



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

### Focus Article:

📖 **Caroling**  
(*Christmas and Epiphany*,  
pp. 27-31)

### Suggested Articles:

📖 **The Color of Christmas  
Extended**  
(*Christmas and Epiphany*,  
pp. 53-60)

📖 **Choral Music for  
Christmas**  
(*Christmas and Epiphany*,  
pp. 89-93)

### What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to [Christian\\_Reflection@baylor.edu](mailto:Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu).

### Christian Reflection

Center for Christian Ethics  
Baylor University  
One Bear Place #97361  
Waco, TX 76798-7361  
Phone 1-866-298-2325  
[www.ChristianEthics.ws](http://www.ChristianEthics.ws)

© 2011 The Center for Christian Ethics

# Caroling

Carols are one of the best known bodies of religious song. Just as Christ's birth was announced by the angels' singing, so Christians through the centuries have celebrated and borne witness through song to the coming of the Messiah.

### Prayer

**Scripture Reading: Psalm 96**

### Reflection

"Sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD all the earth," proclaims the psalmist, "for he is coming, for he is coming to judge the earth" (Psalm 96:1a, 13a). Fittingly the lectionary assigns this psalm for Christmas worship every year, for it beckons us to join with one another (and all the voices of the creation) to sing praise and welcome to the God who comes to us in Christ.

Choral music plays a key role in how we enjoy and understand the Christmas festival. David Music especially appreciates the enduring appeal of carols to ordinary church members celebrating the mystery of the Incarnation. He traces the history of what we call Christmas "carols" through four stages:

- ▶ *The carol began as a type of dance music in the medieval period. Its chorus was sung at the beginning of the song and after each stanza by the dancers as they danced; its verses were performed by a soloist while the dancers rested. By the fifteenth century, the carol form of chorus-stanza was no longer associated with dancing. Clerics and monastics wrote carols (in English, Latin, or both) for spiritual entertainment in the Christmas season. The songs had no specific role in worship.*
- ▶ *As monasteries were abandoned during the English Reformation, the carol form was lost, but Christmas texts became associated with the ballad as a form of popular music. "During the seventeenth century the Puritans attempted to suppress Christmas celebrations," David Music notes, "but the carol endured as a popular song type associated with the Christmas season."*
- ▶ *With the rise of hymn singing (rather than singing versified psalms) in the eighteenth century, hymn texts were written about the Incarnation. During the nineteenth century, more hymns were written for Advent-Christmas-Epiphany and scholars attempted to preserve the earlier carols of the folk tradition. An unusual aspect of the recovered carols and new hymns alike is that often their tunes are in minor keys.*
- ▶ *In the twentieth century, American popular songs with a secular Christmas theme joined the ranks of "traditional" music that is usually heard and sung during the Christmas season.*

Churches today often use Christmas carols, like other hymns and spiritual songs, as vehicles "for praise, prayer, and proclamation in worship, education, ministry, evangelism, and fellowship," Music notes. They help teach the story of Christ's birth, if used with caution. "Many of these songs were written not by pastors, professional theologians, or biblical scholars, but by humble laypersons whose knowledge of the story may have been shaped more by legend,



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Robert B. Kruschwitz, the author of this study guide, directs the Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University. He serves as General Editor of *Christian Reflection*.

© 2011 The Center for Christian Ethics

enthusiasm, and imagination than by the Scriptures.... Furthermore, carols often tell only half the story: the Incarnation is incomplete without the Crucifixion and Resurrection." Thus, he cautions, "those who encounter Christian song only at Christmas will probably have at best only a partial understanding of what it is all about."

To be fair in evaluating carols, Music says, we should remember they "seldom originate or function primarily as theological expression but as outpourings of tenderness and rejoicing.... A carol is like a snapshot: it gives us a glimpse of one aspect of the Incarnation. Add these snapshots together and we can get a fuller picture, but even then they can never exhaust the subject."

### Study Questions

1. Discuss the roles Christmas carols play in your celebration of the Nativity. With whom do you sing or listen to them? How are they used in your congregation's public worship? Do you read or sing them in your personal devotion?
2. Review the Christmas carols in your church hymn book. When were they written? How do they fit into the brief history of carols sketched by David Music?
3. What Christmas carols do you enjoy each year that are not in your congregation's hymn book?
4. Consider the text and tune of your favorite Christmas carol. What does the text highlight for you in the story of Christ's birth? How is it just a "snapshot" – either incomplete, or inaccurate with elements of the story? How does the carol's tune draw you into its text?
5. In a similar way, explore the text and tune of David Music's new carol, "A Lamb is Born among the Sheep."

### Departing Hymn: "A Lamb Is Born among the Sheep"

A Lamb is born among the sheep,  
sing, sing nowell.  
The shepherds' Shepherd lies asleep,  
sing, sing nowell.  
*Nowell, nowell, nowell,*  
*now sing, sing nowell.*  
*Nowell, nowell, nowell,*  
*now sing, sing nowell.*

Eternity breaks into time,  
sing, sing nowell,  
while angel choirs sing songs sublime,  
sing, sing nowell.

#### Refrain

The Light into the darkness shines,  
sing, sing nowell,  
as heaven now with earth combines,  
sing, sing nowell.

#### Refrain

*David W. Music (2011)*  
*Tune: A LAMB IS BORN*

# Caroling

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, 2, and 4	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To review the history and diversity of Christmas carols.
2. To consider the roles that Christmas carols can play in spiritual formation through public worship and personal devotion.
3. To share and critically appreciate the value of particular Christmas carols.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Christmas and Epiphany (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested articles before the group meeting.

