

Hark! The Herald Angels Sing

Luke 2:13-14

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If you'd take your hymnals in hand and turn with me to No. 203, we'll look at the text of this hymn that the choir has so beautifully sung, and we'll consider it before we read the passage upon which it is based. We're going to be looking at Luke 2, verses 13 and 14, and this carol by Charles Wesley, one of the many hundreds of carols that he wrote, is one of the best hymns ever written. It's reckoned by many hymnologists to be among the three or four best hymns ever written. It was certainly one of the most popular hymns in Protestant hymnals in the middle part of the twentieth century. A survey was done of some 60 or 65 different Protestant denominational hymnals, and this particular hymn occurred in almost every single one of them. It was known in a variety of traditions, and it is rich in terms of its content.

We've been looking at "Songs of Christmas" all month long, and we've been doing it with at least three goals in mind: the first has been for you to understand these carols, these familiar and beloved, these beautiful and scriptural carols--some of which you have memorized long, long ago--to help you understand them better; and a number of you have said to Derek and to me throughout the month, "I never realized that about that particular hymn" or "I never realized that about that line." Well, that's exactly what we want you to do. We want you to understand these carols better.

Secondly, however, we want these carols to serve as a window onto the biblical story. We want you to appreciate the truths of Scripture that are being highlighted by these carols, and use these carols as a doorway or a window onto those biblical truths.

But, ultimately, we want the Scripture itself to illumine our singing of these carols, our using of these carols as praise to sing to God. And so this morning, let's begin by looking through, phrase by phrase, the three stanzas which we have in our hymnal of Wesley's hymn, "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing."

Now, in your bulletin you will notice that when he originally wrote this hymn it came in ten stanzas. Given that I have 26 points to make about the three stanzas in our hymnal, you will be glad to know that our hymnal does not have the

original ten stanzas! But you'll also note that in the very first line it's a little bit different: "Hark, how all the welkin rings...." Now there are probably a few "dictionariophiles" here in the building that know what a *welkin* is, or what *welkin* means, but for those who haven't been reading your OED before you fall asleep at night, let me just clue you in. The *welkin* refers not only to the skies and to the celestial world beyond, but to the abode of God. And so when Wesley originally writes, "Hark, how all the welkin rings...." he is speaking of the totality of the inhabited universe giving glory to God, including that part of the universe in which God Himself is the occupant. So it's a beautiful expression of the totality of the universe, the cosmos, and creation. But apparently somewhere along the line, there was someone who said to Wesley, 'Maybe you want to make that a little more simple, so that us ordinary mortals can understand,' and it became "Hark! The herald angels sing...."

Well, let's work through stanza by stanza what Wesley is telling us. I want you to notice, in the first stanza, the first four phrases are descriptions to us of the messengers and the message; and the second four phrases in that first stanza are Wesley's exhortations to us as to how we ought to respond to the messengers and the message.

First, he begins by calling us to hark, as the herald angels sing. In other words, he's saying listen to these divine messengers, these angels that God has sent as heralds. Listen to what they are saying.

He is, of course, drawing this from Luke, chapter two, verse thirteen, which tells us that after that angel had told the shepherds what was going on in Bethlehem, that that angel was joined by a multitude of the heavenly host who were praising God; and so, he is drawing this line from Luke 2:13. But he's asking you to listen carefully to the messengers and to the message that they are bringing.

And then in the second phrase, he tells you what that message is: "Glory to the newborn King." In other words, he's saying, 'Listen: those divine messengers, those herald angels, are announcing the birth of a king, who is *the* King. And of course he's basing this on Luke 2:14. This is the message that that host of angels sang before the shepherds.

Then he says "Peace on earth, and mercy mild." Again, he's elaborating on this message that was brought by the angels to the shepherds, and he's telling us that this King's heralds, this King's messengers, are not bringing a message of war, but a message of peace. They're not announcing a message of condemnation and judgment, but a message of mercy.

And then he explains exactly what kind of peace and mercy he has in mind in the next phrase: "God and sinners reconciled." That is, that this peace and mercy about which the previous phrase speaks, this peace and mercy consists in the reconciliation of God and sinners accomplished through the birth of this King.

