

Hark, the Harold Angels Sing

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A reading from the Gospel according to Luke. And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear.

And the angel said to them, Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you. You will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with this angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased.

[1 : 22] When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.

And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told to them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds had told them.

This is the gospel of the Lord. Praise to you, Lord Christ. I'm going to hold you for one more moment for this reading from the first epistle to Timothy.

Beyond all question, the mystery from which true godliness springs is great. He appeared in the flesh, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. So, good morning, Christchurch. It's dawned on me that Christmas Eve is three weeks from today.

[2 : 33] How many of you feel ready for that? Not at all. Not at all. So, the season of Advent is meant to help us get ready, to prepare ourselves.

And the way we're doing that this year at Christchurch is just looking at these carols of Christmas, wanting to appreciate the truths of the Scriptures by these beautiful and beloved carols, and use these carols as a doorway into these biblical truths.

So, last Sunday, we looked at a carol that Christians have been singing for 1,200 years and counting called, O Come, O Come, Emmanuel. You just sang it beautifully.

But I want to ask you this morning, what's the first Christmas carol? What's the oldest of our Christmas carols? It's what we just read from the Gospel of Luke, that carol of the angels that they sang on that first Christmas night in Bethlehem 2,000 years ago.

And it's on that carol that the carol Hark the Herald Angels Sing is based. Now, even if you have no religious background at all, you most likely have some familiarity with this carol Hark the Herald Angels Sing.

[3 : 47] Some of you may remember it as the concluding scene in the movie It's a Wonderful Life. And all the people of Bedford Falls are gathered together in the home of George and Mary Bailey as they're helping George to pay off his debts in this financial predicament that he's found himself in.

And they're singing Hark the Herald Angels Sing. Yesterday, I looked up a wonderful recording of this carol done in St. Paul's Cathedral in London.

And the very first comment on the YouTube video said, I'm not a Christian, but you've got to admit that Christians have some really good music.

And I couldn't agree more, especially with this. Not all of our music is good. But some of it's really good. Now, where did this Christmas carol come from?

Well, if you go back to Oxford University in the 18th century, there was a group of students that regularly met together to read the Bible and to pray. And they were so serious about this.

[4 : 54] They were so serious about their methods for how to have a relationship with God that people mocked them as Methodists for their intense methods and spiritual disciplines.

One of those students was a classic scholar at Oxford named Charles Wesley. And after many, many years of going through the motions of nominal Christianity, just heartless Christianity, he eventually had a personal encounter with Jesus Christ.

And on May 21, 1738, he accepted the gospel not only as true for the world objectively, but he accepted it as true for him subjectively.

He applied it to himself personally. And you can hear that in the lyrics of many of his hymns where he says, Amazing love, how can it be that thou, my God, should die for me, he says, for me.

So Charles Wesley amazingly wrote this hymn, Hark the Herald Angels Sing, one year, within a year after his conversion. And the original title was A Hymn for Christmas Day.

[6 : 04] And it's arguably one of the greatest hymns that's ever been written. And it's a privilege to walk through it with you now. So we're going to do the same drill as we did last week.

We're going to look at the foundations, the biblical foundations of this familiar carol. And then we're all going to sing this carol together. And we want to remember that great text from the prophet Isaiah a couple weeks ago, where he says that at the sound of their voices, the doorposts and the thresholds shook as the angels were singing.

And that's how we want to sing our Christmas carols this year. So allow me just to read today's carol so it's fresh in your mind and you have it there in your liturgy. 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 the angelic hosts proclaim, Christ is born in Bethlehem. 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. Pleas'd as man with men to dwell, Jesus our Emmanuel.

[7 : 24] Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace, hail the Son 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.

I just want to simply walk through the stanzas of this great carol and talk first of all about the praise of the angels, the nature of the newborn, and the purpose of his birth.

The praise of the angels, the nature of the newborn, and the purpose of his birth. First of all, the praise of the angels. This very first line, Hark the Herald Angels Sing, puts us with those shepherds as they were hearing the heavenly host, which is an army of angels.

And Luke chapter 2 that we read, it doesn't say that they're singing, but it does say that they're praising God with high poetic verse. And so we just kind of fill in the gap and say, how could they help but break into song?

