

Finding Christ this Christmas— Ordinary People: Zacharias & Elisabeth Luke 1:5-80

Christmas is the record of God using a team of ordinary people to do extraordinary works for His Glory, and that is what we see first in the lives of the first couple we meet named Zachariah & Elisabeth as we open to Luke 1:5.

They were ordinary people, lived with ordinary problems, faced with all the ordinary troubles, stresses and pains of life. When we meet them they even had an ordinary response to God—mixed belief and unbelief.

This Christmas we all need to pause and connect to God by prayer, and ask Him to do some extraordinary work through us also! Our focus today is to look at:

Ordinary People God Used

This couple also had an ordinary occupation in Jerusalem in the 1st century—we would call them religious professionals. Zacharias and Elisabeth were a priest and his wife. They lived and worked in the shadow of the Temple of God. They were of the priestly family, able to trace their family tree all the way back to Aaron and the Tribal genealogy of Levi.

From their earliest days that had known about the Lord. They had grown up much like many Americans of past generations—surrounded by the truth, seeing and hearing it in many ways and places. So in that sense we all are ordinary people. We all share the same struggles, trials, and pains through life.

But one thing about them was extraordinary—*they actually believed all that truth about God*. He was real to them and they loved Him and served Him as best they could.

As with each of the other members of the Christmas story—they are in contrast to other

similar peoples of the same time period that did not internalize the truth¹.

Each ordinary person God chose to use in the story of Christmas—stands in extraordinary contrast to the others around them. Each of them—Zacharias and Elisabeth, Joseph and Mary, the Shepherds and the Magi, Simeon and Anna, are examples to us of how to see Christ clearly this Christmas.

Luke 1:5-7 There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judea, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abijah. His wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. 6 And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless. 7 But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both well advanced in years.

The sincere faith of Zacharias and Elisabeth in contrast to the lack of faith in the rest of the priests pointed out in the Christmas story, is so stark and distinct. I like to think of these distinctions between them as continental divides--junctures of monumental and of eternal proportions. That is what we will learn today as we look into their lives.

Little choices, little acts of obedience, little affirmations of consecration, little cries to a great God—these make big differences in the long run.

CONTINENTAL DIVIDES

This summer as we glided along the interstate highways, crossing the Rocky Mountains, I noticed a sign that said:

***"Continental Divide:
A raindrop falling on this side will flow to the Gulf of Mexico,
one falling on the other side will flow to the Atlantic."***

We stopped the car and everyone piled out, climbed onto the sign post platform, and we had some other folks snap a picture of us to record that special moment and spot. But, as I drove on, a very sobering feeling settled over my heart and mind.

Two raindrops can fall just inches apart, and yet arrive at two vastly different destinations.

Hydrology teaches us that there are continental divides, separators that determine

¹ Even to this day it is amazing how the true story of Christmas can polarize a family, a church, a nation, and a world. All around us nearly everyone is comfortable with this "holiday season"—but press the issue of Christ and Him being at the center of Christmas—then things change immediately. Try to display a representation of Christ's Birth on public land, or try to call a Christmas tree by that name and the entire government goes into overdrive. Sadly we live in a post-Christian era. But that only makes the message of Christmas even more precious and distinct!

destinations.

The Christmas story contains side-by-side stories of several sets of “raindrop like” lives. People, so close in everyday life—yet so far apart in destiny.

The lesson for us this Christmas is: beware of getting so close in every way—**but in your heart**, to Christ.

Beware of being **acquainted with Christ** but never **knowing Him**.

How close can you get to Jesus and still be too far away? It is possible to be as close as the characters of Christmas were, and yet miss all that Christ and Christmas have to offer.

But today how about it? Are you seeing Jesus this Christmas? Or is this Christmas flying by so fast you will miss what God is offering you? Everyone who was looking for Jesus to come enjoyed His arrival.

As we examine their lives we can often see ourselves. Who are you going to be like this Christmas—it is your choice you know.

Now, look back at v. 6, and pick up with the lives of these two saints: Zacharias and Elisabeth.

Finding God At Your Zenith

If you think your week is busy, imagine this man’s life. Zacharias was one of 24,000 priests who served the biggest 2 weeks of each year by rotation doing all the special duties of a priest at the Temple of God—and Luke 1:6-8 picks up in that whirlwind week.

