



## The Story Behind the Song: *O Holy Night*

**Christmas Eve, 1906.** It was a cold winter's night. Countless ships bobbed up and down on the icy sea, crewed by weary sailors stationed far away from their families. As their heads nodded and their tired eyelids drooped, it probably wasn't sugarplum fairies that danced in their heads, but visions of home, hearth, and a seat by the fire.

But then something happened.

Without warning, their radios came alive. Not with the usual Morse code, but a man's voice.

*“And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed.”*

Just as the astounded radio operators registered the famous scripture, the voice disappeared. In its place, the sound of a single violin, playing the beloved carol, *O Holy Night*.

Some historians believe this was the first time music had ever been played over the radio, making it the first “entertainment” broadcast in history. It must have been a beautiful moment, as thousands of people hundreds of miles apart were suddenly connected by music.

*O holy night! The stars are brightly shining,  
It is the night of our dear Saviour's birth.  
Long lay the world in sin and error pining,  
Till He appear'd and the soul felt its worth.  
A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices,  
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn.*

But it was not the first time the carol brought different people together.

**Christmas Eve, 1871.** It was not on sea, but on land, not with sailors, but soldiers, when another sudden voice rang out. The Franco-Prussian War had been raging for almost a year. French and German troops were huddling in their trenches when suddenly, a French soldier stood up and began to sing.

*Minuit, chrétiens, c'est l'heure solennelle,  
Où l'Homme Dieu descendit jusqu'à nous  
Pour effacer la tache originelle  
Et de Son Père arrêter le courroux.  
Le monde entier tressaille d'espérance  
En cette nuit qui lui donne un Sauveur.*

As the story goes, the Germans responded with their own carol. And for the rest of the night and through Christmas Day, the shooting stopped.

**Christmas Eve, 1855.** If you can read French, you might notice that the lyrics above aren't quite the same as the lyrics on page one. That's because, in the English-speaking world, the lyrics we know so well were translated and modified by an American minister, John Sullivan Dwight. Dwight was one of the first, perhaps, to see the carol's power to unite rather than divide. A devoted abolitionist, Dwight translated the carol's third verse in this way:

*Truly He taught us to love one another;  
His law is love and His gospel is peace.  
Chains shall He break for the slave is our brother;  
And in His name all oppression shall cease.  
Sweet hymns of joy in grateful chorus raise we,  
Let all within us praise His holy name.*

It's no wonder the song became a great favorite during the Civil War as slavery hastened toward its end.

**Christmas Eve, 1847.** We end where it began, returning once more to France. The carol was originally created by two unlikely men. Placide Cappeau, a fairly unreligious poet, and Adolphe Adams, a composer of Jewish ancestry. The two had been asked by a local priest to compose something for the Midnight Mass held every Christmas Eve. They responded with one of the most beautiful pieces of music ever written.

For a time, some authorities did all they could to ban the song once they learned who wrote it. But their efforts were in vain, as more and more people of countless countries, backgrounds, and philosophies fell in love with it. First performed on Christmas Eve, 1847, the carol soon made its way to almost every corner of the globe – connecting sailors and soldiers, Catholics and Protestants, the enslaved and the free.

And of course, it still connects us today.

Merry Christmas!