



Hymns 101 – The First Noel

And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger."

Luke 2:8-12 (ESV)

**The First Noël the angel did say
Was to certain poor shepherds
in fields as they lay;
In fields as they lay, keeping their sheep,
On a cold winter's night that was so deep.**

**Noël, Noël, Noël, Noël,
Born is the King of Israel.**

**They looked up and saw a star
Shining in the east beyond them far,
And to the earth it gave great light,
And so it continued both day and night.**

**And by the light of that same star
Three wise men came from country far;
To seek for a king was their intent,
And to follow the star wherever it went.**

**This star drew nigh to the northwest,
O'er Bethlehem it took its rest,
And there it did both stop and stay
Right over the place where Jesus lay.**

**Then entered in those wise men three
Full reverently upon their knee,
and offered there in his presence
Their gold, and myrrh, and frankincense.**

**Then let us all with one accord
Sing praises to our heavenly Lord;
That hath made heaven and earth of naught,
And with his blood mankind hath bought**



The First Noël

Without getting too deeply into word origins, the word Noël is thought to be from Old French *Nowel*, meaning the “Feast of Christmas.” It is not *too* far of a stretch to think of the chorus where the word Noël is repeated several times to be like the singing of Happy Birthday, although the usage here is more in the sense of sharing the good news of Christ’s birth to others rather than singing good tidings directly to Him.

This carol is thought to have appeared in England, most likely brought over from France by wandering troubadours sometime before 1823 when the first written records of it appear. It became a very popular song, but was generally sung outside of the church as it was considered a “peasant song” and not worthy of inclusion in the worship setting of a cathedral or even a local church.

These “peasant songs” were often sung when an entire village gathered to sing and celebrate the bringing in of the village Yule log – a custom adopted during the middle ages from the Norse tradition of cutting and hollowing out a huge log then filling it with aromatic oils and spices. The log was lit with on Christmas Eve with the hope that it would burn all the way through the 12 days of Christmas ending on January the 6th.

The attitudes towards this song (and others such as *God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen* and *Hark the Herald Angels Sing*) changed around the mid-1800’s when it was acknowledged that the simple language and moving chorus was a beautiful and easy way to teach the story of Christ’s birth. The First Noël, when all six verses are sung, tells the story in a way that can be understood by almost everyone while the final verse urges us all to sing praises to God for His Creation and our own salvation.