

“O HUSH THE NOISE, YE MEN OF STRIFE”

The Christmas carol, “It Came Upon the Midnight Clear” is familiar throughout our culture. It was written in 1849 by the Rev. Edmund Hamilton Sears, a Unitarian minister who served the Wayland, Massachusetts, Unitarian Church. With a retiring personality, he nevertheless was a Unitarian evangelist and the author of many books, hymns, and poems. An ardent pacifist, abolitionist, and biblical critic, Sears was always searching for ways to link Christian contemplation with non-violent social justice.

Then in 1849, a fellow Unitarian minister, W. P. Lunt, was looking for an appropriate song for the Sunday School Christmas celebration at his church in Quincy, Massachusetts, and requested that Sears write a new hymn for the season. The result was “It Came Upon the Midnight Clear”, a most Unitarian carol in its emphasis on the ethical message of Jesus more than on the metaphysical systems of theology that swirled around his image. The scholar of hymnology, Percy Dearmer, notes “that most Victorian hymn-books offered little or no application of the social message of Christmas— ‘Peace on earth, good-will toward men.’ The hymns that began to express the teaching of Christ came from New England, and it is notable that this one was written by a Unitarian minister.”

When Sears wrote the carol, war drums were loudly beating and echoing throughout the world. The din of revolution, counter-revolution, and marching armies in Europe during 1848-50 marked the most violent episode since the defeat of Napoleon decades earlier. Much closer to home, the American invasion of Mexico of 1846-47 remained a sharp and shameful recent memory to most religious liberals of the time, and especially to Sears. In these conditions, Sears was moved to say something about the human proclivity for violence to give meaning to the Season fo Peace.

It is unfortunate that today we usually do not sing beyond the first verse of Sears’s carol. Consider this original verse, and we may learn what Sears is trying to tell us.

But with the woes of sin and strife
The world has suffered long;
Beneath the angel-strain have rolled
Two thousand years of wrong;
And man at war with man hears not
The love song which they bring.
O hush the noise, ye men of strife
And hear the angels sing.

Ref.: *Hymns for the Celebration of Life*, p. 456; Mark W. Harris, *Historical Dictionary of Unitarian Universalism* (2004), pp. 423-424.