



Rejoice! Reflections on Four Seasonal Hymns

SESSION 4: "HARK! THE HERALD ANGELS SING"

Charles Wesley and the rest of the team that assembled this great hymn meant for it to take us to soaring places when we sang it, but having reached those places they hoped as well that we would be changed by them.

Hark! The Herald Angels Sing

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 host proclaim,
"Christ is born in Bethlehem!"

Hark! The herald angels sing,
"Glory to the newborn King!"

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 in flesh with us to dwell,
Jesus our Emmanuel.

Hark! The herald angels sing,
"Glory to the newborn King!"

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 we no more may die,
Born to raise us from the earth,
Born to give us second birth.

Hark! The herald angels sing,
"Glory to the newborn King!"



Wesley wrote the original lyrics. He was inspired, it is said, by hearing the church bells of London peal on Christmas Day in 1739.

It Takes a Village

This old favorite, long credited to the genius of Charles Wesley, actually represents something of a team effort. While it's true that Wesley wrote the original lyrics (inspired, it is said, by hearing the church bells of London peal on Christmas Day in 1739), the evangelist George Whitefield altered the first two lines in 1753 and another evangelist, the Reverend Martin Madan, did the same with lines 7 and 8 in 1760. Other minor changes were believed to have been made in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and many hymnals have eliminated the fourth and fifth verses of the work, leaving us with this tight, uplifting, three-verse hymn that is widely regarded as one of the most popular of all Christmas pieces.¹ In addition to changes in the text, while Wesley originally set the words to the tune of his earlier hymn "Christ the Lord

Is Risen Today," a nineteenth-century English organist by the name of William Cummings adapted it to Felix Mendelssohn's tune, "God Is Light." It is this later rendition that is popularly sung today.²

Thick with Theology

As pleasing as it is to the ear, this work, like any great poem, is also heavily imbued with meaning and message. No words are wasted. Such weighty (and at times thorny) biblical topics as the virgin birth (verse 2), the deity of Jesus (verse 2), and the immortality of the soul (verse 3) find their way into Wesley's lyrics, as do the theological concepts of reconciliation (verse 1), righteousness (verse 3), and, in the phrase "joyful, *all ye nations, rise,*" the universality of human salvation (verse 1). As the late English hymnist Eric Routley once noted, Wesley was not so much trying to expound on these topics as have the congregant "led into truth by the gentle hand of melody and rhyme."³

So once we have been led into truth by this gentle hand, what are the messages Wesley has waiting for us?

The Herald Angels

As if rousing us from slumber with the resounding "Hark!" Wesley tells us of the angels who, as Scripture has it, announced the birth of Jesus to the shepherds (Luke 2:8–14). But by calling them "herald angels" he is signifying something a little more specific. In ancient times, the heralds were the persons who went to a town or village before the king arrived, often to speak *for* the king. And when they did so, it was usually to announce that the kingdom was at peace. Thus, by referring to the angels this way, Wesley is anticipating the intent of God's proclamation that in the birth of Jesus God is announcing the eruption of peace into the world. He then fulfills this anticipation with the next lines, "Glory to the newborn king, peace on earth."

The word "glory" is important here because in a biblical sense it means that the divine presence is being made as a luminous manifestation ("Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the *glory of the Lord shone around them,*" Luke 2:9, emphasis mine). God is being made manifest as light. And what does it mean to be in the presence of God's light? It is, as the angels heralded, to find "peace on earth and mercy mild." Divine light comforts, guides, and illuminates us. God's light is our

comfort, Wesley is suggesting, in that it brings us peace when we are tormented. It is guidance when we have lost our bearings. And it is illumination when we are confused or uncertain.

As Wesley would have it, the peace that is spoken of here is grounded in the concept of reconciliation, by which he means the healing of old wounds, the rebinding of relationships that have been torn by ill will, breaches of trust, or lack of charity. In the life of Christ, God is reconciling us to himself ("God and sinners reconciled"), but it would be cheap of us to think of ourselves as passive recipients of God's grace without also understanding—as Wesley did—that we are responsible in turn to live reconciled lives. We must forgive as God has forgiven. We must repair battered relationships as God has done. When we look at those who have wronged us we must do so with the eyes of "mercy mild" rather than the steely glare of judgment and condemnation.

