

December's hymn of the month 2019

**By
Bill Dagle**

It was Christmas Eve of 1816. The English newspaper, *The Iris*, contained a new poem for the Christmas celebration. James Montgomery, its author, entitled the poem, *Nativity*. Born an Irishman in November of 1771, Montgomery should have followed in his missionary parents' steps; but by the time James was 12, they had died on the missionary field. At the age of 23, young James found himself in charge of a newspaper as the owner had fled to America to avoid political imprisonment. Originally hired to write stories for the paper, now he would write editorials.

Montgomery would begin an editorial crusade against the English rule over the Irish. The Irish read the paper for inspiration, while the English read the paper to find condemnation. Twice the young publisher was tossed in jail for his political writings; yet he kept on until that evening of 1816. Instead of dividing with the pen, Montgomery was uniting the Irish and the English with the message of Christmas-- "For God so loved the world." A new revolution was beginning.

It would take another 20 years before this quieter rebellion would be fully felt by the English in their churches. Henry Smart, one of England's first organists and composers, had discovered Montgomery's nativity poem. The Church of England taught that the members were spectators during worship, not participants. Smart felt that worship should be a joyful, corporate experience. To prove his point, Smart composed a musical setting for Montgomery's poem and gave it a new title. Both Montgomery and Smart had fought for freedom with the power of the pen. Now, together, they proclaimed that true freedom is found only in Christ's birth and in our rebirth in Him-- as the world started singing, *Angels from the Realms of Glory*.

**Angels from the realms of glory,
Wing your flight o'er all the earth;
Ye who sang creation's story
Now proclaim Messiah's birth.**

**Shepherds, in the field abiding,
Watching o'er your flocks by night,
God with us is now residing;
Yonder shines the infant light.**

Refrain

**Come and worship, come and worship,
Worship Christ, the new born King.**

Bill Dagle, hymn historian, has been doing the stories behind the hymns since 1992 by way of radio, newspaper features, and personal appearances in local churches in the Northeast. The stories behind the hymns allow the listener and singer to understand the circumstances behind the writing of the hymns and how God has worked in special ways in the past to give us these wonderful songs today.