

Christmas message for 2024

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through Him all things were made; without Him nothing was made that has been made. In Him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it.” John 1: 1-5

Most of the different hymns we just sang were written long ago. The first we sang, “Angels, from the Realms of Glory,” was written by Scottish poet James Montgomery. It was first printed on Christmas Eve 1816, but it only began to be sung in churches after an 1825 reprinting.

Our second hymn, “O Little Town of Bethlehem,” was a poem written in 1868 as a poem for the Sunday school in Philadelphia. The words were written by Rector Phillips Brooks and it was put to music by church organist Lewis H. Redner. Brooks visited the Holy Land after the Civil War. While traveling, he wrote to the children of his parish about visiting Bethlehem on Christmas Eve. Then a few years later, 1868, that he reflected on that experience and wrote the words we have all come to know and love.

“Hark! The Herald Angels Sing” is credited to Charles Wesley. So the story goes that Wesley was inspired by the sounds of London church bells while walking to church on Christmas Day in 1739. It should be noted that his original opening line was “Hark, how the welkin (heaven) rings.” Wesley envisioned the song being set to a slow, solemn tune. A friend of Wesley's, George Whitefield changed the opening line to “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing, Glory to the newborn King” in 1753. Whitefield's also changed it to a joyful tone. Several sources state how Wesley was not a fan of the change and never sang the version with Whitefield's first line.

The special music we just heard is probably the most well-known recording of the song, “Do You Hear What I Hear?” Bing Crosby made the song into a hit when he recorded his version of it on October of 1963. It became very popular thanks in large part to his performance of it on a Bob Hope Christmas Special that year.

But most people don’t know how it was written the year before in October of 1962 by Noël Regney. His wife, Gloria Shayne, added the music. They wrote it as a plea for peace during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Regney had been invited by a record producer to write a song for the upcoming season, but he was hesitant due to what he saw as the commercialization of Christmas.

Wow, even back in the early 60’s people thought Christmas had become too commercialized. I wonder what the same folks would think now.....

As we look at the words of the song especially in verse 4 we hear a plea for peace everywhere. Our world desperately needs this peace described here.

We also live in a time when sabers are rattling and threats of nuclear war are made. We see the on-going war in Ukraine and the fighting in the Middle-East and hope and pray for peace. We see how many have little or no hope or joy in their lives. Love for many is a selfish concept where pleasure is sought as a temporary solution to a wayward course in life. And we see how many have no idea of a ‘peace that passes understanding’ is all about.

Christmas is the time to share what we have learned and try to live as such. We are called to share how true peace is more than the absence of conflict and is found in knowing Christ. Let us look at our advent candles of hope, joy, love, and peace with the Christ candle in the center and realize the symbolism there is the key to life. All of these candles represent a constant in one’s life rather than a temporary feeling that may come and go.

John speaks of a light that has come into the world. This is the kind of light our world needs.

I read this week how in December 1910, a French inventor put neon gas into a sealed tube and then added an electrical current. It was the first neon lamp. The word 'neon' comes from the Greek word neos, meaning "the new gas." This invention began a new era in lighting. People would stop and stare at these signs that were visible even in daylight. They were given the nickname "liquid fire."

This new type of light brought attention to a new kind of advertising. Yet, I look at the light John speaks of and realize how the world needs this light much more than any other.

There is much darkness. There is darkness with so many economic changes, we are seeing and many are falling behind. There is darkness in acts of terrorism, war, and violence around the globe. There is darkness in poverty and homelessness in our communities. There is darkness in pain, grief and depression among our family members and friends. There is darkness in guilt, fear and loneliness ... deep within many.

Let us look to the light of Christ, "the true light, which enlightens everyone." John reminds us that "the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it."

Let us look at the advent candles once again on this Christmas morning and remember how they are a sign of God's light coming into the world. And while they are not as bright as neon, but they remind us that God's light always shines in the darkness. And wherever we go, let us do our best to share it with others. Amen.