From here Wesley expands the message of reconciliation through Christ by calling "*all ye nations*" to rise and join the triumph. What is important in this phrase is that Wesley is recognizing the universality of God's love and its accessibility to all people of the world. Such love, he is implying, is not bound only to a select community of saved sinners. Quite the opposite; it is *boundless*. God loves all people and all nations without prejudice or favor. What is being made manifest in the person of "the newborn king" is a divine love that knows no limits. As such, it is not our place to claim that this love can only come into the world through the Christ, because to do so is to limit both God's power and God's imagination. Rather, what we as Christians *can* claim is that we have found that love embodied in the child, and we can invite all other people, all other communities and nations, to embrace the same reconciling gift that we have embraced.

Because of the universal nature of God's love, we are not confined to practice reconciliation only with those who are intimate in our own lives, but to all people, be they distant acquaintances, total strangers, or mortal enemies. Put another way, we can either live lives that feel integrated, lives in which we sense our connectedness to fellow human beings, or we can lead lives that feel disintegrating, distancing, separating us from one another.

Likewise, because Wesley has us sing of *nations*, he is at least intimating that whole countries can benefit from

a more altruistic, companionable, peaceful approach to solving their international problems. Should they do this, Wesley suggests, they will not only rise as nations, they will rise joyfully. God's reconciliation mirrored on earth means an end to enmity, a burgeoning of compassion, the sown seeds of a new world order.

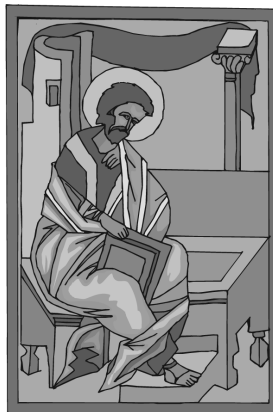
The Incarnate Deity

In the second verse, Wesley has shifted emphasis from the angels heralding God's promise of peace and reconciliation and placed it on, if you will, the *deus ex machina*, the means by which this new promise is to be made flesh.

"Christ is born in Bethlehem!" we sing at the end of verse 1, and in the beginning of verse 2 we are given a sense of who this is: he is one who is adored in heaven (adoration being a word reserved only for the deity), he is everlasting (in other words, he is eternal, timeless), and he is Lord (the ruler). It turns out the eternal ruler and object of human adoration, God's *machina*, is Godself.

As though we would be stunned by this, Wesley then reminds us that this is precisely what we have long been waiting for ("Late in time behold Him come"; see Isa. 9:6), that he fulfills our ancient prophecies ("Offspring of the virgin's womb"; see Isa. 7:14), that God not only has become human ("Veiled in flesh the Godhead see"; see Col. 2:9), but does so freely, willingly, and gladly ("Pleased in flesh with us to dwell").

In singing verse 2 in light of verse 1, we now begin to understand that God's intent is to reconcile ourselves to God and to one another, and that the way this will be done is by the divine becoming human. As Paul wrote to the Philippians, Christ is he who "did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave" (Phil. 2:6-7). What this does is profound in that it begins to move us beyond the miracle of the birth and into anticipation of the life. The baby will not remain a baby. His worth to us will not be contained in the sweetness of the newborn or the innocence of childhood. Rather, he is here to do the real work of reconciliation. It is wonderful and right to sing of his birth, Wesley is implying, but let us not forget that the story doesn't end there. Though churches will be twice filled on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day with people proclaiming in full voice, "Hark! The her-



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ald angels sing, Glory to the newborn king!" they will be half empty a week later, when the gifts have been opened, the goose has been eaten, and much of the goodwill long dissipated.

