

Hark! The Herald Angels Sing

For the rest of December I am going to be using a few classic Christmas songs to help us grasp the meaning of this season and the hope of the second coming of Jesus Christ to this earth. Today we are looking at the song *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*

Let me invite you to listen as I read these familiar words from Luke 2.

That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep. ⁹ Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord's glory surrounded them. They were terrified, ¹⁰ but the angel reassured them. "Don't be afraid!" he said. "I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. ¹¹ The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David! ¹² And you will recognize Him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger."

¹³ Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others—the armies of heaven—praising God and saying, ¹⁴ "Glory to God in highest heaven and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased."

¹⁵ When the angels had returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, "Let's go to Bethlehem! Let's see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

¹⁶ They hurried to the village and found Mary and Joseph. And there was the baby, lying in the manger. ¹⁷ After seeing Him, the shepherds told everyone what had happened and what the angel had said to them about this child. ¹⁸ All who heard the shepherds' story were astonished, ¹⁹ but Mary kept all these things in her heart and thought about them often. ²⁰ The shepherds went back to their flocks, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. It was just as the angel had told them. Luke 2:8-20 NLT

These words from Luke chapter 2 are very familiar. Even people who never crack open the Bible have a chance to hear it in the Charlie Brown Christmas Special when Linus explains the true meaning of Christmas by reading these verses.

The tune for this song was written by Felix Mendelssohn in 1840. The words were written by Charles Wesley. Charles and his brother John Wesley were the founders of what is now the Methodist Church. In his life time Charles Wesley wrote over 6,500 hymns. This text, along with *Jesus, Lover of my Soul*, is considered to be the finest hymn lyrics Wesley wrote.

Let's look together at this song verse by verse and discover the theology found in this wonderful Christmas hymn.

1. A Heavenly Introduction

*"Hark! The herald angels sing, Glory to the newborn King;
Peace on earth, and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled.*

*Joyful all Ye Nations rise. Join the triumph of the skies.
With angelic hosts proclaim, Christ is born in Bethlehem.
Hark! The herald angels sing, Glory to the newborn King.”*

Consider with me, the two participants that are featured in the first stanza: The angels and the shepherds.

The Angels

It is fitting that this most important birth was proclaimed by Supernatural Beings. I've seen a lot of depictions of the Angelic Host, but I doubt any of them are quite accurate. Only the Shepherds could have painted an accurate portrait ... but they were Shepherds, not artists.

The Bible has a lot to say about Angels. In fact, Angels are mentioned 108 times in the Old Testament and 165 times in the New Testament. --- The way the Bible portrays Angels is very different from popular conceptions of feminine creatures with sweet faces, shining halos, and fragile wings.

Here is a Biblical Portrait of Angels:

They are Spirit beings, created before mankind. They are a little higher than human beings with powers beyond human powers. They can appear and disappear in a moment.

These beings serve and worship God voluntarily. We know this because one of the most beautiful and powerful angels --- Lucifer --- rebelled against God and led a Host of Angels who became what we call Demons.

Angels can appear to human beings in many different forms.

Isaiah described them as having six wings and flying.

On some occasions, they appeared as Beings of overwhelming light. In fact, they almost always inspired awe and fear so that their first words had to be “Fear not...”

They sometimes appeared like ordinary men. In fact, the book of Hebrews describes Angels who look so much like normal human beings that people have entertained them without recognizing their supernatural identity.

Angels are most often sent as God's Messengers, and the News they give is usually Good. In this case it was better than good. It was the best news that has ever been proclaimed. We don't know how many Angels were in the choir that night. But the Bible says the Angels number, “Ten thousand times ten thousand and thousands of thousands.” Revelation 5:11 And Luke said this was a great company of the Heavenly Hosts.

