

“Stories Behind the Hymns”

“Now Thank We All Our God”

In 1617, a young man named Martin Rinkart was named archdeacon in his hometown of Eilenberg, Germany.

He began his pastorate at the start of the terrible Thirty Years’ War, and Eilenberg was within miles of some of its most horrific battles. Within months, refugees were arriving in Eilenberg, desperate for the safety of its city walls. The overcrowding was severe. Once or twice the town was overtaken by various armies, and of course at such times citizens would be routed out of their homes and their foodstores plundered.

In 1636, as Eilenberg began to think the worst was over, Rinkart wrote “Now Thank We All Our God” as a table grace for his children.

But the worst was not over. In 1637 the plague hit Eilenberg, and its weakened population could not fight back. Within weeks, Rinkart was the only pastor left in the entire town, all the others having either died or fled. Over eight thousand people died in Eilenberg that year, and Rinkart officiated at about 4,500 funerals. One terrible day he had over 50 funerals, including that of his own wife. Then partially because there were so few healthy people left to plant crops, a famine ensued, and the people of Eilenberg were starving. Rinkart gave away almost everything he owned, saving only a small portion for his own children, and he mortgaged his future earnings to help his neighbors.

Then the Swedish army came upon Eilenberg again, and demanded an impossible tribute of 30,000 florins. Rinkart led a delegation to see the commanding general, but his pleas fell on deaf ears. Leaving the headquarters, he turned to his companions and said, “Come my children. We can find no mercy with men; let us seek refuge with God.” His ensuing prayer so moved the Swedish general that the tribute was lowered to 2,000 florins, and the town was saved.

Rinkart died in 1648, just one year after peace was declared. In modern Germany his hymn is often part of New Year services.



“We Gather Together”

In the 1550s, the Spanish armies of Phillip II conquered what is now the Netherlands. The Dutch people, mostly Protestant, suffered terribly: Phillip massacred thousands of civilians, imposed heavy taxes on the survivors, and political and economic freedoms were repressed. But the worst indignity, the most bitter pill to swallow, was that Phillip banned Protestantism. Most Dutch people were forbidden from worshipping in their own churches.

Of course, the people rose up against this oppression, but for decades their revolts came to nothing. Finally, in January 1597, Dutch and English forces routed the Spanish at the Battle of Turnhout. After over 40 years of occupation, the Dutch people were finally free.

Adrianus Valerius, a beloved Dutch poet, wrote “We Gather Together” in commemoration of the battle and in gratitude for its outcome.

“We Gather Together” quickly became a Dutch favorite, although for centuries it was thought of more as a folk song than something suitable for church. Dutch immigrants brought the song to America, where its words particularly resonated during the dark days of the Great Depression and World War II. Today the hymn is more well known in the US than in its land of origin.

“Come Ye Thankful People, Come”

In the middle 1800s, the Church of England was facing a crisis. Since the time of Henry VIII, the church had been closely tied to the English government and was known for its emphasis on ceremony and tradition. But by the 1840s, close to half of English citizens were identifying with the Non-Conformist movement—meaning they were Baptists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Methodists, or any number of other Protestant denominations. The Non-Conformists tended to shun religious traditions in favor of Bible study and congregational participation, including the singing of hymns. Tensions between the two groups were high.

In London a few moderate Church of England clergy tried to bridge the gap and introduce Non-Conformist elements in their worship. Rev. Henry Alford, a rector at a rural church outside London, was among them. A talented scholar, he wrote numerous poems based on scripture and incorporated them into hymns for his congregation.

“Come Ye Thankful People, Come,” Alford’s most well-known hymn, was written in 1841 and published a few years later. The language, which seems somewhat formal and stilted to the modern ear, was considered “evangelical” and very different from Church of England standards. The first verse is a celebration of the harvest, with the next verses interpreting scripture (the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares, Matthew 13:24-43). The final verse relates the harvest to the second coming of Christ.

**Thanks to Barbara Pendleton for researching and sharing the stories behind the hymns in our worship service today.*