[8 : 37] These angels that appear to these shepherds are called heralds or divine messengers. Now, I, to date, have not yet seen one of these immaterial spiritual beings, but I'm confident that one day I will.

And when these angels show up in the Bible, people instinctively fall down on the ground thinking that they're dying or thinking that they're already dead.

And the angels always have to say what? Fear not. Do not be afraid. So I'm not really sure I'm quite ready to meet one of these creatures. But these heralds, these messengers, they're giving the first announcement of something momentous.

And what is that? They're saying, glory to the newborn king. These divine messengers are announcing a royal birth. And this isn't just a king and a long line of kings.

The original words of this hymn said, glory to the king of kings. This is the king. And so what sort of kingdom, what sort of agenda, what kind of policies will this king come to put into effect?

[9 : 50] That you might tremble at the army of angels that, you know, what in the world are they about to say about this king? But what they actually say is, peace on earth and mercy mild.

This king that's coming has an agenda that's not for war but for peace. For people who are estranged from God. People who find themselves under the condemnation and the just judgment and the wrath of God for our selfishness and our self-centeredness.

This king has come to give us peace on earth and mercy mild. God and sinners reconciled, it says. You see, our deepest problem, our most fundamental problem as human beings is that though we were made to be centered upon God, we've centered our lives upon ourselves.

And we think, maybe we don't say it out loud, but we think to ourselves, I know best how to run my life. I know better than God how to run my life.

And in fact, I'm better off just being sort of independent from God. And we live our lives that way as kind of functional atheists. And the Bible says that that's having enmity toward God.

[11 : 06] It's being estranged from God. And what this carol is telling us is that this king has come so that we would no longer be the enemies of God. He's come to bring our rebellion and our hostility toward God to an end.

And to put us back into a right and a reconciled relationship with our maker and our judge. Well, who is it that can receive this peace and this mercy and this reconciliation that this king has come to bring?

Well, I point you back to our text in the Gospel of Luke, chapter 2, verse 14, where the angels are praising God and they're saying, Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace to those on whom His favor rests.

This is a universal announcement for all people at all times and in all places. But it seems to suggest that this is only effective for those upon whom God's favor rests, upon whom His grace has come to rest.

Does this king come to bring peace for everyone? Well, if you're indifferent to the king, if you're opposed to this king, then you're not going to get the peace that he comes to bring.

[12 : 26] It's only as you surrender to the king, only as you pledge your allegiance to this king and give glory to the God who sent him, that you will have His peace. And so, what then is the proper response to this angelic announcement?

The proper response is hark. It's a great word. Hark. Hark. Which means, it's an old way of saying, listen up. Listen very carefully.

Pay extremely close attention. The prophets of Israel talk all the time about how people can have ears, but they do not hear.

And so, the question is, are you hearkening to these messengers and to their heavenly message, not just with your ears, but with your heart? Have you heard with your heart what they're saying? And if the answer to that question is yes, and that God's favor has come to rest upon you, and you are all in with this newborn king, then here's what this carol tells us about how we're to respond to this message.

[13 : 35] It says, joyful all you nations, rise. Join the triumph of the skies. If you believe what these angels are saying, the only right response is to stand up.

It says, rise up in humble adoration and joyous praise of God, and join in the delight and the elation of heaven. It says, with the angelic hosts proclaim, Christ is born in Bethlehem.

Now, I don't know about you, but in this season ahead, we are going to busy ourselves with many, many things.

The calendar is already too full. And some of you are going to be traveling. How many of you are going to be traveling in this next season? Some of us are going to be traveling. We're going to be buying and giving gifts.

We're going to be hosting and attending parties. We're going to be dealing with our family dysfunctions. Well, what were these angels busy doing in this moment?

[14 : 45] What are they busy doing? They're busy praising God. And there's really nothing more important than the praise of God. And I want to suggest that if this is not on the top of your priority list in this next season, not just on Sunday mornings, but Monday through Saturday, then I want to suggest that you adopt this angelic priority of praising God.

Because heaven came down singing the praise of God, inviting the earth to join in, to joyful all you nations, rise up and join the triumph of the skies.

One of the ways that our humanity is restored to us is by praising God, which is the primary activity for which He made us. And this carol is a rousing invitation for us to praise God in this season of Advent and Christmas.

