merge. I'm sure there was a committee somewhere who didn't like the new music. It is not reverent enough. It's too loud. We miss the old chants in Latin. **You know what I mean... the kind of stuff that would never happen today!** Hopefully we can strike that balance of honoring the rich variety of musical traditions we have been given.

The power of Christmas carols is what they evoke in us. This morning we sang some of our favorites and we will do that again next Sunday. I bet most of us can sing one of these songs and it takes us somewhere – a family event, the church of our childhood, grandma's house, that special Christmas. Growing up I loved Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer. I didn't know why I related so well to this character who was different and didn't play the reindeer games very well and felt oddly out of place in the community in which he grew up, but who goes on to find where his unique gifts are appreciated and useful. Strange, right? These songs are that powerful which is why I hate it when people write sappily sweet send-me-into-a-diabetic-coma types of Christmas songs. NPR did a poll about what people's least favorite Christmas carols were. At the top of the list was, "Grandma Got Run Over by A Reindeer," Paul McCartney's "And so this is Christmas" and "I Got the Christmas Fever." A group called Righteous Pop is putting the Christmas story to various pop songs like the "Brady Bunch" "Here's the story of a girl named Mary who was told that she would bear God's only son." Who knows, it may become the "O Holy Night" of some period in the future.

The point of all this is that it is the experience we have while we're singing these songs that is significant. I can't sing Silent Night without thinking about our Christmas Eve candlelight service. My favorite Christmas memories now include Bill and snow and nice round vowel sounds (don't cha know). So if the Brady Bunch song becomes the hot Christmas carol of the future, I will find some way to look around the

room while we are singing it and find something memorable to store in my heart.

My prayer and hope for us as we go through these twelve days of Christmas (We're at "two turtledoves and a partridge in a pear tree" right now) you will become aware of the amazing memories being created around you and be grateful.

Sources:

www.homileticsonline.com Have Yourself a Happy Twitter Christmas, December 2010.

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/chi-christmas-carols-2010,0,7214872.htmlpage>

William Studwell's Christmas Carols of the Year series.

<http://www.npr.org/player/v2/mediaPlayer.html?action=1&t=1&islist=false&id=131962619&m=131988640> Annoying Songs for Christmas