## Begin with a Story

Emilie Griffin knows the power of music and poetry to interpret the mystery of the Incarnation during Christmastide, the twelve-day season of Christmas. She recounts hearing an old favorite, Menotti's opera *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, performed by members of her Louisiana congregation. She writes, "The church was not crowded. Some of us were rain-soaked. Wet umbrellas were everywhere. The Wise Men in their tall gorgeous turbans and silken hats were magical, but a little worried about how to deal with the winter rain. Yet our small cathedral was filled with the grace of God. I felt a sense of God's abundant mercy. It was enough to take us through storm and trouble in search of the amazing Christ.

"When the opera ended, we all trundled over to the reception where we would have hot punch and cold punch and sandwiches and cake—and the beauty of each other. Along the way, as I inched down the rain-soaked ramp (built for people like me who are handicapped and rely on a cane) I passed the child Amahl and one or two Wise Men. In the story, Amahl had left his crutch behind to follow the Lord Jesus.

"I felt sustained and lifted up by the healing power of grace," she reports, for "inwardly I had felt a spiritual healing with Amahl, who rose out of poverty to meet the mystical visitors and to join their search of the mystical child, the gift of grace.... The music had flooded my heart." (*Christmas and Epiphany*, 59-60)

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to draw you to himself through the music and poetry of Christmas.

## Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Psalm 96 from a modern translation.

## Reflection

This is a chance to enjoy members' favorite Christmas carols and to learn some new ones. Invite members to bring their favorite Christmas recordings, or briefly survey the ones that Mark Suderman reviews in "Choral Music for Christmas." Take the time to critically appreciate a few carols: consider their strengths and weaknesses in telling the story of the Nativity, sharing the gospel in the culture, and forming us morally through public worship and personal devotion.

## Study Questions

1. You might divide into smaller groups to discuss *when* members use carols, *what* carols they use, *how* they use them, and *where* they use them. When the small groups report back, you can explore the overlap among their answers.

In response to the “when” question, liturgical churches follow a pattern of singing Advent hymns during the Advent season, Christmas carols on Christmas Eve and the twelve days of Christmastide, and Epiphany hymns (including verses about the Magi) in Epiphany season. It’s not so tidy in many congregations and through the wider culture: Christmas carols are used right after Thanksgiving and for a few days past Christmas Day. In regard to the “what” question, members might discuss whether they gravitate to old favorites or seek out carols that are new to them, enjoy carols from a wide range of places and times, enjoy some carols that are rarely sung in their congregation, have carols that are favorites personally or in their family, and so on. The “how” question might lead to a discussion of whether members sing or listen to carols (on the radio, on recordings, in live performances), share carols with others through caroling, read carol texts meditatively, and so on. The group with the “where” question might consider the use of carols in public worship services, various church programs, personal devotion, programs in non-ecclesial institutions, shopping mall sound systems, flash mob performances, family gatherings, Christmas parties, and so on.

2. To respond to this and the next two questions, have copies of your congregation’s hymnal available, or prepare a list of the hymns in the Christmas section of the book. (The contents of many hymn books are catalogued online at [www.hymnary.org](http://www.hymnary.org).) The hymnal will give the date of composition of the text; you can find more information about the hymn writer and composer on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ ([www.hymntime.com/tch](http://www.hymntime.com/tch)). Denominational hymnals may include some recent texts by hymn writers in that denomination.
3. Members who have been believers for many years may remember Christmas carols that once were popular, but are not in the current hymnal. Ask members who grew up in different Christian denominations if they remember different carols sung in church. Members may have heard or sung a newer Christmas carol that is not in the hymnal. Some members, especially those who are new to the Christian faith, may identify popular Christmas songs that are not in the hymnal. In each case, explore why the carol is memorable for that person.
4. Do members agree on a few favorite carols, or do they prefer different ones? You might break up members into smaller groups to study a few selected carols more carefully. David Music distinguishes those with “sophisticated theological messages” from others with “simple, child-like expressions of faith and joy.” He notes that some retell portions of the Nativity stories in Matthew and Luke, while others use bits of the Christmas story to address different, but related subjects. Some carols mention details that are not in the biblical stories. Commenting on this poetic license, Music writes that “It undoubtedly aids the memorability of carols to sing that the angels appeared to the shepherds at midnight, that there was hay in the manger, or that the birth took place amid cattle and donkeys, though none of these features are mentioned in Scripture. Whether these elements are literally true or not, they certainly reinforce the biblical message that Jesus was born in humble circumstances.”

If time permits, you might sing a few of these favorite carols. Another interesting project is to study the full text of the carols in the Cyber Hymnal™ ([www.hymntime.com/tch](http://www.hymntime.com/tch)). You may find a few gems among the verses that are not included in your hymnal, or you may be glad the editors left those verses out!

5. David Music’s “A Lamb is Born among the Sheep” may be sung in the original fashion (with everyone singing the chorus at the first and then after each stanza, and a soloist singing the stanzas). The first two verses allude to the Nativity story in Luke 2, referring to Christ with the metaphors of Lamb and Shepherd; in the third verse, the phrase “the Light into the darkness shines” refers to John 1:5, but it is also suggestive of the light of God’s glory that shown around the angel who speaks to the shepherds in Luke 2:9.

## Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.