By pointing to Jesus as God made flesh, and as the fulfillment of the prophets, Wesley is asking that we not confine our adoration to that which is easy but that we use Christmas to prepare ourselves to walk yearlong, and lifelong, with this divine one who is pleased to dwell with us. Experience the love that comes easily in this season, Wesley seems to be saying, but prepare yourself to be faithful when that love does not come so easily. Come to worship when others do not. Give to charity when no one is looking. Make friends with the lonely misfit whom everyone else shuns. Be kind when your impulse is to be indifferent; be big when you'd rather be small; be patient when you'd rather be frustrated; be forgiving when you'd rather be vindictive. Hear that the angels are harkening you even when no one else seems to be listening. The Son of God will not remain in that little manger, peacefully swaddled and blissfully sleeping. He is God in our midst, "Jesus, our Emmanuel," and if Christmas is to have any meaning for us beyond the magic of the season, it will be because as that child grows into his destiny we will grow into our faith. His birth is not a moment to be savored but a relationship to be begun.

Second Chances

In the final stirring verse, we praise the child whose life's work has already been alluded to, and we do so by turning back to the first verse, where the angels proclaimed "Peace on earth and mercy mild" and then confirming that this "heaven-born" baby will be our "Prince of Peace." The "glory" of the first verse, the illuminating

quality, is also echoed as we “hail the sun of righteousness” who brings “light and life.”

The term “righteousness” extends the theme of Christian living alluded to in verse 2 because to be righteous is *to be in right relationship with God*. “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled” (Matt. 5:6). And if what we seek is to be in right relationship with God, then we cannot help but propel ourselves beyond the deep if fleeting emotions of the season and commit ourselves to all of the work and struggle and energy and joy that are part and parcel of *any* relationship.

Enduring relationships are never easy to maintain—weddings are easier than marriages—because things like egos and circumstances and bad breaks and hurt feelings and sheer exhaustion chip away at them, making them smaller and smaller. Only when people go about the hard work of repairing the wounds, reassembling the broken pieces and the broken hearts, can they become whole and intact again. Thus, when we sing in this verse that God has “risen with *healing* in His wings,” we are reminded that the word “heal” comes from the old English *hælan*, which means “to make whole again.” Our relationship with God is a fundamentally healing one, but one in which we must also do our part. Not only must we “render unto God what is God’s,” by which Jesus meant we acknowledge that everything is of God, for which we are to be duly grateful, but we must also be in right relationship with one another. We must look after one another the way new lovers look after one another, or the way new parents look after their own miraculous, swaddled, sleeping, suckling child. We must look after the earth over which we have been given dominion, not to conquer it but to care for it. We must look after the poorest among us, for we are in relationship with them as well and the relationship must be a right and righteous one. We must look after those who are not yet born because what we inherit from past generations should not mean as much to us as what we bequeath to the next one. And when

relationships have eroded and are worn and weathered, we must revive them

This revival is what Wesley means when he speaks of Jesus as “born that we no more may die . . . born to raise us from the earth . . . born to give us second birth.” It is the wisdom to know that we will always make mistakes and we will always fail, but that God is constantly giving us new birth, a second chance. We *cannot not* be loved by God, which is all we can ask of God because it means that we are forever and at all times forgiven and made whole again. And, like the parents with the newborn, is this not what we must deserve and expect and bestow upon one another?

In Sum

Wesley and the rest of the team that assembled this great hymn meant for it to take us to soaring places when we sang it, but having reached those places they hoped as well that we would be changed by them. They hoped that the enthusiasm that seeps out of every pore of this hymn might seep into our own pores, might wend its way deep inside of us, stay with us, and help us, long after the season is past, to make that long and frightening and wondrous pilgrimage from Bethlehem, to Cana, to Caesarea, to Jerusalem, to Golgotha, to Galilee. From birth . . . to life . . . to death . . . to birth again; born to give us second birth. This is what the angels heralded, and what they had to sing about. It is our song as well.

About the Writer

Erik Kolbell is a United Church of Christ minister and author, most recently, of The God of Second Chances.

Endnotes

1. http://hymnsandcarolsofchristmas.com/Hymns_and_Carols/hark_the_herald_angels-sandys.htm.
2. Conversation with J. David Williams, music director, Lafayette Avenue Presbyterian Church, Brooklyn, NY.
3. Erik Routley, *Hymns and Human Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1959), 76.