

“Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas?”
A Sermon delivered by Rev. John Balicki
St. Luke’s Church, Wilton, Maine
Christmas Eve, Dec. 24, 2025

It’s on the top ten list of most popular and most covered Christmas songs of all time. Few remember that the song was written in 1943 which was a difficult year in the history of the United States. Now I know there are a few people here who were alive in 1943 but they couldn’t have been too old then and memories, like hair, may be a little thin. Here’s what marked 1943:

1943 in the U.S. was defined by intense war mobilization, booming defense industries creating jobs but also housing shortages, severe rationing, and significant social shifts, marked by mass migration to industrial centers, increased opportunities for women and minorities, but also explosive racial tensions leading to riots (like in Detroit) and labor strife, all while the nation grappled with the realities of a global war.

So is it any surprise that when Hugh Martin wrote “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas” the lyrics came out like this:

*"Have yourself a merry little Christmas."
"It may be your last."
"Next year we may all be living in the past."
"Have yourself a merry little Christmas."
"Pop that champagne cork."
"Next year we may all be living in New York."
"No good times like the olden days."
"Happy golden days of yore."
"Faithful friends who were dear to us."
"Will be near to us no more."
"But at least we all will be together."
"If the Lord allows."
"From now on, we'll have to muddle through somehow."
"So have yourself a merry little Christmas now."*

What do you think? A little depressing, a bit of a downer? Well it was 1943 after all. The song was written for the movie “Meet Me in St. Louis” and to be sung by its star, Judy Garland. Her reaction, too depressing and if she were to sing them, “Margaret will cry, and they’ll think I’m a monster”.

So a few of the lines got changed. There's biblical precedent for this; the original ending to both Mark's and John's gospels got changed to make them a little more upbeat also. So Hugh Martin changed the second and third lines from "*It may be your last.*" and "*Next year we may all be living in the past.*" to *Let your heart be light. Next year all our troubles will be out of sight* and then changed the second to last line. Instead of "*From now on, we'll have to muddle through somehow.*" He changed it for Judy to "***Until then, we'll have to muddle through somehow***". By 1956 the song had achieved a little popularity, and Frank Sinatra wanted to record it but he wanted it more upbeat so he asked Hugh to "jolly up" that line for his Christmas album. It became the version we might be most familiar with - no more mention of muddling through, "*Hang a shining star upon the highest bough*". Ahh, can't you hear Ol' Blue Eyes crooning right now.

All of which is nothing more than my typically long windup to the first multiple-choice question of the day. And this isn't a public test or vote and you don't even have to share with anyone but here's the question:

On Christmas Eve 2025 are you:

- a. Hugh Martin - just trying to muddle through somehow
- b. Judy - well times aren't really great but I'm sure they'll be better up ahead
- c. Frank - Hey I'm just out there hanging my shining star on my highest bough

And depending on how you answer that question leads to the next question, what brought you here tonight? Let's look at some possible answers to that question:

- a. I'm just here because my parents/grandparents/significant other/friend dragged me here and how much longer do we have until we can get to the real Christmas cheer?
- b. This is part of Christmas tradition - church and carols go with gifts and family and decorating and cards - it's part of the package
- c. I came looking for some meaning to help sort out something in my life and my place in the world

So if you're in the a. group, hang in there you've got three more minutes of sermon. If you're b., the question is what part of Christmas tradition still has meaning and what's "well, we always do this". When asked in 2006, the 90 year-old Hugh Martin said,

"I'm really upset by Christmas now. I just hate the Santa Claus and the jingle bells and reindeer, and the wrapped packages and the holiday push. I hate all of that"

His most enduring Christmas memory was when he was six years old watching his mother decorate the tree. "She was a very artistic woman, and she did sensational Christmas trees. So it was a real joy of the year when she would decorate it".

So perhaps there's a Christmas memory, a Christmas joy, whether from childhood or whatever age that you are still chasing, hoping to recreate. Will you find it here? I don't know. Later in your Christmas Eve or Christmas Day traditions? I don't know.

If you are part of the c.) group looking for meaning, what you will find here if you are open, if you can hear it, is the message of what happened in a small village in Palestine known as Bethlehem. We tell a story in word and song that is told in untold Christian churches and homes around the globe. You know that story well. But think of it as the invisible made visible. We put so much glamour into our Christmas celebrations, both religious and secular if you care to make a distinction; we are so like our narcissistic culture, that perhaps we fail to remember how invisible this event was. A young unmarried couple far from their home territory, a stable, a few shepherds, the height of invisibility. And perhaps in all the glamor we fail to remember that it's the mystery of the incarnation we celebrate (a word you might fail to see in not only all of Walmart but also in our cards and carols). What it means is the invisible becomes visible, God takes on human flesh with all its messy implications, Jesus too is a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids. Which then means that all flesh is sacred. All flesh – independent of age, of ethnicity, of race, of gender or non-gender, independent of immigration status. All life, all people.

Will knowing that make our Christmas merry and bright? Probably not. It will hopefully make it meaningful and sacred if perhaps counter-cultural. As we heard in the epistle today, "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all". All.

Now that's a word you can make a star out of and hang on your highest bough. Amen.

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