

Sunday December 11th, 2022
Advent III

Philippians 2:8-15
“Hark the Herald Angels Sing”

At a university there was a dean who cared about others and showed exemplary behavior. One day an angel appeared at a faculty conference. The angel said as a reward for his good deeds that God would give him his choice of eternal riches, eternal wisdom, or eternal beauty. The dean chose eternal wisdom without hesitation. "Good," said the angel, disappearing into a cloud of smoke. Everyone present turned their gazes to the dean, who was illuminated by a faint halo. A colleague whispered, "Tell me something." I should have chosen the riches.

So, who are these beings that garner our imagination, and often grace the top of our Christmas trees. A detailed exploration of this subject would take many hours, but suffice it to say that Christians inherited Jewish understandings of angels, which in turn may have been partly inherited from the Egyptians. In the early stage, the Christian concept of an angel characterized the angel as a messenger of God.

Angels in scripture are spiritual beings created by God to do specific tasks. Later came identification of individual angelic messengers: Gabriel, Michael, etc. Then, in the space of little more than two centuries (from the 3rd to the 5th) the image of angels took on definite characteristics both in theology and in art. Ellen Muehlberger has argued that in late antiquity, angels were conceived of as one type of being among many, whose primary purpose was to guard and to guide Christians.

Angels are represented throughout scripture as spiritual beings and as intermediate between God and humans: "Yet you have made them [humans] a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor." (Psalms 8:4–5). Christians believe that angels are created beings, based on (Psalms 148:2–5; Colossians 1:16).

In the New Testament, the existence of angels, just like that of demons, is taken for granted. They can intervene and intercede on behalf of humans. Angels protect the righteous (Matthew 4:6, Luke 4:10). They dwell in the heavens (Matthew 28:2, John 1:51), act as God's warriors (Matthew 26:53) and worship God (Luke 2:13). In the parable of the Rich man and Lazarus, angels behave as guides for the spirits of humans. The Resurrection of Jesus also features angels, telling the woman that Jesus is no longer in the tomb, but has risen from the dead.

It is the appearance of angels in the nativity story that garners our attention today. And because Charles Wesley is responsible for thousands of hymns, it's not surprising that we would encounter another one of his famous carols in our Advent journey. Hark the Herald Angels sing is a beloved carol. I have noticed that when it is sung, people really like to belt out the words, and sing with great gusto.

Here are the lyrics:

*Hark the herald angels sing
"Glory to the newborn King!
Peace on earth and mercy mild*

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*God and sinners reconciled"
Joyful, all ye nations rise
Join the triumph of the skies
With the angelic host proclaim:
"Christ is born in Bethlehem"
Hark! The herald angels sing
"Glory to the newborn King!"*

*Christ by highest heav'n adored
Christ the everlasting Lord!
Late in time behold Him come
Offspring of a Virgin's womb
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see
Hail the incarnate Deity
Pleased as man with man to dwell
Jesus, our Emmanuel
Hark! The herald angels sing
"Glory to the newborn King!"*

*Hail the heav'n-born Prince of Peace!
Hail the Son of Righteousness!
Light and life to all He brings
Ris'n 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!"*

Hark! The Herald Angels Sing, is an English Christmas carol that first appeared in 1739 in the collection *Hymns and Sacred Poems*. The carol, based on Luke 2:14, tells of an angelic chorus singing praises to God. As it is known in the modern era, it features lyrical contributions from Charles Wesley and George Whitefield, two of the founding ministers of Methodism, with music adapted from "Vaterland, in deinen Gauen" by Felix Mendelssohn.

Wesley, who had written the original version as "Hymn for Christmas-Day," had requested and received slow and solemn music for his lyrics, Music people did not really gravitate to and which has since largely been discarded. Moreover, and this is quite surprising, Wesley's original opening couplet is not what we now sing. Instead he wrote "Hark! how all the welkin rings / Glory to the King of Kings".

I had to look the word "welken" up. I had never heard it before. Its from Middle-English and *welken, welkne, wolkne* are all forms of the word and it means ("cloud; sky; weather (?); heavens; (in *astronomy*), it means planetary, or celestial spheres. So what happened to "how all the welken rings"?

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The popular version, which we sing now, is actually the result of alterations by various hands, most notably by Whitefield, who changed the opening couplet to the familiar one we know. In 1840—a hundred years after the publication of *Hymns and Sacred Poems*—Mendelssohn composed a cantata to commemorate Johann Gutenberg's invention of movable type printing, and it is music from this cantata, adapted by the English musician William H. Cummings, that fit the lyrics of "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing", and what propels the carol as it is known today.

There are a number of directions we could take in exploring what Wesley was trying to communicate with these much-loved words, but there is one line in particular that stands out to me more than the others. In the third verse, Wesley writes, "Mild He lays His glory by." Wesley's point is that God didn't just invade the world to save sinners through the incarnation. In coming as a babe to Bethlehem Christ also gave us an example to follow:

Consider the Apostle Paul's famous words, "Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.

And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore, God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:4-11).

I was thinking that Christmas is a challenging time for all of us, and I am not referring to the rush and the preparations, or the materialism for that matter. Gazing at the nativity, and reflecting on the humbleness of the King of Kings being born in a stable, unacknowledged by all but a group of shepherds who only came to the stable because the angel miraculously came and told them. Born to a peasant family, who were challenged by the scandalous nature of Jesus' birth.

Then the only one who saw the significance of his birth, was a paranoid king, who saw the Magi's message and pilgrimage as a threat to his well-ordered rule. This in the Christ whose birth we celebrate today and throughout this season. As Wesley indicates; Jesus willingly gave up all of his rights and privileges as God, in order to enter our world. Just imagine the sheer magnitude of what Jesus' willing gave up, to obediently follow his Father's mission.

The challenge at every Christmas, and really every day we live, is that to truly honour Christ we are called on to have the same mind as Jesus. That is, can we lay aside whatever bit of glory we have, and strive for to serve the good of others? Can we be content to be in humble circumstances, over looked by the world, if it means that we can serve others.

Bruce Thielmann, one time pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh, told of a conversation with a member of his flock who said, "You preachers talk a lot about 'do unto others,' but when you get right down to it, it comes down to basin theology." Thielmann asked,

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“Basin theology? What’s that?” The layman said by way of explanation, “Remember what Pilate did when he had the chance to acquit Jesus?

He called for a basin and washed his hands of the whole thing. But Jesus the night before his death, called for a basin and proceeded to wash the feet of his disciples. It comes down to basin theology: which one will you use?” (The Tardy Oxcart, p. 516)

This is really the challenge at Christmas. When we examine our world; which basin do we call for? It is what Paul challenges us with in our lesson from Colossians. “See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ. For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily.” (Col. 2:8-9)

“Hark the Herald angels sing, glory to the new born king”. Our King who continues to invite us to bring him into every encounter we have with people and every opportunity we have to lay our glory aside and glorify him.