

## The First Carols: The Gloria

Sunday, December 22, 2019

Luke 2:1-14 (15-20)

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

According to Classic FM, the top five Christmas Carols are: *O Holy Night*, *Silent Night*, *In the Bleak Midwinter*, *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*, and *O Come All Ye Faithful*. That's a good list! I'm pleased that *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing* made the list because it's one of my absolute favorite Christmas carols.

Charles Wesley wrote the hymn, which is based on the lyrics sung by a choir of angels who startled some shepherds in a field outside Bethlehem. One angel has a solo part, and then comes the chorus: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" (v. 14). This announcement, known as the "Gloria," has been the foundation for many popular carols, including the warbling "Glo-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-ria in excelsis Deo" of "Angels We Have Heard on High."

Charles Wesley was John Wesley's younger brother, and together they founded the Methodist movement in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. John was the organizer and preacher, and while Charles did some preaching too, he is most famous for the thousands of hymns he wrote, only a fraction of which are in most hymnals. If John was the prose theologian, Charles expressed the depth of Christian faith in poetry. In 1739, Charles published *Hymns and Sacred Poems*, which contained this famous hymn we know as "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing."

But, did you know, this wasn't the original title? In Charles Wesley's original, the hymn begins, "Hark! How all the welkin rings, glory to the King of kings." Huh? What's a "welkin"? (I, glad you asked!) Welkin is an old English word that refers to the sky, the firmament or the "vault of heaven" which contains the stars and all the heavens.

In an ancient cosmology, the welkin was like a set of crystal spheres that would ring (as in "the music of the spheres," which we sing about in another hymn, "This is My Father's World"). In Wesley's hymn, the whole cosmos is ringing with the news of the birth of Jesus, the world's true and long-awaited king.

That's quite different from the version we sing now, which is the result of an unauthorized edit to Wesley's original work by his friend George Whitefield. Whitefield changed the line to read: "Hark! The herald angels sing, glory to the newborn king." Wesley was not amused. The change made Wesley furious, not only because it was done without permission, but because it made the hymn a little less biblically powerful. Wesley noted that the angels in verse 13 don't "sing," they "say." And the glory given by the angels is to "God in the highest heaven" (v. 14). Yes, the "newborn king" is God in the flesh and worthy of praise, but Wesley wanted to express the message of the angels as a sign that the whole cosmos, both heaven and earth, gave glory to God at Jesus' birth, which is really the thrust of the biblical narrative.

For Wesley, and indeed for the gospel-writer Luke, the birth of Jesus is a sign of heaven and earth coming together, bringing peace by reconciling God and humanity. Our text and Wesley's hymn announce that the story of God's rescue plan for the world, a story that began in Genesis when God revealed a plan to bless the broken world to another shepherd named Abraham, is becoming a reality. Abraham would shepherd a family that became a nation, Israel, whose mission is to be a light to all the other nations, bringing them back to God.

But when we look at the whole story of Scripture, we see that Israel, delivered by God from slavery and settled in a promised land, struggled with that mission (in Hebrew, the word "Israel" means "striving or wrestling with God"). Israel sinned by following other gods and a series of corrupt kings, which led to their exile away from the land God promised them. Some of the exiles returned from Babylon, but for the next 500 years, many of the people still believed that Israel was in exile, struggling under foreign domination.

Luke explains that when Jesus was born, Rome ruled the world and Caesar Augustus was the emperor. Augustus considered himself a "son of god" and a "prince of peace." He minted coins that proclaimed those titles to the world. His divinity, however, was self-proclaimed, and his idea of peace involved eliminating all of Rome's enemies and imposing his will on the world. In fact, this was the way of every emperor. When a new emperor came to the throne, messengers heralded his ascension throughout the Roman world as "good news," but it was good news only for those in power, who maintained peace at the point of the sword.

For Israel, the real good news lay in the promise of God's true king, the Messiah, who would come on the scene and pave the way for God to save the people from all earthly tyrants. Thus, when the angels announced to the shepherds that God's ancient plan is now fulfilled, they say: *"I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people"* (v. 10).