But it's also an invitation to proclaim this King that God has sent, to share the angelic message with others about God's long-promised, long-awaited Messiah.

With the angelic hosts proclaim, it says, Christ is born in Bethlehem. I want you to think about who among your family, who among your friends and your co-workers and your neighbors, needs to hear this message in a fresh way, that God has made a way for God and sinners to be reconciled.

[16:18] And perhaps you might invite them and bring them as we talk next week about joy to the world and what that means. Silent night the following week and what that means. Invite them to come to our 5 p.m. candlelight Christmas service on Christmas Eve.

This carol, this Christmas carol, calls all the nations of all the peoples of the world to come and praise the one true Creator God and His newborn King.

That's what these angels are all about, the praise of the angels. I want to talk also not only about the praise of the angels, but the nature of the newborn. Let's think together about the nature of this newborn.

Having established the subject of praise in this poem, and having commanded all the nations to join in with this praise, really the rest of this poem, the rest of this hymn, gives us a list of all that's praiseworthy about this newborn King.

For as lowly as His birth in Bethlehem may be, this is no ordinary newborn. I mean, these newborns that we had up here, they're pretty cute. But this newborn is different.

[17:35] We say in the second stanza that this is Christ by highest heaven adored. Now think about that. These angelic beings are ancient.

They've been around a very, very long time, dwelling in the presence of God. They were there as the eyewitnesses of creation. And they bore witness when God spoke with a word and He said, let there be light.

Let there be light. And bang! A vast expanse of galaxies burst into existence. Now astronomers estimate that there are 3,000 billion trillion stars.

I think we have more than one astrophysicist here. Please correct me if I'm wrong. But there's an estimated 3,000 billion trillion stars. That's a three with 24 zeros behind it.

And every single one of those stars can put out the amount of energy every second that's equal to a trillion atom bombs. These angels saw God create all of that with a word.

[18:52] Let there be light. And yet here in Bethlehem, they've just seen something so amazing, something so incredible, something that's blowing their angelic minds.

And what is that? Christ, by highest heaven adored, Christ the everlasting Lord, has taken a human body.

The everlasting Lord is lying in the most famous animal trough ever. He's lying in a manger. Now in all the unfathomable ages before the universe was created, these angels saw Christ in all of His glory, in all of His power.

And these angels knew about this covenant that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit had made, each with one another in eternity past, promising to themselves that they would send this one as the Savior of the world.

And so highest heaven since that moment has been adoring Christ as the everlasting Lord for all the ages. But yet here in this moment, they are astonished.

[20:12] They're astonished that the everlasting Lord is somehow a newborn baby in the arms of Mary. Late in time, behold Him come, offspring of the virgin's womb.

Now late in time does not mean the Messiah was late showing up, that He missed as sometimes us pastors can show up late for these scheduled appointments. We apologize for that.

But He didn't miss His scheduled appointment, but rather now after centuries and after millennia of God's promises and of God's people waiting for those promises to be fulfilled, the time is here.

As the Apostle Paul says in Galatians 4, He says, When the set time had fully come, God sent His Son, born of a woman. And now comes the profound line, and I think maybe my favorite line in the whole carol, where it says, Veiled in flesh, the Godhead see.

Veiled in flesh, the Godhead see. And what that means is that when you are looking at Jesus, you are seeing God.

[21 : 28] And that if you want to know what God is like, who God is, and what God does, look at Jesus.

I want to give you a couple of texts that I think probably Charles Wesley was thinking about as he was writing this line. Jesus says to His disciple Philip, in the Gospel of John chapter 14, He says, Philip, anyone who has seen Me has seen the Father.

Anyone who has seen Me has seen the Father. In the opening lines of this great epistle to the Hebrews, we read these words.

It says, The Son, Jesus Christ, the Son, is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of His being. The Apostle Paul adds to this.

He writes to the church in Colossae and he says this. He says, The Son is the image of the invisible God, for in Christ all the fullness of the deity lives in bodily form.

[22 : 38] Veiled in flesh, the Godhead see. Hail the incarnate deity. And this says that it's not enough to simply see Him. You need to hail Him.

To hail is to honor, to acclaim. Some of you have football teams. Don't you say hail in those cheers? I think one of you has a cheer like that that you were doing yesterday.

