

Christmas Eve 2020

The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.

Religion News Service columnist Thomas Reese has said that for the entire world, 2020 has been *annus horribilis*, a Latin phrase meaning "horrible year."

For the most part, I would have to agree with his assessment.

2020 has felt to most of us as though we have been walking in darkness, feeling our way through a space that we are totally unfamiliar with. A place that we do not want to be in. For some, it has been filled with tragedy and pain, as so many loved ones have been lost to COVID not only in this country but throughout the world. Many others have suffered from stress and anxiety over the loss of jobs and having great difficulty in providing for their families. Those who had no idea where their next meal would come from. We have had to try to understand the anger and violence done to those living on the margins, especially to people of color. Sadly, this was not new to any of us but instead exacerbated by the pandemic. Things already long present within society, now laid bare for all to see; the victims, the perpetrators, and those who watched.

Society says there is a light at the end of the darkness. But from whence does that light shine? Is it but a reflection of the hues of evil, of death, of pain, of suffering, of injustice? Isaiah tells us that this is not the case.

I chose our hymns tonight for a reason. Of course, Joy to the World and Silent Night have treasured places at worship during the Christmas season. O Come All Ye Faithful sets

the stage for why we gather tonight. I want to spend just a few minutes talking about the other two hymns that we are singing tonight.

You can find several sources for the history of “Go Tell it On the Mountain” and how it came to be known. We do not know who wrote this song because the original artist lived in slavery at least 200 years ago. These praise songs were from a group known as Spirituals, spread orally from plantation to plantation.

But what we do know, is about those responsible for bringing this song to the rest of the world. In 1907, John Wesley Work Jr. compiled and edited a number of songs, including this one, in his songbook Jubilee Songs and Folk Songs of the American Negro. But the song was popularized years before that by the original Fisk Jubilee Singers.

According to the Encyclopedia Britannica: “Fisk Jubilee Singers, were a group of African American singers established (1871) at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee. It is one of the earliest and most-famous black vocal groups, known for the performance of slave spirituals. Originally known as the Fisk Free Colored School, Fisk University was established in 1865 to educate newly freed slaves”.

Sadly, 6 years after the school opened, they were out of money. The group of singers were put together to tour across the North and raise money for the school. Many were former slaves themselves.

They began by performing only traditional hymns to showcase their musical training and their performances received a moderate amount of attention, but their journey was anything but easy.

As might be expected, Northern winters were cold and even in the north, they were not accepted in many places they went to. Hotels were hard to find and they were often met with hostility and threats, but they kept going.

The story goes that finally, three days before Christmas, the tide turned. The choir had run out of funds when the most famous preacher of the day, Henry Ward Beecher, invited them to his church. They began to sing the songs of their hearts, the spirituals they had learned from their parents during slavery days.

And the wealthy congregation responded with tears... and donations. Soon, they went from struggling, to successful to, eventually world-famous; touring England and even Queen Victoria herself.

Their concerts were the first time most Americans were introduced to African American spirituals, including "Go, Tell It on the Mountain," a seasonal crowd favorite. The Good News was truly spread "Over the hills and everywhere."

The Fisk Jubilee Singers still perform today.

Another hymn that is very inspirational, especially this year, is the one that we sang before the reading from Luke. 'I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day'.

By the mid-1800s, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was a household name, and his poems, like "The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere" and "The Song of Hiawatha" were memorized and quoted all over America.

But by 1863, Longfellow was discouraged after years of hardship. His beloved wife had died in a tragic fire, causing him to fall into a deep depression. That Christmas, he wrote in his journal: "How inexpressibly sad are all holidays."

Amy Green who is a contributing writer for Crosswalk.com tells the story this way:

“A few years later, despite his deep conviction against violence, his oldest son, Charley, left this note in his house after stealing away to join the Union Army: “I have tried hard to resist the temptation of going without your leave, but I cannot any longer.”

Less than a year later, on December 1, 1863, Longfellow received a telegram that every parent during wartime dreaded: Charley had been injured in a skirmish with Confederate troops and was currently in a Virginia hospital. Knowing the poor conditions of battlefield medical stations, Longfellow immediately left his Boston home to search for his son.

After arriving, he spent three days searching the incoming wounded arriving at the train station, passing up and down the line of bleeding, bandaged men, limp on pallets packed into boxcars, until he finally saw a familiar face: Charley, the prodigal son, alive, but barely breathing.

After being rushed to medical care and stabilized, Charley was eventually allowed to return home to Boston. On Christmas Day, with his son still shivering with fever, possibly never to recover, Longfellow struggled with the terrible reality of the war that had torn his country apart... and began to write a poem.

With each line, he built a picture of darkness—and in the midst of it, hope.

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!”

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.”

This wartime Christmas poem-turned-song still rings out a story of the triumph of hope over despair even today”.

I think that we can agree that this Christmas should be one of the most significant ones we have ever experienced. Despite the times of hopelessness that 2020 has brought, there truly is a light ahead of us; not just shimmering brightly in the distance but surrounding and residing within us. **That light is Jesus.**

Jesus has been our source of hope for over 2,000 years. The triumph of hope over despair. The Light that illuminates the darkness.

Our voices join with the Fisk Jubilee Singers as we proclaim to all this night;

Go, tell it on the mountain

Over the hills and everywhere

Go, tell it on the mountain

That Jesus Christ is born!

Amen!!