

The Songs of Christmas

ADVENT: Day 13

"I SAW THREE SHIPS"

*I saw three ships come sailing in,
On Christmas Day, on Christmas Day.
I saw three ships come sailing in,
On Christmas Day in the morning.*

As far as I know, "I Saw Three Ships" is not a well-known Christmas hymn. You may have never heard it at your church. It's seldom if ever featured in Christmas shows or compilation albums.

But it's still a Christmas hymn worth knowing, even if its origin story is, well, rather spooky.

The story behind the song

The lyrics to "I Saw Three Ships" have been altered multiple times throughout the years to change with and reflect the times.

The hymn was purportedly first written in the Middle Ages and sung by wandering minstrels who hoped to earn their living through such songs. In its first iteration, the song retold a legend that some people believed was true: three ships sailed to the Cologne Cathedral in Germany, each carrying a skull of one of the three wise men.

Somehow, such a story seems befitting for a medieval tale. And now you also know why the lyrics have changed over the years.

Later, the lyrics spoke about different Bible characters who rode the ships to Bethlehem. Today, the words are about Mary, Joseph, and soon-to-be-born Jesus' journey to Bethlehem—even though they certainly didn't take ships on their non-sea-faring journey from Egypt to Bethlehem. Rather, the current lyrics remind us of the journey of these "three ships."

Rejoicing over their return

In the Middle Ages, families would stand at the harbor and watch ships sail away, often whisking away friends and family members they loved.

But so many variations of a catastrophe could occur on these long voyages: Ships could sink in high winds and storms. Pirates or enemy vessels could attack. Sickness could spread. Starvation could occur.

In other words, when loved ones sailed away, remaining family and friends didn't know if they would ever see or speak to them again. And there were no telegraphs, phones, or email to send word if anything went wrong.

So, imagine yourself as someone saying goodbye. Then, months or even years later, imagine your deep hope when seeing a returning ship. You'd watch the ship get closer and closer, praying that the person you loved was arriving back home.

"I Saw Three Ships" has many stanzas but one central theme: Christmas is about rejoicing over the arrival of Jesus. That's why this song remains a Christmas carol today.

Christmas is a time to remember that Jesus, our Messiah, arrived in Bethlehem. But it is also a time to be reminded that, one day, Jesus will return.

Jesus told his disciples, "Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also" (John 14:1-3).

Just as people rejoiced when they saw those ancient ships pull into the harbor, we will rejoice one day when Jesus returns.

This Christmas, let's rejoice over the arrival of Jesus in Bethlehem and, one day, our arrival in heaven.

"The Songs Tell the Story"
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