

By Pat Haggerty

There are so many beautiful traditions associated with Advent and Christmas. During Advent, we truly embed ourselves in the preparation for Christmas and for the arrival of the Christ Child in our hearts. During the Christmas season, we share in conviviality, friendship, gift-giving and song. There is nothing that creates a more beautiful backdrop for the season than its lovely music. Music enhances our liturgies and binds us together as community.

We all have our favorite Christmas hymns that connect us so meaningfully to the season. Many of these go back centuries and emanate from different countries. “Silent Night,” for example, a favorite of many, dates back to 1818. A Catholic priest named Joseph Mohr wrote the simple words on the afternoon of Christmas Eve for his small German parish. The song has become one of the most beloved of the season.

Did you know that some Christmas carols are based on poems written by famous poets? One song that I love is “In the Bleak Midwinter.” This is based on a poem written by Christina Rosetti, an English poet, in 1872. It was published posthumously in 1904 and was written as a Christian anthem in 1906. The most popular settings of this hymn were composed by Gustav Holst and Harold Edwin Darke in the early 20th century.

Another English poet, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, is responsible for the words to “I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day.” He wrote the words to “Christmas Bells” in the 1860’s shortly after his wife’s death and during the time of the Civil War. It was later sung to a tune written by John Baptiste Calkin in 1870. Though not used extensively in worship, the song bears a strong message for the New Year. Longfellow writes of the despair of war and the elusive search for peace:

“And in despair I bowed my head;
There is no peace on earth,’ I said;
For hate is strong, And mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men.”

Longfellow ends on a hopeful note, as he writes:

“Then pealed the bells more loud and deep;
God is not dead, nor doth he sleep;
The Wrong shall fail, The Right prevail,
With peace on earth, good-will to men.”

Let us find peace in the Child-Jesus. Let us seek hope in the coming year. Let the bells of right ring out and prevail for us. Let us continue to hear the bells ring out for all of us.