When Luke starts the recorder capturing the life of this dear couple they were heading into the greatest week of their professional lives.

As an aged man, it was a supreme honor given once in a lifetime to serve at the altar of incense. This was a high honor that was permitted to a priest but once in a lifetime. The incense was offered daily before the morning sacrifice at about 9 AM, and after the evening sacrifice, about 3 PM in the afternoon. It was probably the evening offering that was assigned to Zacharias. So this event in v. 6 shows us a series of principles that illustrate what type of people God wants to use.

Lesson # 1: God reminds us in v. 6 with those words about this couple “walking in all the commandments”, that He wants to use listening people

Chronologically Dr. Luke is the one who actually begins the New Testament. Luke records the bridge to the Old Testament. Malachi ends with a promised Elijah that would

come to turn people back to God.

So Luke takes us first to the birth of John the Baptist, to where the angel Gabriel appeared to John's father as he served in the temple. John's parents were Zacharias and Elisabeth. Zacharias means "God remembers," and Elisabeth means "His oath." Together their names mean, "God remembers His oath." And so God talked to a priest who had been listening to His voice in His Word. Zacharias had faith in God's Word and a heart for God's truth.

God had made a promise to David that one of his descendants would have an eternal reign. Luke sets the stage for us to see that Christ is that descendant. "God remembers His oath!" God breaks through into human history after 400 years of silence.

Question: Are you listening to God speak through His Word, so He can also use you in an extraordinary way? Have you carved out a place in your daily routine for God's Word, prayer, and worshipful ministry? God wants to use those who LISTEN to Him.

Lesson # 2: God reminds us in v. 8 with those words about this couple "while he was serving as priest", that God usually uses active people.

If you look closely you may notice that God often speaks to His people and calls them while they are busy doing what God called them to do in their daily tasks.

Moses and David were called from the fields caring for sheep; Gideon was called while threshing wheat; Peter and his partners were called while mending nets; and Paul as he was on a business trip out of town. It is hard to steer a car that is not moving; when we get to work at what we are called to do—God starts to direct us into further and wider fields of ministry.

So it was on this day for Zacharias, while placing fresh incense upon the altar before the great curtain of the Holy of Holies towering 60 feet into the air above – that Gabriel appeared with a message from God. After four hundred years – God's silence was broken. God had remembered His oath.

Question: Are you doing what God called you to do? Whether we eat, drink, teach, sell, nurse, build, make or whatever we do, DO all to the Glory of God (I Corinthians 10:31. God wants to use ACTIVE people for His Glory.

Lesson # 3: God reminds us in v. 13 with those words about this couple "your prayer is heard" that He often uses struggling people.

Part of this couple's life is that they had ordinary problems. Most of us think that we have extraordinary problems. But the more you step back and look beyond the circle of your own life and problems—you find that what we face is what Paul describes as what "is common to man" and what James calls "like passions". Life is hard, all people have problems and the key is only what we will do with those problems.

Zacharias and Elisabeth are such a model of how to go on in spite of what others would call extraordinary challenges. This couple lived in a world that measured God's blessing and your personal worth by whether or not you had a son.

They never did. They spent their entire married life waiting for a child, waiting for a son, living and finally giving up on ever being able to have a child. If we think about it, there are so many lessons God can teach us from their lives.

No matter what they faced they kept on serving the Lord and growing. Even in the weeks of silence—Zacharias kept on in the Word so that when he at last could speak God's Word flowed from his heart.

Question: Are you struggling with something? Do you feel that you have an impossible challenge, an unmovable obstacle in your life? Let God HEAR your prayer. He wants to use struggling people.

Lesson # 4: God reminds us in v. 23 with those words "he departed to his own house" that God always uses ordinary people.

As quick as it came, it was gone. The big day in the Temple, the incredible appearance of the angel and then—it was over. Things end so quickly don't they! But while the spotlight faded, God's Word, His promises, and His Presence NEVER fade. It is in the everyday life of ordinary people that God wants to work extraordinarily!

