

## HARK THE HERALD ANGELS SING

One of my favorite movies around Christmas time is Frank Capra's classic "It's a Wonderful Life." It is the story of a man named George Bailey who gets a chance through an angel to see what his life would have been like if he had never been born. Anyone who has ever watched this film will remember when George Bailey walks down the main street of Bedford Falls after it has been reduced to Pottersville. It is a creepy place. A quaint town reduced to a red-light district with loud music and the flashing of flesh-peddling neon signs. All because George Bailey had never been born. One person can make an enormous difference in the lives of others.

What would the world be like without Christmas? What would the world be like this morning if Jesus had never been born? How would it be different if that birth announcement by the angels more than 2000 years ago had not been given?

Today is Christmas and we are continuing in our series songs of Christmas. The song I want to talk about this morning is one of the most familiar of all the Christmas Carols. In fact this song has been named one of the most popular hymns in the English language. It was written by Charles Wesley, the brother of John Wesley who was a pioneer in the Methodist Church. In his lifetime Charles Wesley wrote over 3,000 hymns. This song along with "Jesus, Lover of my Soul" are considered to be the finest lyrics Wesley wrote.

Originally the song said "Hark how all the welkin rings, Glory to the King of Kings." Welkin means heaven. Wesley's verses were altered by William Cummings, an English musician. He rewrote Wesley's lyrics in 1885 almost 100 years after Wesley's death and then added them to the music of Felix Mendelssohn. Mendelssohn had written a cantata honoring the famous printer of the Bible, Johann Gutenberg. Cummings decided it was the right melody for Wesley's song.

Wesley first wrote the hymn from the words of Luke chapter 2. This is a very familiar passage. Even people who never crack open the Bible had a chance to hear it in the Charley Brown Christmas Special where Linus explains the true meaning of Christmas by reading those verses.

Luke 2:1 In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. 2 (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) 3 And everyone went to his own town to register. 4 So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. 5 He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. 6 While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, 7 and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. 8 And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. 9 An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. 11 Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. 12 This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." 13 Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, 14 "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests."

## 1. WHEN JESUS WAS BORN

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 hosts proclaim, Christ is born in Bethlehem.  
Hark! The herald angels sing, Glory to the newborn King.

Imagine what that birth announcement must have been like. Through history there have been a number of people who painted this scene but I doubt that any of them are even close to the reality. The quietness and darkness of the night out in the open country was suddenly interrupted by the explosion of light and the angels voice. The shepherds were terrified at the sight.

The first ever vocal radio broadcast was in 1906. Reginald Fessenden was a Canadian engineer and inventor. He grew up near Niagara Falls and was the son of an Anglican Pastor. On Christmas Eve he sent the Morse Code message "CQ...CQ", alerting all ships at sea to expect an important transmission. When the telegraphers had assembled in their shipboard radio shacks, they heard the unimaginable: The sound of the human voice! Instead of hearing dot-dot-dot, they heard for the first time through their earphones a human voice. He read from Luke chapter 2, the same verses I read to you this morning. He then played the song O Holy Night on the violin. Those who were listening that night were no less stunned than if a tree had talked to them. Earphones that had only ever carried Morse code were communicating the full range of sound.

Even that amazing experience was nothing compared to what the shepherds witnessed that night.

The word used here for good news is EUANGELIZO which comes from 2 words EU which means good/wonderful and AGGELOS which means messenger (the same word used for angel). Together it signifies good, merry, glad, and joyful tidings, that makes a mans heart glad, and makes him sing, dance, and leap for joy. -- William Tyndale

The gospel is neither a discussion nor a debate. It is an announcement. -- Paul Stromberg Rees

Angels are God's Messengers, and the News they give is usually Good. In this case it was better than good. It was the best news that has ever been proclaimed. They must have wondered why this Great News was not proclaimed to all Nations of the World. Why didn't God accompany the announcement with world-wide spectacles like thunder and lightening, meteor showers, maybe a lunar eclipse and erupting volcanoes ... anything to make the whole world take notice!

Instead God the Father sent an enormous Heavenly Choir to announce the birth of His Son to a few motley shepherds in an obscure little field. No one does things that way! It would be like the British Royalty sending messengers to proclaim the birth of Prince Williams first-born to a bunch of longshoremen loading crates on the docks ... or inviting a few random cab drivers to come and see the royal baby.

The shepherds were your average, everyday, blue-collar working folks. They did NOTHING to deserve the honor. In fact, that was the whole point. The gift God had given was for each of us.

## 2. WHO JESUS WAS

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 as man with men to dwell, Jesus our Emmanuel.  
Hark! The herald angels sing, Glory to the newborn King.

Charles Wesley managed to pack a lot of truth into a few short verses. If we stop to look at each phrase, it is like a mini-course in Christology.

a. His DEITY --"Christ by highest heaven adored; Christ, the everlasting Lord!"

John 1:1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

b. His VIRGIN BIRTH -- Late in time behold Him come, Offspring of the virgin's womb."

Isaiah 7:14 Therefore, the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.

c. His INCARNATION -- "Veiled in flesh the Godhead see, Hail, the incarnate deity"

John 1:14 The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

d. His HUMANITY -- "Pleased as man with men to dwell, Jesus our Emmanuel"

Hebrews 4:15 We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are --- yet was without sin.

An English Hymnist named Eric Routley once wrote concerning Wesley's hymns, "These hymns were composed in order that men and women might sing their way, not only into experience, but also into knowledge; --- that the cultured might have their culture baptized, and the ignorant might be led into truth by the gentle hand of melody and rhyme."

Truly Jesus was Emmanuel, God with us. He came so that He could die on the cross for our sins. He came to give his life for ours.

