

# “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing”

*The Rev. S. Shane Nanney – December 24, 2022*

*Isaiah 9:2-7 and Luke 2:1-20*

What is your favorite Christmas carol?

If you took a poll of the assembled crowd on Christmas Eve, you would probably get a variety of answers.

“Silent Night, Holy Night,” “Joy to the World,” “O Little Town of Bethlehem,” “O Come, O Come Emmanuel,” and “The First Noel” are certainly in this conversation.

But there is a good chance that one of the top five will be Charles Wesley’s, “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing.” In fact, it is number five on Classic FM’s list of top Christmas songs.

Wesley’s carol, of course, 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-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 18th century. John was the organizer and preacher, and Charles is most famous for the thousands of hymns he wrote, only a fraction of which are in most of our hymnals.

In 1739, he published *Hymns and Sacred Poems*, which contained this famous hymn we know as “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing.” But this was not the original title.

In Charles Wesley’s original, the hymn begins with, “Hark! How All the Welkin Rings.” What is a “welkin?” It is an old English word that refers to the sky, the firmament or the “vault of heaven” that 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 also sing about in another hymn, “This is My Father’s World”). The first line of this carol went like this: “Hark! How all the welkin rings, glory to the King of kings.”

The message is that the whole cosmos was ringing with the news of the birth of the world’s true and long-awaited king.

That is quite different than the version we sing now, which is actually the result of an unauthorized edit to Charles 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.”

The change made Charles 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 do not “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 Luke, the birth of Jesus is a sign of heaven and earth coming together, which brings peace and reconciliation between God and humanity. It is an announcement 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. Abraham would shepherd a family that became a nation, whose mission had been to be a light to 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. Israel sinned by following other gods and a series of corrupt kings, which led to their exile away from the land God had 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, still under foreign domination.

Luke explains that when Jesus was born, Rome was in control and Caesar Augustus was the emperor. Augustus considered himself a “son of God” and a “Prince of peace.”

For Israel, the real good news would only come when God’s true king, the Messiah, would come on the scene and pave the way for God to save them from these tyrants.

And then, an angel came and announced to another group of shepherds that this ancient plan had been fulfilled. *“I AM BRINGING YOU GOOD NEWS OF GREAT JOY FOR ALL THE PEOPLE,” PROCLAIMED THE ANGEL. (v. 10)*

God’s promised return was happening, but in a way that no one expected. God was not returning as a conquering hero, a glorious cloud-surfing warrior coming back 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 nowhere town called Bethlehem.

And yet, this is why the whole welkin was ringing — a glimpse of heaven and earth coming together, as God had intended from the beginning. God was coming to dwell with his people to redeem and save them. The long-awaited Messiah, the true king, was the Lord himself, wrapped in the swaddling clothes of a tiny baby, fully human and fully divine.

And so, as Charles Wesley put it, “all the welkin rings” with this news. “Peace on earth and mercy mild,” he writes, echoing the message of the angel host.

God’s rescue mission was becoming a reality in a manger in Bethlehem.

The carol puts it nicely: “God and sinners reconciled.”

Paul says, it’s 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, HE MADE HIM TO BE SIN, WHO KNEW NO SIN, SO THAT IN HIM WE MIGHT BECOME THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD.” (2 Corinthians 5:21)*

“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 (and sing) on Christmas Eve: “Be reconciled to God!”

Here is the takeaway: God has stepped toward us in Jesus. Will you step toward God? Will you be reconciled to God?

If you need help, we encourage you to return here every Sunday to hear the rest of the story, to see the love of God in the face of Jesus and the faces of God’s people. Join us and know that you will receive the peace of God and mercy mild as you are reconciled to God forever. Amen.