Now: the first four phrases have described for you the messengers and their message; now the next four phrases in stanza one will exhort us to respond to that message. Notice what Wesley says to us next: “Joyful, all ye nations, rise....” He’s saying this: Our response to this kind of a message is to stand up in joyous awe and praise of God. In the Scriptures, when someone comes into the presence of God, they rise—and very often they take off their shoes, in humble adoration, in awe of the presence of the Almighty God. Well, Wesley calls on all the nations to stand up!

And, join in the joyous awe of the God who has sent this message. “Join the triumph of the skies” is his next phrase. By that he means that we are to join...all the nations are to join in this triumph of Christ that is being announced in the Palestinian night sky. Respond to this in faith, in trust, in belief, and join the triumph that is being announced by these angels in the skies.

“With the angelic host proclaim...” is his next phrase. He says: Indeed, you’re not only to join with them, but with them in your hearts and voices you are to join those angelic company, and you are to declare what they are declaring.

And what are they declaring? Well, he tells you in the next phrase: “Christ is born in Bethlehem!” This is the first time he uses the word “Christ,” which is simply the English version of the Greek name for the Old Testament Messiah. When you see “Christ,” that is the English version for the Greek name for the Old Testament Messiah, and so what he is saying is this: that this host is proclaiming that the Messiah has been born for our salvation in the City of David (Bethlehem), just where God had prophesied it more than 600 years beforehand through the prophet Micah.

So there’s the first stanza, chock full of truth. But then we have a refrain, when set to Mendelssohn’s beautiful tune. And the refrain is the same phrase as the first two phrases of the first stanza, but now they function a little bit differently. When we sang them first, we are singing Wesley’s description to us of the message and the messengers. The second time we sing them (and, indeed, each time we sing them from now on in the refrain), we are singing them back to God in response to what Wesley has revealed about Christ, about the message, and about the messengers. And so now the refrain serves to express our own praise to God for the glorious gift of the Messiah, and when we sing “Glory to the newborn King!” we are confessing that the focus of our hearts and lives ought to be on giving God glory. Well, there’s the first stanza.

Let’s look at the second stanza. He begins, “Christ, by highest heaven adored....” The next two stanzas are going to be almost wholly taken up with a focus upon the person and work of Jesus Christ. “Christ, by highest heaven adored....” What Wesley is asking you to do in the second stanza is consider who it is whose birth is being announced. And he begins by saying, ‘It’s the Messiah’s birth: Christ.’

But he doesn't stop there. He says, 'This Messiah is adored by highest heaven.' In other words, this Messiah is worshipped by the greatest created beings in the world. He's saying, 'Think of it! This babe in a manger in Bethlehem has been adored by the greatest created beings that exist. They worship Him: Christ, the everlasting Lord.' What's he saying? That this Messiah is no mere earthly king; rather, He is the incarnate eternal Lord of the universe.

Then he goes on to say, "Late in time behold Him come..." He's not saying that Jesus was late showing up; he's not saying that He missed His schedule. He's saying that now, after many hundreds of years of His people's waiting, at the right time, the time of God's appointment, He has come into this world: "...offspring of the Virgin's womb." He's come into this world in the most remarkable way. He's been brought into this world through a young virgin.

And then he says, "Veiled in flesh the Godhead see..." In other words, he says when you look at Jesus, when you consider Jesus, in Him you behold the Godhead. Now, the *Godhead*, or *Godhead*, is an English word that translates a Greek word that has in it the idea of the fullness of deity. *Godhead* refers to the fullness of what it means to be God, and so when he says "...veiled in flesh the Godhead see..." he means that in Him, in Jesus Christ, you behold the Godhead: the fullness of deity in bodily form.

"Hail the incarnate Deity..." is his next phrase. In other words, he says 'So when you greet Him, when you hail Him, when you honor Him, when you acclaim Him, when you acknowledge Him; when you do so, own Him as God in the flesh, as the incarnate Deity. Own Him as not only the Savior of sinners, but as the Son of God incarnate.