So there they are, two obscure people from 20 plus centuries ago, known only to us from the pages of Scripture. Other than these few verses in Luke, little else is known about them. But if we look closely at what has been recorded, there is so much we can learn.

Zacharias was just One of Thousands

Zacharias was just one of 24,000 priests who served at the Temple 2 weeks per year, but God was looking for him—it is he who meets Gabriel. After he hears the good news of his son of promise, John the Baptist, he waits in muted silence for his unbelief.

After 40 weeks of waiting (and studying God's Word) John is born and his dad sings. What was ZACHARIAS doing while he had no voice?

It would appear that he spent much of the time while he was set aside, handicapped as it were, studying God's Word! If you are incapacitated, crippled, handicapped, out of circulation, laid aside, out of work, and so on—**you can waste the time or turn it to gold**. The choice is yours!

Please follow along as we listen to the song known throughout the ages as a song called

“The Benedictus of Zacharias” in Luke 1:67-79:

Luke 1:67-79 *Now his father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Spirit, and prophesied, saying: 68 "Blessed is the Lord God of Israel, For He has visited and redeemed His people, 69 And has raised up a horn of salvation for us In the house of His servant David, 70 As He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets, Who have been since the world began, 71 That we should be saved from our enemies And from the hand of all who hate us, 72 To perform the mercy promised to our fathers And to remember His holy covenant, 73 The oath which He swore to our father Abraham: 74 To grant us that we, Being delivered from the hand of our enemies, Might serve Him without fear, 75 In holiness and righteousness before Him all the days of our life. 76 "And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Highest; For you will go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways, 77 To give knowledge of salvation to His people By the remission of their sins, (**Only Jesus can remit sins. Acts 10:43 To Him all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins.**) 78 Through the tender mercy of our God, With which the Dayspring from on high has visited us; 79 To give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, To guide our feet into the way of peace."*

The song that Zechariah sings summarizes the ministry of John pointing to Jesus. The song introduces the Coming One – Jesus, and explains why He came.²

By the act of faith, naming John as Gabriel had told him to do (Luke 1:63), God looses Zacharias' tongue and he bursts into a Spirit prompted hymn.

Ordinary Zacharias tells The Wonders of Jesus

If you read these verses closely, they reveal these beautiful pictures of what the coming of Jesus Christ to earth really means.

*First, Zacharias tells us that JESUS CAME TO **OPEN** OUR PRISON DOOR—JESUS HAS REDEEMED US (v. 68).*

*"Blessed is the Lord God of Israel, For He has visited and **redeemed** His people."*

We see such power in that word *redeem* which means "to set free by paying a price." It referred to the ancient custom of releasing of a prisoner or the liberating of a slave by purchasing them.

Jesus Christ came to earth to bring "deliverance to the captives" (Luke 4:18)—that

² The song that Zechariah sings summarizes the ministry of John pointing to Jesus. The song introduces the Coming One – Jesus, and explains why He came. But this song also reflects the notes from Zacharias' 40 week plus Bible study conducted as he waited in mute silence for his son's birth. Here are all the places Zacharias found promises of Christ's coming. First he quotes from Psalms 18, 23, 32, 34, 83, 106, and 132. Plus he uses extensive quotations from Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Malachi!

was the message He preached at His hometown synagogue. Christ's salvation is offered to us who are in bondage to sin and death. We are powerless to set ourselves free; only Jesus the Lamb of God could pay the price necessary for our redemption (Eph. 1:7; 1 Peter 1:18–21).

This Christmas remember with Zacharias that there is **NO BONDAGE that His Power cannot break.**

Think of all those that Jesus freed: the leper in Mark 1, the demoniac in Mark 5; the palsied man by the pool in John 5; and countless others. In Acts 16 the earthquake shook the jail doors open, and the chains fell off – but they had to get up and walk out! Are you bound to some secret or public sin today? Jesus wants to redeem and liberate you—just ask Him. Say “Jesus open the prison door of my bondage”.

This Christmas remember with Zacharias that there is **NO FEAR that His Presence will not banish.**

Matthew 28:20b “and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” Amen. Are you chained to fear about the past, the present or the future? Jesus banishes all fears when we open our eyes to His Presence. Just say, “Jesus redeem me from my fears.”

