

## ○ Little Town of Bethlehem

One of my favorite Christmas carols is *O Little Town of Bethlehem*. It will be sung by soloists, choirs and congregations in churches, and played in recordings in schools, retail stores, on radio stations and television programs in this yuletide season.

The lyrics draw us – in our mind’s eyes – to the little town where the Christ child was born. Our hearts overflow with joy at what happened here.

The song was written by Phillip Brooks (1835 – 1893), a well-known preacher within the Episcopal Church and an American patriot. During the Civil War, he took a firm public stand against slavery. He held a Doctorate of Divinity from Oxford and was a teacher at Yale University. Harvard University established the Phillip Brooks House, a social services institution dedicated to “the ideal of piety, charity, and hospitality.”


In 1865, Brooks traveled to the Holy Land, and on Dec. 24, he made his way on horseback from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. While there, he attended a five-hour musical praise celebration at the Church of the Nativity, just a short distance from the hillside where the shepherds heard the very first Christmas song.

At Christmastime three years later, recalling that magical night in Bethlehem, Brooks wrote a song for the children’s choir of his church. His organist put melody to his words and on Christmas Eve in 1868, *O Little Town of Bethlehem* was sung for the very first time. Here are the lyrics:

*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 wond’ring love.  
O morning stars, together  
Proclaim the holy birth,  
And praises sing to God the King,  
And peace to men on earth.*

(more)



*How silently, how silently  
The wondrous gift is giv'n!  
So God imparts to human hearts  
The blessings of his heav'n.  
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.*

As you read these lyrics, and hear the song performed between now and Christmas Day, wander back in your imagination to the Bethlehem of more than 2,000 years ago, and offer praise to God for that glorious moment in time when God entered human flesh to deliver people from the bondage of sin through faith in Christ.

Hallelujah! What a Savior.

– Beecher Hunter