

December 4, 2016: Singing the Story of Christmas: It Came Upon the Midnight Clear

So is anyone sick of Christmas music yet? Here we are – the first week in December – the second week of Advent – with plenty of waiting yet to do --- and I'm sure some of you can't wait to be done with the holidays! For those humbugs out there, we love you anyway!, and bear with those of us who are Christmas-lovers basking in the glow of the twinkling lights, surrounded by the music of the season! As we prepare our hearts to welcome Christ once again, we will be listening for God's message of love and hope woven into some of our beloved Christmas carols. And maybe, this deep listening will help you hear these beloved, old songs in fresh, new ways. Last week, we dug into the Advent favorite, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" and wrestled with what it is we are longing for in our faith journey. This week, we turn to "It Came Upon The Midnight Clear" to hear with fresh ears and open hearts God's words for us through song.

Despite being penned in 1849, the words of this carol are as poignant and contemporary today as the day they were written. Instead of focusing on Bethlehem and the details of the nativity scene, this poem draws our attention instead to the message of the angels that night. "Peace on the earth, good will to men, From Heaven's all gracious King." These words are familiar to anyone who has heard the Christmas account found in Luke 2, specifically verse 14. While the song's first verse lays out the scene of the angels "bending near the earth" on that midnight clear, each of the following verses brings us to the angels whose heavenly music still "floats o'er all the weary world." This carol is not so much about the "little baby Jesus" as it is about the anticipation of the promised peace of Christ and the difference this peace would make in the world, if we would just listen to the angels' song.

The carol's words were written in Wayland, Massachusetts in 1849, by the Rev. Dr. Edmond Sears, a Unitarian minister – which helps to explain why you don't see the names, "Christ" or "Jesus" anywhere in this carol. Though it would be another decade before the civil war tore the US apart, the debate over slavery was raging and the recently concluded Mexican American war was still on the hearts of the Northern dissenters. His poem spells out a call for peace and goodwill that echoes as "solemnly and stilly" (and some would say futilely) as the call that resounded in his time, and still resounds today. Nowhere is Sears' message more obvious than in the poem's third verse, one that has been left out of contemporary hymnals and all but forgotten.

Yet with the woes of sin and strife
The world hath suffered long;
Beneath the angel-strain have rolled
Two thousand years of wrong;
And man, at war with man, hears not
The love song which they bring:
O hush the noise, ye men of strife,
And hear the angels sing!

Sears didn't start from scratch when he wrote this hymn. Fifteen years earlier, he had written a poem entitled, "Calm on the Listening Ear." Based on the same concept – the song of the angels – but it presented the more common idealized response to Christ's coming. The only echo of disquiet in those original lyrics is formed as a question in the last verse: "This day shall Christian tongues be mute, And Christian hearts be cold?" After witnessing 15 years of ministry and war, social struggles all around him, he pulled that poem from his files, made some revisions, and *It Came Upon the Midnight Clear* was born.

Not only do the words of this hymn speak of the call for peace amidst a world warring with each other, but it speaks to the social unrest of his time as well. The California Gold Rush was creating excitement, but was also disrupting the lives of men and women caught up in Gold Fever. The Industrial Revolution was pulling people from their small, marginal farms to the cities, where they often just exchanged one form of poverty for another. Sears was clearly concerned about the world unfolding around him: wars for independence were being brutally crushed, economic depression, slavery, the Cherokee Trail of Tears, child labor. And, of course, the tensions over slavery, which would soon plunge the nation into its most terrible war, were already present.

As he struggled to write his Christmas eve sermon that year, "it was the poverty and the hopelessness of the people he touched in the slums that sickened his heart and blocked his progress. He must have wondered how he could write about the Light of the world when the world seemed so very dark." [\(link\)](#) There was something about to whom the angels announced the birth that inspired him. The angels came to the lowly, the marginalized – the shepherds. And in his mind, they come and sing over us still today. As a minister deeply committed to social causes he understood the importance of hope, the importance of purpose – the importance of trusting that things can and will get better.

It was in that troubled and hopeful context that Sears wrote this hymn that emphasizes peace as a gift from "heaven's all-gracious king" (v. 1). He portrays angels bringing peace to a still-weary world—angels hovering above "sad and lowly plains" (v. 2). The current stanza three in our hymnal poignantly articulates the situation of so many with images of those "beneath life's crushing load, whose forms are bending low, who toil along the climbing way with painful steps and slow...." The second half of this stanza offers hope that the song of the "blessed angels" who "bend on hovering wings" would soothe the "Babel sounds" of a suffering world.

Now in the mid-19th century, industrialization was on the rise. The railways and factories were built. With industrialization came a different kind of hardship for workers. So when Sears refers to the "Babel sounds", we may think of factory noises. And the words "above its sad and lowly pains," and "beneath life's crushing load, whose forms are bending low" all of a sudden have a much more concrete meaning – we can picture the factory workers, bodies bent beneath the loads they bore. This Christmas carol is supposed to bring hope to those who suffer daily strife – hope, that, above and through it all, the angels continue to sing their song, even and especially for those who are marginalized and kept at the bottom of society.

As the carol reaches its conclusion, we are presented with a concept to ponder and reflect upon. "And ever over its Babel sounds the blessed angels sing." This angelic message of "peace on earth, goodwill to men" is ever over us - still ringing today, but the question is, do we hear the message? There are so many things that seem to get in our way. In the day of Rev. Sears, it was the war and social unrest and injustice. What gets in the way of the angel song today? Our own trouble, our busy schedules and our dreams and desires of getting ahead and making a name for ourselves become obstacles to the joyous news the angels bring.

Most of our Christmas carols bring about warm and fuzzy feelings, bringing back memories with a few simple notes, but Rev. Sears would be rolling in his grave if he thought that's all his Christmas poem amounted to. His words were not intended to create a warm feeling in your heart; they were intended to light a fire - to stir you to open yourself to a new way of being in the world. There are moments when we realize the message of peace has not yet been fully realized on earth. Then we sing "It came upon the midnight clear," and the power of the Incarnation and the message of the gospel touch us even more deeply. When he wrote, "rest beside the weary road, And hear the angels sing," he was not hoping that we would get lost in a melancholy daydream about Christmas celebrations of old, but that we would open our hearts and therefore our lives to the persistent angel-song, the intervention of divine grace - grace that would change us, remake us, and lead us out of the darkness of stale routine and carelessness and into the light of generosity, forgiveness, and acts of love.

May it be so this Christmas! As we bustle about the house and the stores, making our preparations - may we all slow down a little - hush the noise and cease the strife. Let the warring hatred that divides and pits us against one another be set aside so we may listen together to the angels sing of peace and goodwill. Let our hearts be inspired by the angels' song, and this Christmas, may we find peace over all the earth, and the whole world give back the song which now the angels sing. Amen!