

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

O Little Town of Bethlehem

PHILLIPS BROOKS

Page | 1

It was a visit to Bethlehem itself that inspired Episcopal priest Phillips Brooks (1835–93) to write this carol. Then rector of the Church of the Holy Trinity in Philadelphia, he spent the Christmas week of 1865 in Bethlehem. Upon his return in September 1866, he began working on the carol, but it would not be completed until 1868, when Brooks, with organist Lewis Redner (1831–1908), set the words to music for a Christmas service.

The form of this hymn is somewhat unusual. It does not offer (until the last verse) direct praise or prayer to God, but rather addresses the little town itself. Why do you think Brooks made this choice? What image of Christmas does this song evoke? How are the “hopes and fears of all our years” met by Christmas Day? How does singing this song make you feel?

O little town of Bethlehem
How still we see thee lie
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
The silent stars go by.
Yet in thy dark streets shineth
The everlasting Light
The hopes and fears of all the years
Are met in thee tonight.

For Christ is born of Mary
And gathered all above
While mortals sleep, the angels keep
Their watch of wondering love.
O morning stars together
Proclaim the holy birth
And praises sing to God the King
And Peace to men on earth.

How silently, how silently
The wondrous gift is given!
So God imparts to human hearts
The blessings of His heaven.
No ear may hear His coming,
But in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive him still,
The dear Christ enters in.

O holy Child of Bethlehem
Descend to us, we pray
Cast out our sin and enter in
Be born to us today.
We hear the Christmas angels
The great glad tidings tell
O come to us, abide with us
Our Lord Emmanuel.