Yes, go blue. But to hail Him is to adore Him even as the angels are adoring Him. And why should we do this? Well, it's not because He's the greatest human being that our species has ever produced, although that's true enough.

It's that here in Jesus is the fullness of God veiled in flesh. Here is the deity with a face. The deity as a person that you could hug.

And what does that mean? It means that the nature of our humanity and the nature of God need not remain as permanent enemies if God has taken to Himself a human nature for good.

[23 : 52] Pleased, it says. Pleased as man with men to dwell, Jesus our Emmanuel. What does it mean that He was pleased to do this? It means that He was willingly and gladly emptying Himself and humbling Himself not out of a sense of sheer duty, but out of a sense of delight for the joy that was set before Him to come and dwell with us and to be like us in this fallen world as a human being inhabiting the depths and the pain and the sorrow and the difficulty of our human nature and our human experience as Emmanuel, which we learned last week, means God with us.

So what is it that blows the minds of these angels more than the creation of all the stars and all the galaxies? It's that God Himself, the everlasting Lord, would come and take the place of sinners like me and like you.

That's the praise of the angels and the nature of the newborn. And I want to just close talking about the purpose of His birth. What's the purpose of His birth?

Now that we've discovered who this person is, we can look at what He came to do. And so the final stanza says, Hail the heaven-born prince of peace.

We discovered that was one of the names of the Messiah last week in Isaiah chapter 9. He's the mighty God and the wonderful counselor. He's the prince of peace. And He's coming to set the world right.

[25 : 43] He's coming to bring God's shalom, the wholeness and well-being that the Creator God intended for His creation. He's coming to bring that back. Hail the heaven-born prince of peace.

Hail the son of righteousness. Light and life to all He brings. Risen with healing in His wings. This again is from one of the other prophets, the prophet Malachi chapter 4 verse 2 where it says the Messiah is going to come like the sun of righteousness, which is very much like we talked about last week, the days spring from on high.

He's going to come like the sunrise in the morning, that first light at dawn. And when He rises up, whatever His presence and His power touches, He's going to bring light where there's darkness. He's going to bring life where there's death. He's going to bring healing where there's pain. And notice that the final lines give us three very particular reasons why He's born.

Jesus was not born because He was bored and He had nothing else to do. Jesus was not born because He put planet Earth on His bucket list of places to visit and come see the sights.

[27 : 00] It says, Jesus was born to die in our place and as our substitute so that death would not be the end of your story, so that death would not be the final word of any of our stories.

You see, the only way that the curse of humanity could be solved by God in any sort of just way would be for, on the one hand, us to suffer it eternally ourselves and to be separated from God in an everlasting death.

Or, God in His grace could be born as the Prince of Peace to live the life that we were meant to live and to die the death that we were condemned to die and so absorb that curse in Himself, in our place, so that we could escape it.

Now, you're not going to find that in the sentimentalized versions of Christmas with gentle snowfall and cozy sweaters, hot cocoa and twinkly lights and chestnuts roasting on an open fire and on and on we could go.

So, but friends, Jesus was born in order that He might die.

[28 : 30] His cradle was under the shadow of His cross and the reason He took on a human body is so that He could remove the curse of sin and death from your body.

He was born to raise you up from death to life and He was born so that you could be reborn with the new life of God Himself. This is what Jesus is talking about in the Gospel of John chapter 3.

He talks to a guy like me, a guy named Nicodemus, professional religious guy, and He says, Nicodemus, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again, unless they're born from above, unless they're born of God, born a second time.

So, Jesus says to Nicodemus and He says to each one of us, He says, you need a whole new nature. You need a whole new life. You need to be regenerated.

You need a second birth. And so, I say to you all this morning, hark. Listen up. Listen very carefully.

[29 : 40] pay very close attention. Have you surrendered your life to this prince that's come to give you peace with God, peace that passes all understanding?

And have you allowed this son of righteousness to come and to shine His life and His light and His healing into your soul? Because that's why Jesus came.

Jesus wants to raise you up with Him to a life abundant, a life eternal that He and only He can give you.

And so, now that we know what this song means, are you ready to sing it together? We're going to just take a quiet moment and invite our musicians to come and they're going to invite us to stand in just a moment and again, we want you to sing it, sing it boldly.

And we offer this up to Him in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.