

While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks



Rarely does a hymn so directly, completely, and poetically emerge straight from scripture. This hymn draws directly on the infancy narrative of Luke 2 of course. Drawing so thoroughly on the biblical language, the various stanzas of this hymn trace through one of the favorite scenes in the Christmas story.

This hymn may not be as familiar to congregations as some of the more often-sung Christmas carols today, but that was not always the case. The hymn was penned by Nahum Tate in 1700. Tate was the son of an Irish clergyman. He moved to London in 1677 and began writing for a living. Best known for his revision of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, Tate also wrote the famous New Version of the Psalms of David, for which he collaborated with Nicholas Brady in 1696.

A supplement to Psalms was released in 1703 which included this hymn, "While Shepherds Watched their Flocks." It was the only Christmas hymn permitted to be sung in the Anglican Church. Prior to 1700, only the psalms were allowed to be sung. Given this context, it is not surprising that the hymn would so completely remain near to the scriptural text. Congregants were accustomed to singing scripture and only singing scripture.

What once must have been virtually a requirement for widespread acceptance is now a breath of fresh air. Most hymns are grounded in the scripture or draw from the imagery of scripture. But most are not so committed to setting the words of scripture to music, nor should they all. But this one does and it is a refreshing and enjoyable song to sing.

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