This Christmas remember with Zacharias that there is **NO STAIN that is Precious Blood cannot cleanse.**

Revelation 1:5b “To Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood”. Jesus clearly stated in His ministry that all sins are forgivable. Just ask Him, seek His cleansing. Say to Jesus this Christmas, “Cleanse me now.” And hear Him say, “I am willing—be clean.”

This Christmas remember with Zacharias that there is **NO PAST that His Words cannot make new.**

John 8:11 She said, “No one, Lord.” And Jesus said to her, “Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more.” Just say, “Jesus let me start over again in you—give me Your new beginning.”

Second, from this amazing song of Zacharias we can learn that:

*JESUS CAME TO **DEFEAT** OUR ENEMIES—JESUS SAVED US FROM OUR ENEMIES: (vv. 69–75).*

*69 And has raised up a horn of salvation for us In the house of His servant David, 70 As He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets, Who have been since the world began, 71 That we should be **saved from our enemies** And from the hand of all who hate us, 72 To perform the mercy promised to our fathers And to remember His holy covenant, 73*

*The oath which He swore to our father Abraham: 74 To grant us that we, Being **delivered from the hand of our enemies**, Might serve Him **without fear**, 75 In holiness and righteousness before Him all the days of our life.*

In the Old Testament a horn symbolizes power and victory (1 Kings 22:11; Ps. 89:17, 24). As Zacharias had studied the Scriptures he reflects upon God as He is often pictured in the Old Testament delivering the army of His people as they are about to be taken captive. But when the Lord arises, the enemy is defeated.

In the first word picture, we as captives are set free. In this second word picture our enemy is defeated *so that he cannot capture us as prisoners any more*. God offers total victory to us His people.

The word salvation (Luke 1:69, 71) carries the meaning of "health and soundness." No matter what the condition of the captives, their Redeemer brings spiritual soundness. When you trust Jesus Christ as Savior, you are delivered from Satan's power, moved into God's kingdom, redeemed, and forgiven (Col. 1:12-14).

How close can you get to Jesus and still be too far away? It is possible to be as close as the characters of Christmas were, and yet miss all that Christ and Christmas have to offer.

Jesus came to open every prison door of our life: there's no bondage He can't break; and there's no fear He can't banish; and there's no stain He can't cleanse; and there's no past He can't make new.

But today how about it? Are you seeing Jesus this Christmas? Or is this Christmas flying by so fast you will miss what God is offering you?

This Christmas remember with Zacharias that there is **No enemy can stand before Him, not Death, not Darkness, not Despair, not Defeat, not Defilement—nothing stands before Him.**

Matthew 1:21 And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins."

John 8:31-36 Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, "If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. 32 And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." 34 Jesus answered them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin. 36 Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed.

*THIRD JESUS CAME TO **PAY** OUR DEBTS—OUR DEBT WAS CANCELLED BY HIS DEATH (vv. 76–77). 76 "And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Highest; For you will go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways, 77 To give knowledge of salvation to His people By the remission of their sins*

Remission means "to send away, to dismiss, as a debt." All of us are in debt to God because we have broken His law and failed to live up to His standards (Luke 7:40–50). Furthermore, all of us are spiritually bankrupt, unable to pay our debt. But Jesus came and paid the debt for us (Ps. 103:12; John 1:29). This is the glorious truth of our great salvation through Christ.

- When Jesus JUSTIFIED us, we as sinners stood before God as accused, and were declared righteous by His imputed righteousness.
- When Jesus REDEEMED us, we as sinners stood before God as slaves and were granted freedom by His ransom.
- When Jesus FORGAVE us, we as sinners stood before God as debtors and our debt was forgotten by His payment.
- When Jesus RECONCILED us, we as sinners stood before God as enemies and were made friends by His peace.
- When Jesus ADOPTED us, we as sinners stood before God as strangers and were called sons and daughters by His choice.

*FOURTH JESUS CAME TO **BRING** THE DAWNING OF A NEW DAY THAT KNOWS NO NIGHT—OUR NIGHT WAS ENDED BY HIS LIGHT (vv. 78–79). 78 Through the tender mercy of our God, With which the Dayspring from on high has visited us; 79 To give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, To guide our feet into the way of peace."*

Dayspring means "sunrise." God's Word sees lost people as those sitting in darkness and death, and distress. Christ's birth brought light, life, and peace. Christ's birth was the dawn of a new day because of the tender mercies of God.

