

CHRISTMAS CAROLS WE HAVE LOVED

Part 2: Hark! The Herald Angels Sing

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Presented at Trinity Community Church, San Rafael, California, on Sunday, December 9, 2007

Christmas carols. In spite of our familiarity with these age-old songs, even we sing them in church, we seldom stop to think about what they really mean.

Therefore, this month, we're considering the history and meaning of some of our favorite Christmas carols, that they may shed fresh light on the grandest Story of all time.

Background

"Hark! The Herald Angels Sing" was written almost 270 years ago by Charles Wesley, an Anglican Priest, who with his older brother John, founded the Methodist Church. Charles was born in England in this month, exactly 300 years ago, the 18th and last child of his parents, Samuel and Susanna.

Though Charles was ordained a deacon in the Church of England when he was 28 years old, it was not until three years later that he was actually converted to genuine faith in Christ and is said to have found "rest to his soul."

He wrote over 5,500 hymns, as he traveled with his brother to establish and support the Methodist movement in Britain and America, including the widely known "Christ the Lord is Risen Today" and "O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing." His hymns cite all but four books of the Bible.

"Hark! The Herald Angels Sing" was first published with *ten* stanzas. Wesley, a somber man, requested that it be sung in a slow and solemn manner and originally hoped his lyrics would be sung to the same tune as his Easter hymn, "Christ the Lord is Risen Today." It was not until 100 years had passed that Felix Mendelssohn composed the tune that was later adapted by another musician to fit Wesley's lyrics, as we know them today.

The Proclamation

The first verse recounts the angelic announcement to the shepherds in the fields near Bethlehem. Without the details of the story or its cast of characters, we are drawn immediately into the proclamation itself.

*Hark! The herald angels sing
"Glory to the new-born King!
Peace on earth and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled!"
Joyful, all ye nations, rise,
join the triumph of the skies;
with the angelic host proclaim,
"Christ is born in Bethlehem!"
Hark! The herald angels sing
"Glory to the new-born King!"*

Listen! The angel messengers are singing!

“Herald angels” are those who have been given a message to declare. And when Jesus was born, to the astonishment of the shepherds, that’s just what they did!

The shepherds *“were terrified, but the angel reassured them. “Don’t be afraid!” he said. “I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David!”* (Luke 2:9-11)

“Glory to the new-born King!” they shouted. Because the result of His coming would be the reconciliation between God and man.

God’s divorce from His creation, we are told, began in Eden’s Garden, when Adam and Eve chose to do things their own way (without God) for the first time. Realizing what they had done, they hid themselves for a time, followed by the usual presentation of excuses and blame-shifting, until God pronounced His judgment. With that sentence He also prescribed the way back into His favor — a way that He Himself would provide — as He informed the provocateur, the serpent:

Genesis 3:15 “I will cause hostility between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring. He will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.”

So, in due time — for the passage of time means little to the Eternal God — He raised up His Champion, Jesus Christ, to “crush the serpent’s head” (that is, to nullify his power) and confirm our faith connection with God. Apostle Paul explained:

Colossians 1:19 For God in all his fullness was pleased to live in Christ,²⁰ and through him God reconciled everything to himself. He made peace with everything in heaven and on earth by means of Christ’s blood on the cross.²¹ This includes you who were once far away from God. You were his enemies, separated from him by your evil thoughts and actions.²² Yet now he has reconciled you to himself through the death of Christ in his physical body. As a result, he has brought you into his own presence, and you are holy and blameless as you stand before him without a single fault.

Reconciliation means to bring together, to re-establish harmonious relations. This is what Christ has done through His sacrificial offering; it is for this purpose that He was born.

Then, the song writer calls people everywhere to acknowledge what God has done and join the angels’ song of heavenly triumph. Christ’s birth was a triumph enacted from heaven and a triumph that was to impact heaven itself.

Hebrews 9:22 In fact, according to the law of Moses, nearly everything was purified with blood. For without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness.

²³ *That is why the Tabernacle and everything in it, which were copies of things in heaven, had to be purified by the blood of animals. But the real things in heaven had to be purified with far better sacrifices than the blood of animals.*

²⁶ *Now, once for all time, [Christ] has appeared at the end of the age to remove sin by his own death as a sacrifice.*

Not only the earth, but also the heavens benefited from this marvelous plan!

The Incarnation

The second verse reveals the surprising means of achieving this universal triumph.

