



## Good King Wenceslas

*Bless the Lord who crowns you with tender mercies (Psalm 103, NKJV).*

It is fitting that Christmas carols feature a silent night and a baby away in a manger in a little town of Bethlehem. But Good King Wenceslas? Who on earth is he? Why would a Christmas carol feature an obscure tenth-century Bohemian king?

There is no direct link between the story of this obscure “king” and the King of Kings for whom we celebrate the Christmas season. The nativity story is absent. That fact alone may explain why the carol is not on the top-ten old-time Christmas-carol list. Nor is the song suitable for jolly carolers strolling door-to-door singing the first verses of only the most familiar tunes. Its complex lyrics tell a simple story, though not one that is easily memorized.

Even though the story is based on legend, I confess, this is one of my favorite carols. In fact, Wenceslas was not actually a king. He was a Duke of Bohemia—now part of the Czech Republic. Born in 903, to a Christian Duke and a pagan mother, he was determined to follow the faith of his father. But when Wenceslas was fifteen, his father died and his mother took the reigns of power, persecuting Christians—even ordering the assassination of his Christian grandmother.

But, the people rebelled and demanded that Wenceslas become their ruler. He did, and he subsequently made Christianity the official state religion. He is remembered for building churches and inviting missionaries to come and teach his people—and for helping the poor, including a poor man who was gathering wood.

Here in this song we find a servant king leading the way through a blizzard when he might have enjoyed his wealth and warmth or feasted in frivolity and turned his back on one more instance of hardship. Or, he might have sent his page alone on this mission of good will:

*Good King Wenceslas looked out  
On the feast of Stephen,  
When the snow lay round about  
Deep and crisp and even.  
Brightly shone the moon that night  
Though the frost was cruel,  
When a poor man came in sight  
Gath'ring winter fuel.*

The king learns that the poor man lives far away “underneath the mountain...against the forest.” They secure food, wine and firewood and trudge off through the “bitter weather.” When the page “can go no longer,” the king tells him to walk in his footsteps. The last verse powerfully depicts servant leadership.

*In his master's steps he trod  
Where the snow lay dinted.  
Heat was in the very sod  
Which the Saint had printed.  
Therefore, Christian men, be sure  
Wealth or rank possessing,  
Ye who now will bless the poor  
Shall yourselves find blessing.*

My husband and I enjoy visiting country churches in our travels. One of our favorites is only a dozen miles away from our little get-away farm house in northern Michigan. St. Wenceslas Church was built by Bohemian settlers more than a hundred years ago. We wander inside, through the parish grounds and cemetery—all named for a legendary saint of more than a thousand years ago.

Legend or no, the carol written to his memory is a story of goodness—goodness found on the highest level of society. King Wenceslas certainly could have ordered someone to carry out the good deed. Rather, he endured the hardship in order to enjoy the privilege of offering a tender mercy in person.

*Ye who now will bless the poor  
Shall yourselves find blessing. □*

—Ruth A. Tucker

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