"Pleased as man with men to dwell..." is his next line. He's saying here that Christ in His mercy has been pleased—that is, He has chosen of His own will—to dwell with us, like us, in a fallen world, as a human being. You remember in the Old Testament in II Samuel 7 when David tells the Lord that he wants to build a temple for Him? And the Lord says to David, 'David, ever since My people Israel were wandering in the wilderness, leaving Egypt on the way to the land of Canaan...did I ever ask them to build Me a temple? No. I dwelt with them in a tent.'

Why? Well, they were in tents! They were nomads, they were wandering in the wilderness; and when God commanded a place to be built that would represent His tangible presence with His people, what did He ask for? A tent. It was beautiful; it was expensive; it was elaborate; but it was a tent! And so the Lord says to David, 'When My people were in tents, I came and dwelled in a big tent right in the middle of them!' It's a glorious passage, when He says that to David.

Well, you see, Jesus does something even greater than that. He comes and dwells with us as a human, as the God-man, fully inhabiting our experience,

living among us as one of us. “Pleased as man with men to dwell....”

And then finally...have you noticed it? It's the first time in this carol that the name “Jesus” is mentioned. You're all the way into the eighth phrase of the second stanza before it's finally named: “Jesus, our Emmanuel.” Oh, you've been introduced to Him as the King and as the Messiah, and as the incarnate Deity; but now His name is given: Jesus. His name is Jesus, for He's His people's Savior, and He is literally, Wesley reminds us, Emmanuel: God with us.

And then comes the refrain, and once again that refrain serves to allow you to express your praise to God for this glorious gift of Jesus Christ, His incarnate Son.

Then comes the third stanza, again all about Jesus Christ: “Hail the heavenly Prince of Peace!” Wesley is taking you all the way back to Isaiah 9:6, where the Messiah is described (among other things) as the Prince of Peace; and he's saying when you hail Jesus— when you acclaim Jesus, when you honor Jesus, acclaim him— acclaim Jesus the Messiah as the Prince of Peace who was prophesied by Isaiah.

And when you hail Jesus, hail Him as the Son of Righteousness, he says in the next phrase. There, he's going back to Malachi 4:2a, the first part of Malachi 4:2, and he's saying that Jesus the Messiah is the Son of Righteousness prophesied by Malachi.

And when you hail Jesus, acknowledge that “Light and life to all He brings....”— and of course Wesley is going back to John 1:4, a passage you'll hear read tonight during the *Lessons and Carols of Christmas*, where John reminds us that He was the light of the world and the life of men—a phrase in John 1:4 that actually goes all the way back to Psalm 27:1, when the psalmist says that “the Lord is my light and my salvation, and He is my life.”

Then he says “...risen with healing in His wings.” He's back to Malachi 4:2b this time, the second half of verse 2 where the Son of Righteousness is described as rising with healing in His wings.

Then in the next phrase, “Mild He lays His glory by...” Wesley interprets for us Philippians 2:7 as briefly and as accurately as you can do it. You remember Philippians 2:7? That “...He emptied Himself and made Himself of no reputation” on our behalf... “Mild He lays His glory by...”

And then the next three phrases tell you three reasons why Jesus was born. He was born that man no more may die. In other words, Jesus was born to remove the curse brought by Adam's sin and ours. What was that curse? Paul says, “...the wages of sin is death”, so He was born to remove the curse brought by Adam's sin and ours. The wages of sin: death...so “that man no more may die.”

Secondly, He was “born to raise the sons of earth...” He was born to raise us to newness of life, as Romans 6 says. He was born to raise us so that we would be resurrected to eternal life, as I Corinthians 15 tells us; and, He was “born to give them second birth”; that is, Jesus was born that we might be born again, that we might be regenerated, that we might be renewed and transformed. And then we sing the refrain again.

Well, there it is: twenty-six points out of the three stanzas of “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing.” We've already looked at Wesley's “Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus,” and now this one...we see how packed every phrase, every line of these glorious carols are.

Now we turn to the word of God, so let me ask you to turn very briefly to Luke 2:13,14. Let's look to God in prayer as we do so.