*Christ, by highest heaven adored;
Christ, the everlasting Lord;
Late in time, behold Him come,
Offspring of the Virgin's womb.
Veiled in flesh, the Godhead see;
Hail the incarnate Deity!
Pleased as man with men to dwell,
Jesus, our Emmanuel!
Hark! The herald angels sing
"Glory to the new-born King!"*

Wonder is a primary element of real Christmas celebration, because, on that first Christmas, God lovingly invaded the realm of humankind. The Great Creator became one with His beloved creation. The Mighty God became an infant.

*Christ, by highest heaven adored;
Christ, the everlasting Lord;
Late in time, behold Him come,
Offspring of the Virgin's womb.*

Isaiah had long before predicted with stunning accuracy the miracle that was to take place:
Isaiah 7:14 *The Lord himself will give you the sign. Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel (which means 'God is with us').*

Many have doubted the story because of the sheer miraculousness of it — a virgin conceiving a child — yet it was the reasonable way for God to thoroughly identify with us in our vulnerability and pain. To appear as a full-grown man would be amazing, but would lack the depth of empathic identification that Christ expressed and by which He became our heavenly Scapegoat, our Substitute, our Deliverer.

Wesley calls us to see with eyes of faith, beyond the veiled barrier of human flesh — to recognize that Jesus was (and is) God, with us.

The Purpose

Christ's incarnation — His in-fleshness — was more than just amazing, it was purposeful. The incarnation was simply a means to the end God had in mind.

*Hail, the heaven-born Prince of Peace!
Hail, the Son of Righteousness!
Light and life to all He brings,
Risen with healing in His wings,
Mild He lays His glory by,
Born that man no more may die,
Born to raise the sons of earth,
Born to give them second birth*

*Hark! The herald angels sing
"Glory to the new-born King!"*

Isaiah (9:6) prophesied: *"Unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."* Jesus is the "heaven-born Prince of Peace" who restored our peace with God and brings to our hearts the peace of God.

Apostle John described how the God the Word became flesh and *"gave life to everything that was created, and his life brought light to everyone. That light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it."* (John 1:4-5)

Malachi (4:2) prophesied: *"To you who fear My name The Sun of Righteousness shall arise with healing in His wings."* Jesus is that protecting Healer.

Yet, all that glory and wondrous power was concealed in the flesh of an infant, a child, a boy, a man. It was God's plan to enter from the outside and to achieve great things from the inside out. Paul reflected on this transition:

Philippians 2:6 *Though [Christ] was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to.⁷ Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. When he appeared in human form,⁸ he humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal's death on a cross.*

⁹ *Therefore, God elevated him to the place of highest honor and gave him the name above all other names,*

¹⁰ *that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,¹¹ and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

As the hymn writer attests, Jesus Christ was born — God in human flesh — to achieve three things:

- To conquer the power of the fear of death (this is the father of all other fears that we experience)
- To take many people to Heaven (populate heaven with forgiven souls)
- To give humankind a new spiritual birth (the necessary requisite for a heavenly life)

The Prayer

The final verse that we usually sing is really a prayer, an invitation to God to have His way — bring His loving salvation — in our lives.

It recognizes Him as the true Desire of all people — whether they know His name to call on Him or not. Many are aware only of their own deep need, with no notion that a real Helper exists for them. Consumed by their perplexity or misery, they fail to recognize that there is a Helper — a Healer, a Forgiver, a Savior — who stands ready to respond when they turn to Him with their hearts.

So Wesley kindly puts words in our mouths to invite Christ to be born again in us:

Fix in us Thy humble home

This new birth, which Jesus promised to those who would ask Him, achieves three vital (lifegiving) things:

- He crushes the head of satan
Paul advised: *“I want you to be wise in doing right and to stay innocent of any wrong. The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.”* (Romans 16:19-20)
- He transforms us in His own image
Paul revealed that God *“predestined [us] to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.”* (Romans 8:29)
- He restores us to the love of God the Father
Jesus confided: *“The Father himself loves you dearly because you love me and believe that I came from God.”* (John 16:27)

Take up the powerful words of this closing verse today, and with your own voice invite Jesus the King to come and accomplish His glorious plan of transforming salvation in your life — to break sin’s headlock, to create a right spirit within you, and to baptize you in His unfailing love. Make it *your* prayer today.

*Come, Desire of nations, come
Fix in us Thy humble home
Rise, the Woman’s conquering Seed,
Bruise in us the serpent’s head
Adam’s likeness now efface;
Stamp Thine image in its place
Second Adam, from above,
Reinstate us in Thy love
Hark! The herald angels sing
“Glory to the new-born King!”*