

The Songs of Christmas

ADVENT: Day 2

"THE FIRST NOEL"

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

Every time my family sang "The First Noel" in church, people wondered why we were grinning at each other. It's not a funny song, but my family couldn't help but snicker under our breaths as we repeated, "Noel, noel, noel, noel."

And do you know how hard it is *not* to laugh at church when you get the giggles? We weren't laughing at the lyrics. Rather, we laughed at what that unique word brought to our collective minds. You see, we had a Christmas decoration that consisted of four angels, each holding a red candle. The angels sat on letters spelling out N-O-E-L.

My dad would often rearrange those angels.

Eventually, one of us would discover his terrible dad joke and shout out, "Dad! It wasn't the first LEON!"

The story behind the song

"The First Noel" might be one of the oldest hymns we have. Some think the tune was written in the 1200s, but the Christmas words were added six hundred years later.

The word *noel* comes from a Latin word that means "to be born," but *noel* later came to mean Christmas. Consequently, "The First Noel" means "The First Christmas."

We know people have been celebrating the birth of Jesus since 300 AD, which means Christians have formally and collectively celebrated his birth for seventeen hundred years.

And, if "The First Noel" was first sung in the 1800s, people like Abraham Lincoln might have sung it. Your great- great-great grandparents may have sung it. Pause for a moment and consider how many people have sung about that first Christmas, occurring on a "cold winter's night that was so deep."

The song's one mistake

The problem with that "cold winter's night" is that Jesus was likely born sometime in the spring.

We don't have to delve into the trivia of dating biblical events to know this; the text provides insight. (And, if you read the previous devotional, you should already know this answer.)

"There were shepherds *out in the field*, keeping watch over their flock by night" (Luke 2:8 emphasis added). Now, I'm not a shepherd, but I have been camping. I would not stay "out in the field" on "a cold winter's night."

So why does "The First Noel" contain that line? Because, by the time the hymn had been written, Christmas was celebrated in December—when it's cold. In other words, that one line of the hymn was written to match its own time rather than the biblical times.

But, that trivia doesn't change the truth about Christmas.

The first Christmas was announced by angels who appeared to shepherds in a field. People have been "announcing" and celebrating the story of Christ's birth ever since. When you sing "The First Noel," you sing about the first Christmas, and your voice joins with millions of others throughout history. People have always wanted to announce the true meaning of Christmas, just as "the angels did say."
What will you announce about Christmas this year?