We, the people, know that God's promised return emerged, but in a way that no one expected. God did not return as the conquering hero, a glorious cloud-surfing warrior swooping down to destroy Israel's enemies. No, the "sign" given to these shepherds was a leaky, burpy, dirt poor little baby, born in a barn in a backwater town called Bethlehem.

But in this birth the whole welkin starts ringing because heaven and earth coming together, as God intended from the beginning. God came to dwell with the people to redeem and save them. The long-awaited Messiah, the true king, is God wrapped in the swaddling clothes of a tiny baby, fully human and fully divine. So, as Charles Wesley put it, "all the welkin rings" with this great and glorious good news. "Peace on earth and mercy mild," he writes, echoing the message of the angel host.

This is a very different kind of peace than that of Caesar or any earthly power, then or now. This peace isn't just offered to some, but to *"all whom God favors,"* to all of humanity created in God's image (v. 14). God's grace, first offered to Israel, is now offered to everyone who chooses to follow this child, perfect in his humanity and perfect in the image of God. Broken humanity is restored because God comes among the people to save them from their sins, to renew creation and restore peace to God's good world. God's rescue mission becomes a reality in a manger in Bethlehem. The carol puts it nicely: "God and sinners reconciled."

These lyrics echo the words of the apostle Paul, who saw the arrival of Jesus, his birth, death and resurrection as the means by which God was *"reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them"* (2 Corinthians 5:19). For Paul, the birth of Jesus heralded the promise of peace promised to the shepherd Abraham long ago and to the shepherds in a field outside Bethlehem. Because of Jesus, heaven and earth are at peace with one another, and that is news good enough to make all the welkin ring!

Indeed, Paul says, it is such good news that it needs to be shared often. The "ministry of reconciliation" is the Christian mission, proclaiming God's peace, God's grace, and God's

new creation made possible in Christ to the whole world. *"For our sake [God] made [Christ] to be sin, who knew no sin, so that in [Jesus] we might become the righteousness of God"* (2 Corinthians 5:21). That will surely preach but, even better, it will sing!

"Joyful, all ye nations rise. Join the triumph of the skies. With angelic hosts proclaim, 'Christ is born in Bethlehem!'" Here in Wesley's carol, based on the message of the angels, is the essence of the gospel: "Peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled!" In fact, this is the best message we can preach or sing at Christmas (or anytime, really!): "Be reconciled to God!"

How does such reconciliation happen? It happens through faith, in our trusting that, through Jesus, God's rescue plan for the world includes sinners like us. Whatever old life we've struggled with, whatever sin hounds us, wherever peace of heart or mind or body or soul eludes us, the good news is that the peace of Christ can (and does!) overcome them.

At Christmas we celebrate how God stepped toward us in Jesus. The question we must ask each day is: Will we step toward God? Will we be reconciled to God? The whole welkin is ringing with praise to God for what God did by coming in person in Christ. Let's join the song!

Prayer: Loving God, help us remember the birth of Jesus, that we may share in the song of the angels, the gladness of the shepherds, and worship of the wise men. Close the door of hate and open the door of love all over the world. Let kindness come with every gift and good desires with every greeting. Deliver us from evil by the blessing which Christ brings, and teach us to be merry with clear hearts. May the Christmas morning make us happy to be thy children, and Christmas evening bring us to our beds with grateful thoughts, forgiving and forgiven, for Jesus' sake. Amen. (Robert Lois Stevenson)

#### Sources:

- Hawn, C. Michael. "History of hymns: 'Hark! The Herald Angels Sing.'" *United Methodist Discipleship Ministries*. umcdisciplesh.org. Retrieved December 15, 2011.
- Roberts, Mark D. "'Hark! The Herald Angels Sing': The carol that shouldn't exist, part I." December 23, 2009. markdroberts.com. Retrieved December 15, 2011.
- "The 30 Greatest Christmas Carols of All Time." November 20, 2018. <https://www.classicfm.com/discover-music/occasions/christmas/nations-top-30-christmas-carols/>