Jesus is the only key to the day that knows no night. He came into a manger one dark night to bear away the sin of the world. He will take your penalty, your debt, your stain, your sin if only you will ask Him.

The story of Christmas is that the Sunrise has come, He is here, open your heart to Him!

Elisabeth: A Woman of God

Elisabeth was an ordinary woman by all outward signs—but inwardly she is anything but ordinary. This ordinary woman God chooses to use, responds with amazing obedience.

- **Elisabeth was the first recorded example of a New Testament woman of faith**, even when her husband Zacharias was not. He was struck dumb because of his unbelief, but Elisabeth was not. She believed God (1.24-25).
- **Elisabeth was the first person filled with the Spirit** (1.41) **in the New Testament**. She was also part of the first Spirit filled family. Each member of this family is recorded as being filled with the Spirit—Elisabeth (Luke 1.41), John the Baptist (Luke 1.15), and Zacharias (Luke 1.67).
- **Elisabeth sang the first song of the New Testament** (1.42-45).
- **Elisabeth was the first Titus 2 woman who encourages Mary** (1.45). Mary was a young woman with so many challenges as an unwed mother in the Jewish culture. Elisabeth was an older woman who had walked with God for many years, who assures Mary that God would bring to pass all that He had revealed to her. In that time and place, how Mary needed the loving encouragement that Elisabeth gave.

The Songs of Christmas

We need to notice how much singing opens the story of the Gospels. Dr. Luke who starts us further back in the account of the birth of Christ than any of the other gospel writers—also records the songs.

Christ's Birth is surrounded by the songs of the saints. Since Luke continues with the record of the early church in Acts, and since Paul tells us that Spirit filled saints sing—we can be sure that the early church sang much and often. We can also see that the joy of these early saints is what called attention to them in the Roman world.

There is the song of Zacharias, the song of Elisabeth, the song of Mary, the song of Anna, and the song of Simeon. So Christmas is introduced to us by a series of five Spirit prompted songs, with Elisabeth's being the first.

- Elisabeth breaks into song at Mary's arrival known as from the first words of the Latin Vulgate as the "**Exclamavit**" (1.42-45).
- Mary follows with her marvelous "**Magnificat**" (1.46-55) where she quotes over

twenty different Scriptures!

- Zacharias breaks forth into his famous "**Benedictus**" (1.68-79).
- Angels break into the night sky over the shepherd's fields of Bethlehem with "**Gloria**" (2.14).
- Simeon lifts his eyes to God holding baby Jesus in his arms and sings his "**Nunc Dimittis**" (2.29-32).

Some day when we at last come into His presence—Revelation records that we will forever be singing that He alone is worthy!

Zacharias: A Study and a Song

Luke 1:67-80 Now his father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Spirit, and prophesied, saying:

- 68 "Blessed is the Lord God of Israel, For He has visited and redeemed His people,
- Psalm 106:48 **Blessed be the Lord God of Israel** From everlasting to everlasting! And let all the people say, "Amen!" Praise the Lord!
 - Exodus 3:16 Go and gather the elders of Israel together, and say to them, 'The Lord God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, appeared to me, saying, "**I have surely visited you** and seen what is done to you in Egypt;
- 69 And has raised up a horn of salvation for us In the house of His servant David,
- 2 Samuel 22:3 The God of my strength, in whom I will trust; My shield and **the horn of my salvation**, My stronghold and my refuge; My Savior, You save me from violence.
 - Psalm 132:17 There I will make the **horn of David grow; I will prepare a lamp for My Anointed.**
 - Isaiah 9:6-7 For unto us a Child is born, Unto us a Son is given; And the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. 7 Of the increase of His government and peace There will be no end, **Upon the throne of David and over His kingdom**, To order it and establish it with judgment and justice From that time forward, even forever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this.
- 70 As He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets, Who have been since the world began,
- Genesis 49:10 The scepter shall not depart from Judah, Nor a lawgiver from between his feet, **Until Shiloh comes**; And to Him shall be the obedience of the people.
- 71 That we should be saved from our enemies And from the hand of all who hate us,
- Psalm 18:17 He **delivered me from my strong enemy**, From those who hated me, For they were too strong for me.