To the Shepherds, it must have been an astounding sight. But the Angels may have felt like this heavenly introduction or birth announcement was vastly understated. After all, this was the most

significant event in all of human history. Like the 1st Stanza says, this Child had come to bring Peace on earth, and mercy mild. At last, it would be possible for God and sinners to be reconciled. It is no wonder that Wesley exclaimed: Joyful all Ye Nations rise. Join the triumph of the skies. With angelic hosts proclaim, Christ is born in Bethlehem.

The Angels must have wondered why this Great News was not proclaimed to all nations of the world. Why didn't God accompany the announcement with world-wide spectacles like thunder and lightening, meteor showers --- maybe a lunar eclipse and a few erupting volcanoes ... anything to make the whole world take notice!

Instead God the Father sent an enormous Heavenly choir to announce and introduce the birth of His Son to a few shepherds in an obscure little field. No one does things that way! It would be like the British Royalty sending messengers to proclaim the birth of Prince Williams' first-born son to a bunch of longshoremen loading crates on the docks ... or inviting a few random cab drivers of London to come and see the royal baby. It would be like announcing by inviting homeless people to the White House for breakfast. It just doesn't happen.

The Shepherds

Just who were these Shepherds to deserve such an honor? Well, they were your average, every day, blue-collar working folks. And they did NOTHING to deserve the honor. In fact, that was the whole point.

Jesus came to save ordinary, average, everyday people. We can identify with those Shepherds because they were just like you and me. None of us deserve the Peace on Earth that Jesus offers. We are sinners who do not deserve to be reconciled to God. But it is to US, that this Good News is proclaimed.

“Yet as I read the birth stories about Jesus I cannot help but conclude that though the world may be tilted toward the rich and powerful, God is tilted toward the underdog.” – Philip Yancey

Dietrich Bonhoeffer:

For the great and powerful of this world, there are only two places in which their courage fails them, of which they are afraid deep down in their souls, from which they shy away. These are the manger and the cross of Jesus Christ. No powerful person dares to approach the manger, and this even includes King Herod. For this is where thrones shake, the mighty fall, the prominent perish, because God is with the lowly. Here the rich come to nothing, because God is with the poor and hungry, but the rich and satisfied he sends away empty. Before Mary, the maid, before the manger of Christ, before God in lowliness, the powerful come to naught; they have no right, no hope; they are judged. From God Is In the Manger: Reflections on Advent and Christmas

This Christmas Carol does much more than tell about the Birth of Jesus. Like so many of Charles Wesley's Hymns, this text is really a condensed course in Bible Doctrine in poetic form.

The first stanza introduces the birth of Jesus. The second verse tells about a holy incarnation.

2. A Holy Incarnation

*“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 newborn King.”*

Charles Wesley managed to pack four important truths about Jesus’ identity into this one short verse. If we stop to look at each phrase, it is like a mini-course in Christology.

• **His Deity** --*“Christ by highest heaven adored; Christ, the everlasting Lord!*

John 1:1 says: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*

His Virgin Birth -- *Late in time behold Him come, Offspring of the virgin’s womb.*

Isaiah 7:14 prophesied: *Therefore, the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.*

• **His Incarnation** --*Veiled in flesh the Godhead see, Hail, the incarnate deity.*

In John 1:14 we read: *The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.*

• **His Humanity** --*Pleased as man with men to dwell, Jesus our Emmanuel.*

Hebrews 4:15 tells us: *We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are --- yet was without sin.*

Charles Wesley really packed a lot into the few lines of this second verse; showing us all that Jesus was both fully God and fully man.

Listen to what an English Hymnist named Eric Routley wrote concerning Wesley’s hymns, “These hymns were composed in order that men and women might sing their way, not only into experience, but also into knowledge; --- that the cultured might have their culture baptized, and the ignorant might be led into truth by the gentle hand of melody and rhyme.”

The final stanza gives a theology of what Jesus came to do for us.

