

Day 11: Infant Holy, Infant Lowly

Dec. 8

*1 Infant holy, infant lowly,
for his bed a cattle stall;
oxen lowing, little knowing
Christ the babe is Lord of all.
Swiftly winging angels singing,
bells are ringing, tidings bringing:
Christ the babe is Lord of all!
Christ the babe is Lord of all!*

*2 Flocks were sleeping; shepherds keeping
vigil till the morning new
saw the glory, heard the story,
tidings of a gospel true.
Thus rejoicing, free from sorrow,
praises voicing, greet the morrow:
Christ the babe was born for you!
Christ the babe was born for you!*

The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. (Luke 2:20)

Infant Holy, Infant Lowly is a very old, traditional Polish Christmas carol which dates back likely to the 14th or perhaps even 13th century. It was first published, however, only in 1908 in the original Polish. In 1925, a British musician named Edith M. Gellibrand Reed translated the carol into English.

Unlike so many of her hymn-writing peers, Edith Reed lived a highly athletic lifestyle, regularly engaging in swimming, sailing, hiking, and camping. Her great adventures led her to walk all the way around most of the coastline of England and Wales. Her work life (and passion), however, centered in the music education of children.

This hymn that Reed translated for us, *Infant Holy, Infant Lowly*, is as simple as it is brief. Only two verses, and those very short, it can be sung in its entirety in less than a minute and 15 seconds. The language is not challenging and its message is completely understandable.

What gives *Infant Holy, Infant Lowly* its punch is the way it presents the last two lines of each stanza. The pitch rises as each short phrase is enunciated until at last we arrive at the joyful proclamation: “Christ the Babe is Lord of all” (in verse 1), and “Christ the Babe was born for you” (verse 2).

Given what we know of Edith Reed’s athletic prowess, my mind pictures a high jumper approaching the crossbar at ever-increasing speed, with great concentration, with ever greater determination until at last, the bar is cleared and still intact, to the jubilation of athlete and audience alike, everyone experiences relief and release and joy. This is just my own flight of fantasy, for in truth, Edith did not compose the music. Yet the music provides such a sensation inside me nonetheless.

Verse 1 pictures the infant Jesus in a cattle stall before animals that are completely unmindful of his true identity: he is Lord of all! Parting the curtain, we’re now clued in that

unseen angels are also present; they surround him and are singing praises as is truly fitting.

Verse 2 depicts some of the other participants in the Christmas drama, the shepherds. These have been roused from their flocks by the angels' "tidings of a gospel true." Unlike the animals, these men, simple though they be, join in the angels' rejoicing, now "free from sorrow" themselves. Yes, the angels have revealed Christ's identity to them, and they have now made personal the joyful message: "Christ the babe was born for you!"

Questions

1. What images come to mind as you sing your favorite Christmas hymns? (Note: *Jingle Bells* is not a Christmas hymn. Neither is *Grandma Got Run over by a Reindeer*.)
2. Have you ever had the sense that you were in the presence of angelic beings?
3. When did you truly grasp the enormity of the notion that Christ the babe was born for *YOU*?

Prayer

Jesus, the simple story of Christmas is so familiar that sometimes I forget how powerful it is when applied personally to my own life. Donkeys, sheep, shepherds – sure, but what has that to do with me? But when I allow the message to build in me into a crescendo of light and power – when I allow your lordship to encompass even me, I am moved. And grateful. Christ the babe, born for me ... Christ the babe, Lord of all, rule in my heart now and forever. Amen.