

December 18, 2016: Singing the Story of Christmas: Hark! The Herald Angels Sing

Each week of Advent, the four weeks leading up to Christmas, we've spent time unpacking a beloved Christmas carol, learning about its history and discovering again, or maybe for the first time, the deep meaning behind its words. We've delved into "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel," "It Came Upon the Midnight Clear," and "Love Came Down at Christmas," and have one more carol left after today – Christmas Eve's favorite "Silent Night."

This morning's focus song, "Hark! the Herald Angels Sing" is one of the most popular Christmas carols today, and the favorite of many. It can be heard in both of the classic films *It's a Wonderful Life* and *A Charlie Brown Christmas* – which could explain how it is so well known, both in and outside the church. While the combination of the words and the notes draw us into its triumphant energy, I would guess that most people haven't stopped to listen to the meaning of its words in quite some time. Before we do that though, let's do a little digging into the song's creation story.

Charles Wesley was the youngest of eighteen children. Many of you have heard of his older brother, John Wesley, the founder of Methodism. One of the things that Charles was able to do, in a magnificent way, was combine highly poetic lyrics with high theology. English hymnist, Eric Routley, said this about Wesley's songs, "These hymns were composed in order that men and women might sing their way, not only into experience, but also into knowledge." They were the means through which theology and religious concepts were taught. Charles Wesley is known for teaching faith through his songs – and he's not alone! Our hymn book is full of faith concepts – in the hope that whether you've formally learned them or not, as you sing the songs, you pick them up and internalize them – especially with those songs where the tune just gets stuck in your head and you end up singing them all day long! Have you ever noticed the title of our small black hymnal? *The Faith We Sing*.

Charles Wesley, lived in the 17th century and wrote this and 6,500 other hymns to instruct converts in the great truths of the Christian faith. A few of his best-known hymns include "Jesus, Lover of My Soul" (1739), "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling" (1747), and "O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing" (1749). He also wrote another popular Christmas carol, "Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus" (1744) and two well-known Easter hymns, "Christ the Lord Is Risen Today" (1739) and "Rejoice, the Lord Is King" (1746).

In 1737, during his daily quiet time, Charles Wesley, who had already written more than 3000 hymns was working on a new Christmas song and the words he wrote began, "Hark, how all the welkin rings. Glory to the King of kings." The word "Welkin" – a word that we don't use today, literally means "the vault of heaven." He put the words to music and it became a popular hymn in his church.

Wesley had an old college friend, another famous preacher and often theological adversary of his, named George Whitfield. Whitfield decided that "welkin" was way too obscure a word even for the 18th century, so he changed the words and published the song (without consulting Wesley) as "Hark! The herald angels sing. Glory to the newborn

king.” This really upset Wesley because technically nowhere in the Bible does it say angels sang about the birth of Jesus Christ. Actually, nowhere in the Bible do angels sing... but it certainly does make a prettier picture and song lyric. And listen how different these two ending phrases are:

Glory to the King of Kings.

Glory to the newborn King.

The second loses the Handel’s Messiah feel to it – King of Kings and Lord of Lords – declaring his elite status, and instead it simply makes him an infant king, like any other. Interesting!

Charles Wesley refused to sing Whitfield's reworking of his words, furious that he had presumed to alter them to suit his own ends.

What is even more intriguing is that Charles specifically requested that his words be sung to slow, solemn music. After all, he had created a theological masterpiece telling the true meaning of Christmas, it deserved a SERIOUS tune... Well, arranger Williams H. Cummings disagreed and set the words to the tune written by the great musician Felix Mendelssohn, which had been written in 1840 to honor the invention of the printing press. Interestingly enough, Mendelssohn specifically stated that this tune should be used for secular music only, not feeling that it was properly suited for religious words. In 1857, Cummings decided that neither Wesley nor Mendelssohn knew what they were talking about. Those words and that tune obviously belonged together and he published them together in a Methodist hymnal, and the rest is history.

Wesley wrote this hymn, not to tell the story of the angels and shepherds, but to tell all those who would sing it what, exactly, was going on in the Christmas event. Christmas is about God coming to dwell with us, in order to reconcile us with God. Drawing on the teachings of Paul, the whole salvation message is here in Wesley's five stanzas. Yes 5... although three are all we have in our hymnal, and all I'll be focusing on today.

In the first verse, the words draw us into the scene from Luke chapter 2 where the angels appeared to the shepherds: Hark! The herald angels sing, glory to the newborn King. Then we hear from the angels what this newborn king brings: peace on earth, mercy, reconciliation between us and God, and a joyful response from all the nations.

The second verse is packed with theological statements about who this baby is... Christ, by highest heaven adored; Christ, the everlasting Lord. In John’s gospel, we hear that the Word was with God at creation and then became flesh in Jesus, so while Jesus the man was born one day 2000 years ago, Wesley is pointing out that Christ has been around since before the beginning of time. Christ is the everlasting Lord, who has been born into flesh as Christ Jesus: Late in time behold him come, offspring of a virgin’s womb, reminding us of the virgin birth story and that God’s timing doesn’t always match up with ours. Veiled in flesh the Godhead see; hail th’ incarnate Deity, Please with us in flesh to dwell, Jesus, our Emmanuel ... all to say that Jesus is the incarnate God, part of the trinity come to earth, taking on skin and bone, walking alongside us to be Emmanuel, God with us.

The first two lines of the third verse present two more names for Jesus: Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace! Hail the Sun of Righteousness! The title "Prince of Peace", first used by the prophet Isaiah (9:6), highlights the power of Jesus to bring peace into our lives and our world. The title "Sun of Righteousness", first used by the prophet Malachi (4:2) which reads, "But for you who revere my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings," harkens back to the prophecy that the corrupt and evil will be defeated and the righteous will rise.

And our carol ends strong with a theology of salvation: born that we no more may die, born to raise us from the earth, born to give us second birth. This divine child has come to reconcile us to God, opening up the doors to our heavenly home of eternal life.

Wow! This song really is PACKED with theological concepts! And that's only three of the original 5 verses. What is important for me to focus on, and what I hope you will hear from today's message, is that Christmas is so much more than simply the favorite carols, the twinkling lights, the family gatherings and gift giving. It's more than shepherds and wise men, angels and mangers. Christmas is about this newborn King that the angels continue to sing about even today. Christmas is about this "Prince of Peace," "Sun of Righteousness," "Everlasting Lord," "Incarnate Deity," "Emmanuel." A God that is with us, for us, filling us, using us, and depending on us to live out the kingdom of God each and every day. Christmas is a celebration of a God that loves us so much that our gift could never fit under a Christmas tree, could never fit into a neatly wrapped package, but instead lives and breathes and through God's outpouring of grace, continues to do so through us.

As we enter the last week of our waiting for Christmas, it is my prayer that you sing this song a few more times this week. That you really pay attention to the words, that you remember who and what we celebrate come Christmas Eve. The love of God poured out again and again, in so many ways – yes, through the newborn baby Jesus, but also through each one of us who receive this amazing gift of God, and re-gift it to others. May we all receive God gifts of love, peace, reconciliation, mercy, and joy as we sing, "Glory to the new born king!" Amen.