3. A Healing Invitation

“Hail the heaven born prince of peace! Hail the Sun 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 newborn King.”*

• **Jesus brings light and life:** *Light and life to all He brings.*

John 1:4 says of Jesus: *In Him was life, and that life was the light of men.*

Some people believe that those who follow Jesus will be repressed, bored, and miserable. Nothing could be further from the truth. True life is found only in Him. And Jesus sheds light on the most vital issues of life. His Word truly is a light that guides us into a fulfilling life. Satan often shines his light on sin and sinfulness and it truly looks tempting. It may even feel exciting and wonderful for a short season but eventually you have to pay the price for sin when you walk against the light of God in your life.

• **Jesus brings healing:** *Risen with healing in His wings.*

I Peter 2:24 explains: *He himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, so that we might die to sin and live for righteousness; by His wounds you have been healed.*

• **Jesus brings victory over death:** *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.*

I Corinthians 15:54-57: *When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: “Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? ... Thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Just hours before my father passed away, I walked out into the nursing home parking lot and opened my Bible to these words: *“And now, dear brothers and sisters, we want you to know what will happen to the believers who have died so you will not grieve like people who have no hope.¹⁴ For since we believe that Jesus died and was raised to life again, we also believe that when Jesus returns, God will bring back with Him the believers who have died.* 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14 NLT

Through Jesus Christ and Him alone we find salvation. All roads don't lead to God contrary to popular belief.

In conclusion, I want to look at two old-fashioned words that we find in this Christmas hymn. We shouldn't be surprised to find some archaic language in this old song. After all, Charles Wesley lived in the 1800's. The words he used did not seem strange to singers back then. But even though we don't use these words in every-day language any more, their meaning is relevant to our lives.

Look at the first word in this song. It jumps out at you: “Hark!” This word means pay attention,

or listen! “Hark!” Is a word you shout in order to grab everyone’s attention. The song could start with the words: HEY, YOU! But that wouldn’t be quite as poetic. Jesus often said, “Let him who has ears to hear listen.” It does no good for God to speak if we will not listen.

The message of salvation has been proclaimed: Jesus has come. Salvation is yours if you want it. And the first thing we need to do is described by that one word: “Hark!” Are you listening to the voice of the Spirit today?

The second archaic word is “Hail!”

The word “Hail!” means to acclaim, salute, acknowledge. The Carol says: --“Hail the heaven born prince of peace! Hail the Sun of Righteousness!”

To Hail is to give the Worship that is due to the One who brings us Light, Life, Healing, and Eternal Salvation.

Today, will you harken to His words and hail Him as *your* King and Savior?

The announcement went first to the shepherds. They didn't ask God if He was sure He knew what He was doing. Had the angel gone to the theologians, they would have first consulted their commentaries. Had He gone to the elite, they would have looked around to see if anyone was watching. Had He gone to the successful, they would have first looked at their calendars. So He went to the shepherds. Men who didn't have a reputation to protect or an ax to grind or a ladder to climb. Men who didn't know enough to tell God that angels don't sing to sheep and that messiahs aren't found wrapped in rags and sleeping in a feed trough.

A small cathedral outside Bethlehem marks the supposed birthplace of Jesus. Behind a high altar in the church is a cave, a little cavern lit by silver lamps. You can enter the main edifice and admire the ancient church. You can also enter the quiet cave where a star embedded in the floor recognizes the birth of the King. There is one stipulation, however. You have to stoop. The door is so low you can't go in standing up.

The same is true of the Christ. You can see the world standing tall, but to witness the Savior, you have to get on your knees.

So....

while the theologians were sleeping

and the elite were dreaming

and the successful were snoring,

the meek were kneeling.

They were kneeling before the One only the meek will see.

They were kneeling in front of Jesus.

To the American People: Christmas is not a time or a season but a state of mind. To cherish peace and good will, to be plenteous in mercy, is to have the real spirit of Christmas. If we think on these things, there will be born in us a Savior and over us will shine a star sending its gleam of hope to the world." -- Calvin Coolidge Presidential message (December 25, 1927).

Hark, the herald angels sing, glory to the new-born king!