Lord, we love this beautiful carol, and we thank You that it is so shot through with biblical truth. But what we are about to read now is not merely beautiful poetry written by a human author of amazing imagination and inspiration. We are about to read the very words of God, inspired by the Holy Spirit and given through the human instrument of Luke. We pray, O God, then, that we would listen to these words for what they are: they are the very word of God to us. Bless our reading and hearing of them, in Jesus' name. Amen.

“And suddenly three appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying,

‘Glory to God in the highest,
And on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased.’”

Amen. And thus ends this reading of God's holy, inspired, and inerrant word. May He write its eternal truth upon our hearts.

I. What are the angels busy doing?

Just three things I want you to see in that very rich passage, and the first thing is this: did you notice what the angels are busying themselves with doing? These angels are busying themselves with the praise of God. The very thought of the incarnation of the Son of God has set these angels singing. They cannot help but praise God.

Well, let me ask you a question: What are you busying yourself with this season? Now, there are a lot of us here who are concerned that we are too busy, that we're too busy getting ready for this, or getting ready to give something, or getting ready to get something, or getting ready to entertain someone; or we're

too preoccupied with somebody that we're not going to entertain, or that we are going to entertain; or with some problem in our family; and we're crushed down by the rapidness and the squeeze of the season, and we're wondering whether our priorities are right. And maybe this is the third or fourth, or tenth, or fifteenth Christmas that we've wondered that. Well, what were the angels busying themselves with? They were busying themselves with the praise of God. So, what should you be busying yourself with this season? The praise of God. There's nothing more important than the praise of God, and if that isn't your priority this season, I suggest you adopt an angelic priority: the praise of God.

II. The message of redemption is all about God's glory.

Now, what were they doing? Well, they were giving us a message, and that message was "Glory to God in the highest"; and that reminds us of a second thing: this message of redemption is all about God's glory. Think of it: God's redemption of His people is all about God's glory. You know, we can look at this gospel story of Christ's coming in the world, and we can still be man-centered about it. We can think that it's all about us, but the angels are telling us that God's redemption of us is all about His glory; and the reason is because everything is about His glory! Those of us who've grown up on *The Shorter Catechism* were taught to believe that the chief reason that we are here is to glorify and enjoy God forever. And these angels are reminding us that even as Jesus comes into the world on a rescue project to save men and women and boys and girls, it's all about God's glory.

So how are we living life outside of this room? Are we living it for God's glory? Students who are finished with exams and looking to get into some trouble, are you living life for God's glory? Adults who are facing a Christmas season without someone you know and love, filled with hurt and doubt, are you living for God's glory? People who have so much and enjoy the satisfactions that this world can afford, but have squeezed God out to the side to the periphery, are you living for God's glory? These angels are announcing that it's all about God's glory. In this season of all seasons, does our life really say that it's all about God's glory?

III. Peace on earth among men with whom He is pleased.

Thirdly and finally, notice that very interesting phrase at the end of verse 14: "Peace on earth among men with whom He is pleased." Now, many of you will remember the King James: "Peace on earth, good will towards men." But many of you will have other translations in front of you, and they all will say something a little bit different. Some of them will say something like this: "Peace towards those upon whom God's favor rests." And some will say: "Peace towards men of good will." And some will say: "Peace towards men with whom God is well pleased."

It's difficult to know exactly how to translate the phrase, but you see what all of those modern translations are getting at: this is not a generic announcement. This is an announcement for people who believe the message. It is not that there is peace for everyone. No. Those who are indifferent to this announcement, those who are indifferent to this Christ, to this Savior, there is no peace and joy for them.

This peace is only for those on whom God's favor rests, for those who have rested and trusted in Jesus Christ alone for salvation as He is offered in the gospel. And so don't go through this Christmas season, with all its sentiment and all its memories, without embracing the only One who can give you peace on this earth and forevermore: Jesus, the Christ.

Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, as we sing together these beautiful words, grant that we would sing them understanding and believing what we sing; and that above all, we would trust in the only One—and live for the only One—who can give us peace. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Grace, mercy and peace to you....

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