

## *Tidings of Comfort and Joy*

Sunday December 31 is the First Sunday after Christmas and thus, we will continue to sing carols as our hymns. I always wish we could sing Christmas carols for more than just Christmas Eve and Christmas Day worship services because they are so beautiful and their message is so wonderful. One of the hymns for this Sunday is *“God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen”*. Pastor John often says it is his favorite of all the carols. Maybe that’s why *“God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen”* was sung as a solo by Monique Rigby on Christmas Eve, was one of the carols in the Christmas Day service of lessons and carols and is again a hymn for this the First Sunday After Christmas!

So, let’s look at the history and the meaning of this unique carol. *“God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen”* is one of the oldest existing Christmas carols. It dates back to the 1500s and earlier. In the 15th Century, church music was typically sung in Latin and was dark and rather somber. Consequently, most churchgoers did not really like the religious songs of the period. So, the faithful counteracted this by singing more uplifting and melodic songs in the streets. The nightwatchmen are said to have sung *“God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen”* as they walked the streets of London. The original author of the lyrics is unknown and multiple versions and stanzas developed over the next 200 plus years. The first printed version of the song didn’t appear until 1760. The melody and lyrics were first published together in 1833 in a collection titled, *“Christmas Carols Ancient and Modern,”* compiled by William Sandys. This collection also included *“The First Noel”* and *“I Saw Three Ships.”*

It is interesting to consider the title and lyrics in light of their original meaning. Note the comma in the title and first line: **God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen**. Typical of 17th-century language, “rest” in this usage means “to keep or continue” while “merry” means “great, mighty, or strong”. So a modernized translation of the first line could read: “God keep you strong, gentlemen”. This fits with the rest of the verse – a hopeful cry to stay strong because Jesus Christ has saved mankind.

Charles Dickens referenced the song in his classic, *“A Christmas Carol.”* The song describes how Jesus has come to “save us all from Satan’s power when we were gone astray” which is an appropriate theme for all mankind—and epitomized by Scrooge. *“God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen”* is somber and yet uplifting and inspiring. It is centered around the birth of Christ and conveys the Christmas message of hope and abundant joy.

In today’s world filled with unrest, we, too, need the message, God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen or May God Keep You Strong in Spirit, Folks. Don’t be troubled by the use of gentlemen—gentlepersons or gentlefolks just doesn’t have the same poetic flair; it’s intended for all of us, just as is the Christmas message of hope and joy. For Christ’s birth does indeed bring us everlasting “tidings of comfort and joy”!

***God rest ye merry, gentlemen,  
Let nothing you dismay  
Remember Christ our Savior  
Was born on Christmas Day  
To save us all from Satan's power  
When we were gone astray.  
O tidings of comfort and joy,  
comfort and joy;  
O tidings of comfort and joy!***