- 72 To perform the mercy promised to our fathers And to remember His holy covenant,
- Jesus performed ALL the promises of God. Romans 15:8 Now I say that Jesus Christ has become a servant to the circumcision for the truth of God, **to confirm the promises made to the fathers**,
 - Leviticus 26:42 **then I will remember My covenant with Jacob**, and My covenant with Isaac and My covenant with Abraham I will remember; I will remember the land.

73 The oath which He swore to our father Abraham:

- Genesis 12:3 I will bless those who bless you, And I will curse him who curses you; And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."
- Genesis 22:16-18 and said: "By Myself I have sworn, says the Lord, because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son— 17 blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies. 18 In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice."

74 To grant us that we, Being delivered from the hand of our enemies, Might serve Him without fear,

- Psalm 34:4 I sought the Lord, and He heard me, And delivered me from all my fears.

75 In holiness and righteousness before Him all the days of our life.

- Jeremiah 32:39 then I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear Me forever, for the good of them and their children after them.

76 "And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Highest; For you will go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways,

- Psalm 83:18 That they may know that You, whose name alone is the Lord, Are **the Most High** over all the earth.
- Isaiah 40:3 The voice of one crying in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord; Make straight in the desert A highway for our God.
- Malachi 3:1 "Behold, I send My messenger, And he will prepare the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, Will suddenly come to His temple, Even the Messenger of the covenant, In whom you delight. Behold, He is coming," Says the Lord of hosts.

77 To give knowledge of salvation to His people By the remission of their sins,

- Only Jesus can remit sins. Acts 10:43 To Him all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins."

78 Through the tender mercy of our God, With which the Dayspring from on high has visited us;

79 To give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, To guide our feet into the way of peace."

- Psalm 23:4 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; For You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.
 - Psalm 32:8 I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will guide you with My eye.
 - Isaiah 9:2 **The people who walked in darkness Have seen a great light; Those who dwelt in the land of the shadow of death, Upon them a light has shined.**
 - Isaiah 32:17-18 The work of righteousness will be peace, And the effect of righteousness, quietness and assurance forever. My people will dwell in a peaceful habitation, In secure dwellings, and in quiet resting places,
 - Isaiah 48:17-18, 22 Thus says the Lord, your Redeemer, The Holy One of Israel: "I am the Lord your God, Who teaches you to profit, Who leads you by the way you should go. 18 Oh, that you had heeded My commandments! Then your peace would have been like a river, And your righteousness like the waves of the sea. "There is no peace," says the Lord, "for the wicked."
- Isaiah 60:1-3 Arise, shine; For your light has come! And the glory of the Lord is risen upon you. 2 For behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, And deep darkness the people; But the Lord will arise over you, And His glory will be seen upon you. 3 The Gentiles shall come to your light, And kings to the brightness of your rising.

Songs through The Centuries

Songs have always been a part of the church. Songs reflect the era they were introduced. There are three that rise from three distinct eras:

- Medieval stone churches with stone echoing chambers (5th to 15th Centuries) best characterized by the well known chant/song "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel".
- European Alpine Chalets (18th Century) and the quiet sound of sleigh bells as we sing "O Little Town of Bethlehem".
- American Folk songs (19th Century) "There's a Song in the Air".

"O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" was originally used in the medieval church liturgy as a series of antiphons—short musical statements that were sung for the week of vesper services just before Christmas Eve. Each of these antiphons greets the anticipated Messiah with one of the titles ascribed Him throughout the Old Testament: Wisdom, Emmanuel, The Lord of Might, The Rod of Jesse, Day Spring, and The Key of David.

The haunting modal melody for the verses is also of ancient origin. It is based on one of the earliest forms of sacred music known—the Chant or Plain Song.

O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear.

O come, O come, Thou Lord of might who to Thy tribes, on Sinai's height, in ancient times didst give the law in cloud and majesty and awe.

O come, thou Rod of Jesse, free Thine own from Satan's tyranny; from depths of hell Thy people save and give them vict'ry o'er the grave.

