

I Wonder As I Wander

Sunday December 3 is the first Sunday in Advent. I thought it might be interesting to look at some of the hymns we will sing during this Advent season as we prepare our hearts and minds for the birth of our Savior. This Sunday we will sing the hauntingly beautiful American folk carol; *I Wonder As I Wander*. The carol was written by American folklorist and singer John Jacob Niles (1892 –1980) often called the "Dean of American Balladeers. Niles was an important influence on the American folk music revival of the 1950s and 1960s.

Niles was traveling through southern Appalachia collecting folk tunes and ballads when he found himself in the tiny town of Murphy NC in the summer of 1933. It was there that he heard a young girl singing a few lines of a folk song she had learned from her mother and grandmother. Here is what Niles later wrote about the origin of the carol we know as *I Wonder As I Wander*.

"I Wonder As I Wander" grew out of three lines of music sung for me by a girl who called herself Annie Morgan. The place was Murphy, North Carolina, and the time was July 1933. The Morgan family, revivalists all, were about to be ejected by the police, after having camped in the town square for some little time, cooking, washing, hanging their wash from the Confederate monument and generally conducting themselves in such a way as to be classed a public nuisance. Preacher Morgan and his wife pled poverty; they had to hold one more meeting in order to buy enough gas to get out of town. It was then that Annie Morgan came out—a tousled, unwashed blond, and very lovely. She sang the first three lines of the verse of "I Wonder As I Wander." At twenty-five cents a performance, I tried to get her to sing all the song. After eight tries, all of which are carefully recorded in my notes, I had only three lines of verse, a garbled fragment of melodic material—and a magnificent idea."

Here is the song text as Niles heard it:

*I wonder as I wander out under the sky,
How Jesus the Savior did come for to die.
For poor on'ry people like you and like I
I wonder as I wander out under the sky.*

With the writing of additional verses and the development of the original melodic material, *I Wonder As I Wander* came into being. Niles sang it at concerts he gave as he traveled throughout Appalachia over the next several years. Since then, it has been sung by soloists and choral groups throughout America and included in many Christian hymnals. An interesting note about the word "on'ry" used in the first verse: The contraction transcribes the Appalachian pronunciation of the word "ornery" (stubborn) or perhaps, "ordinary." Somehow that fits well with the message that Jesus died to save ordinary human beings, who are often resistant (stubborn) to his message.

*When Mary birthed Jesus 'twas in a cow's stall,
With wise men and farmers and shepherds and all.
But high from God's heaven a star's light did fall,
And the promise of ages it then did recall.*

*If Jesus had wanted for any wee thing,
A star in the sky, or a bird on the wing,
Or all of God's angels in heav'n for to sing,
He surely could have it, 'cause he was the King.*

Let us be filled with the wonder of the Advent of our Lord and King as we wander in our daily lives. Come and worship and prepare for His birth.