

Cindy Bassett

The Bible Corner



The first Christmas carol

Davey," mother called, "it's time to practice your Christmas carols. You promised Grandma a special piano concert on Christmas Eve."

"Okay, Mom," Davey said as he sat down at the piano and opened his music book. "Let's see, 'Silent Night,' key of 'C'..." He stopped abruptly. "Mom," he asked, "where do Christmas carols come from anyway?"

"Christmas carols have a long history," his mother replied. "Every country seems to have its own favorite traditional carols. But the very first Christmas carol was sung by angels almost 2,000 years ago!"

"You mean on the night that Jesus was born?" Davey asked.

"That's right," she answered. "And ever since that time, Christmas carols are sung all over the world to celebrate the first Christmas."

"Was there any music?" Davey grinned. "You know, on the piano?"

"Well, it would have been a little difficult since the carol was sung in the fields near Bethlehem," his mother replied. "But let's start at the beginning of the story."

"A very long time ago, in Bethlehem, there lived a little boy named Amina. His father was a shepherd, just as his grandfather had been. In fact, all of Amina's ancestors had been shepherds. Amina's father was teaching him how to be a good shepherd, too."

"It was by no means an easy life Amina's

family had chosen, but it was the only way of life his family had ever known. Shepherds were always watching for the wolves that roamed the countryside, especially at night. Wolves are the natural enemies of sheep," mother said.

"Well, how could these shepherds be certain that their sheep would be safe from the wolves at night when they went home to bed?" Davey asked.

"The sheep were never left alone. Someone from the family had to take a turn every evening and keep the night watch," his mother continued. "The sheep were so important that the shepherds counted them every night and again the next morning."

"Whenever Amina's father left him in charge at night, he always reminded the boy: 'Never, ever leave the flock. If an animal strays, you must wait until morning to begin searching for it.'"

"One cold night, it was Amina's turn for the night watch. As soon as his father left him, he sat cross-legged on the ground close to the sheep and pulled up his blanket all around him. Then, as he always did, Amina started to play his flute. The music seemed to soothe the sheep and it helped to make Amina not feel so lonely."

"There was something else, too, that Amina had not told anyone. He was very afraid of the wolves. Amina had never actually seen a wolf, but he had heard all of the terrible stories about their sharp teeth and their fierce behavior. Sometimes, especially when it was cold at night, Amina heard them howling. So, for nearly all of the night, he kept playing his flute."

"On that particular night, the skies suddenly had become so bright that it was like day out in the fields. Amina stopped playing and listened. He heard something, but it wasn't the sound of wolves; it was a strange music he had never heard before. Amina stood and listened."

"I must go and see where this lovely sound comes from," he said to himself. "Surely with so much light, the sheep will be safe for just a few minutes!"

"Just over the next hill Amina saw the first angel. 'Do not be afraid,' the angel told him. 'I bring you great and wonderful news. For tonight, in Bethlehem, a Savior has been born to you, Christ the Lord!'"

"Suddenly, this angel was joined by a great number of other angels, who were singing: 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, And peace on earth to all people of good will!'"

"That angels' song was the very first Christmas carol," his mother concluded.

"Wait a minute!" Davey said anxiously. "What happened to all the sheep that Amina left in the field? Did the wolves get them?"

"As soon as the angels had finished their wonderful song, they disappeared, and the skies became dark again. Amina didn't remember the sheep until he heard the wolves howling. He ran all the way back to the field, fearing what he would find. But there on the hillside, Amina saw one of the sheep standing very peacefully next to a wolf," mother said.

"But you said that the wolf was the sheep's natural enemy! How could that have happened?" Davey challenged her.

"On that first Christmas Eve, all the promises the prophets had foretold for hundreds of years came to pass. Nearly 700 years before the birth of Jesus, the prophet Isaiah had predicted: 'A new king will arise from David's descendants. And on that day, the wolves and sheep will live together in peace!'"

"It's up to each one of us now, Davey, to bring that same message of peace that the an-

gels sang in that first Christmas carol. And you can start by making a joyful sound on the piano!" his mother said, smiling.

For further reading:

1) The story of the first Christmas carol at Christ's birth is found in Luke, Chapter 2:8-20.

2) The prophecies of Isaiah foretold a new kingdom of peace in Isaiah, Chapter 11:1-9.

3) Jesus is described as the Good Shepherd in John, Chapter 10:8-16.

A collection of facts about Christmas carols:

1) Some of the early Christmas carols were composed like folk songs. They retold the Nativity story in many verses.

2) In the Middle Ages, carols were performed as part of miracle plays that took place outside of Gothic cathedrals. They were also sung in processions accompanied by drum and tambourine music. The use of handbells also became a popular tradition.

3) The mummers in England performed carols in an elaborate fashion through the use of masks and costumes.

4) Carols were banned by the Puritans in England and Scotland in the 16th century. They didn't come back into fashion again until the Restoration in 1660.

5) Most of the carols popular today have been translated from foreign languages. Since Latin was once the official language of all of Christendom, most of the familiar medieval hymns begin with Latin lines.

6) Carols are called noels in France and *Weinachtslieder* in Germany. "Silent Night" was originally written in German. "O Come, All Ye Faithful" is of Latin origin. "Away in a Manger" was written anonymously.

7) "We Three Kings of Orient Are," one of the earliest American carols, was written in 1857.

8) Today, singing Christmas carols is still popular. It remains as a means of praising God and sharing His peace and joy with others.

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