O come, Thou Day-spring, come and cheer our spirits by Thine advent here; O drive away the

shades of night and pierce the clouds and bring us light.

O come, Thou Key of David, come and open wide our heav'nly home where all Thy saints with Thee shall dwell—O come, O come, Emmanuel!

Refrain: Rejoice! rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.³

Joseph Mohr, 1792–1848

English translation by John F. Young, 1820–1885

Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you: He is Christ the Lord.
(Luke 2:11)

When this beloved hymn was written by two humble church leaders for their own mountain village parishioners, little did they realize how universal its influence would eventually be.

Joseph Mohr, assistant priest in the Church of St. Nicholas in the region of Tyrol, high in the beautiful Alps, and Franz Gruber, the village schoolmaster and church organist, had often talked about the fact that the perfect Christmas hymn had never been written. So Father Mohr had this goal in mind when he received word that the church organ would not function. He decided that he must write his own Christmas hymn immediately in order to have music for the special Christmas Eve mass. He did not want to disappoint his faithful flock. Upon completing the text, he took his words to Franz Gruber, who exclaimed when he saw them, "Friend Mohr, you have found it—the right song—God be praised!"

Soon Gruber completed his task of composing an appropriate tune for the new text. His simple but beautiful music blended perfectly with the spirit of Father Mohr's words. The carol was completed in time for the Christmas Eve mass, and Father Mohr and Franz Gruber sang their new hymn to the accompaniment of Gruber's guitar. The hymn made a deep impact upon the parishioners even as it has on succeeding generations.

When the organ repairman came to the little village church, he was impressed by a copy of the Christmas carol and decided to spread it all around the region of Tyrol. Today it is sung in all major languages of the world and is a favorite wherever songs of the Christmas message are enjoyed.

Silent night! holy night! all is calm, all is bright round yon virgin mother and Child, holy Infant, so tender and mild—sleep in heavenly peace, sleep in heavenly peace.

Silent night holy night! shepherds quake at the sight; glories stream from heaven afar; heav'nly hosts sing alleluia—Christ the Savior is born! Christ the Savior is born!

Silent night! holy night! Son of God, love's pure light radiant beams from Thy holy face with the dawn of redeeming grace—Jesus, Lord at Thy birth, Jesus, Lord at Thy birth.⁴

Born in Belchertown, Massachusetts, Josiah Gilbert Holland began his professional career as a medical doctor. But soon he became involved in writing and editorial work and eventually helped establish *Scribner's Magazine*. "There's a Song in the Air" first appeared in a Sunday school collection in 1874 and five years later in Holland's *Complete Poetical Writings*. The present tune, "Christmas Song," was composed for these words by Karl P. Harrington approximately 25 years later. The composer was a recognized church musician, serving in various Methodist churches as organist and choir director. He was also one of the musical editors for the *Methodist Hymnal* of 1905, when the present version of the carol first appeared.

³Osbeck, K. W. 1990. *Amazing grace : 366 inspiring hymn stories for daily devotions*. Includes indexes. Kregel Publications: Grand Rapids, Mich.

⁴Osbeck, K. W. 1990. *Amazing grace : 366 inspiring hymn stories for daily devotions*. Includes indexes. Kregel Publications: Grand Rapids, Mich.

There's a song in the air! There's a star in the sky! There's a mother's deep prayer and a baby's low cry! And the star rains its fire while the beautiful sing, for the manger of Bethlehem cradles a King!

There's a tumult of joy o'er the wonderful birth, for the Virgin's sweet Boy is the Lord of the earth. Ay! the star rains its fire while the beautiful sing, for the manger of Bethlehem cradles a King!

In the light of that star lie the ages impearled, and that song from afar has swept over the world. Ev'ry hearth is aflame—and the beautiful sing in the homes of the nations that Jesus is King! We rejoice in the light, and we echo the song that comes down thru the night from the heavenly throng. Ay! we shout to the lovely evangel they bring, and we greet in His cradle our Savior and King!⁵

⁵Osbeck, K. W. 1990. *Amazing grace : 366 inspiring hymn stories for daily devotions*. Includes indexes. Kregel Publications: Grand Rapids, Mich.