



Sometimes it's helpful to know the story behind the songs we have come to treasure, including the Christmas carols that have been sung for centuries. "O Little Town of Bethlehem" has such a tale that makes the words all the more powerful. Back in the 1860's, a pastor named Philips Brooks was called to serve Holy Trinity Church in Philadelphia during one of the worst nightmares in our nation's history. Women would often come to the church building wearing black, as a loved one would die

from fighting in the Civil War. And although the burden of attempting to serve as a spiritual leader grew so heavily on Brooks, his reputation as a prolific preacher began to grow, and eventually he would be asked to preside over perhaps the most attended funeral proceeding in the entire 19th century, for the President who had just been assassinated in Abraham Lincoln. And although he managed to dig deep and find the words for the homily, the near-depressing years for his congregation and the entire country plagued his very soul.

It led him to take a trip to the Holy Land, and the story so goes:

At dusk, a sudden sense of awe fell over Brooks. Under a clear sky, the first stars just beginning to emerge, he rode into the still tiny and remote village of Bethlehem. He recalled the story of the Savior's birth, and by being present in the place in which Jesus was born, was able to add vivid detail to the familiar tale in Scripture. The great speaker was all but speech-less as he considered the Lord born in such modest surroundings. There, on streets almost unchanged since biblical times, Brooks felt as if he were surrounded by the spirit of the first Christmas. He would later tell his family and friends that the experience was so overpowering that it would forever be "singing in his soul."

So, a few years later, during the holiday season, Brooks penned a little poem about his experience that he couldn't forget, and passed along to one of his closest friends, who so happened to be the organist at Holy Trinity. In the middle of the night on Christmas Eve of 1868, the beloved tune came to the musician, and so was born, "O Little Town of Bethlehem." In the next few years, it would spread to become a favorite of all the churches in Philadelphia, and by the time of Brooks' death in 1893, it became one of the most beloved Christmas carols in the world, including that most precious second verse: "How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given. So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of the heavens. No ear may hear his coming, but in this world of sin Where meek souls will receive him still, the dear Christ enters in." And so, we give thanks for Phillips Brooks who year after year helps us remember that Christ entered in then and still does today for all of us. Thanks be to God, indeed! Amen.

Source: *Stories Behind the Best-Loved Songs of Christmas: Heartwarming Stories Behind Popular Carols* (Ace Collins, Zondervan Publishing House, 2020)