Moses Mendelssohn was the grandfather of Felix Mendelssohn who wrote the music to this song. He was far from being handsome. Along with a rather short stature, he had a grotesque hunchback. One day he visited a merchant in Hamburg who had a lovely daughter named Frumtje. Moses fell hopelessly in love with her. But Frumtje was repulsed by his appearance. When it came time for him to leave, Moses gathered his courage and climbed the stairs to her room to take one last opportunity to speak with her. She was a vision of heavenly beauty, but caused him sadness by refusing to look at him. After several attempts at conversation, Moses shyly asked, "Do you believe marriages are made in heaven?" "Yes;" she answered, still looking at the floor. "And do you?" "Yes I do," he replied. "You see, in heaven at the birth of each boy, the Lord announces which girl he will marry. When I was born, my future bride was pointed out to me. Then the Lord added, 'But your wife will be humpbacked.' "Right then and there I called out, 'Oh Lord, a humpbacked woman would be a tragedy. Please, Lord, give me the hump and let her be beautiful.' " Then Frumtje looked up into his eyes and was stirred by some deep memory. She reached out and gave Mendelssohn her hand and later became his devoted wife.

### 3. WHAT JESUS OFFERS

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 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.

Jesus brings LIGHT and LIFE. That means abundant life here on earth and everlasting life in heaven. The life that Jesus offers is unlike anything we find on earth.

John 1:4-5 In Him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.

Unfortunately, we as Christians do not clearly reflect that light we have been given. Some people believe that those who follow Jesus will be repressed, boring, and miserable. Nothing could be further from the truth. True abundant life is found only in Him.

Some people think that becoming a Christian means the party's over. To be spiritual is to be miserable. Unfortunately, sometimes Christians do not present an overly joy filled life. We hear words like holiness and we associate that with living in a monastery, separated from the world and alone.

That is not what holiness means. When we lived in Kuwait I had a friend. He is now a very influential pastor now in the Middle East, but he wasn't always. When he first came to work in there he was serving as a pastor in a small church which did not pay him well so he had to support himself by other means. When he was a kid he had learned to do magic tricks, and he would support himself doing magic shows. Pulling rabbits out of a hat, sawing people in two, that sort of thing.

One day he was called to do a show in a big conference center. There were a number of different acts that would be performing that day. He arrived and asked the organizers where he could get dressed. They said that they did not have a dressing room for him but that he could get dressed backstage. There were a number of different acts getting ready to go on. A dog show and a large Filipino burlesque dance group. Fortunately, he only had to change his shirt. He went to a corner and had taken off the shirt he was wearing and was getting ready to put on another when he heard a voice behind him say "Pastor Andy?" He turned around half dressed to find a Filipino girl from the dance group he recognized from the church. He felt so awkward standing there ...

The girl said that she was glad he was there, that one of the members of the dance group had just received word from home that her son was very sick and she wondered if he could pray for her. He put on his shirt and then called the whole dance group over. They got into a circle and then held hands and prayed for the girl whose son was ill. He said there was a powerful sense that God was there.

How do you define holiness? Most people do not immediately think of the backstage of a conference hall with a magician and burlesque dance group. Holy simply means set apart for God. When God breaks through the ordinary in is a holy time. When we set apart ourselves for him we are a holy people.

Holiness is not separation from the world, it is bringing the power and presence of God into the world.

Not only does Jesus bring Light and life but He also brings HEALING. Healing from damaged emotions and past hurts. The true healing that Jesus brings is reflected in the next verse: 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.

Our healing is in the fact that the issue of sin has been dealt with in our lives and now we have heaven to look forward to. A man named Ralph Stockman put it this way: "The hinge of history is on the door of a Bethlehem stable."

Let's close today by looking at the very first word -- HARK. We shouldn't be surprised to find some archaic language in this old Hymn. Charles Wesley lived in the 1800's. Hark is not a word we use anymore. It means PAY ATTENTION, or LISTEN! "Hark!" Is a word you shout in order to grab everyone's attention. The song could start with the words: HEY, YOU! Jesus often said, "Let him who has ears to hear listen." It does no good for God to speak if we will not listen.

The message of salvation has been proclaimed: Jesus has come. Salvation is yours if you want it. And the first thing we need to do is described by that one word: "Hark!" Are you listening to the voice of the Spirit today?

Hail the heaven born prince of peace! Hail the Sun of Righteousness! Each of us are called to HAIL Jesus. Hail does not refer to an ice rain. This isn't a Texan's way of talking about that place where the Devil live. The word means to acclaim, salute and acknowledge. To Hail is to give the Worship that is due to the One who brings us Light, Life, Healing, and Eternal Salvation.

A few weeks ago the news reported the story about a 5 year old boy that was terminally ill that died in Santa's arms. Eric Schmitt-Matzen from Knoxville TN has played Santa for many years. He looks every bit the part. A few weeks ago he had just gotten home after one of his gigs when he received a call from a nurse at a local hospital. The nurse asked him to come to the hospital right away because there was a very sick little boy who wanted to see Santa. Eric arrived at the hospital 15 minutes later and was given a toy by the boy's mother to hand to her son.

He walked in and saw the boy laying there. He was weak and it looked like he was ready to fall asleep. He sat down on his bed and asked, "Say, what's this I hear about you're gonna miss Christmas? There's no way you can miss Christmas! Why, you're my Number One elf!" He gave the boy the present, and he was so weak he could hardly open the wrapping paper. The boy asked him, "They say I'm going to die. How can I tell when I get to where I'm going?" He told the boy, "When you get there, you tell 'em you're Santa's Number One elf, and I know they'll let you in."

The boy then sat up, and asked one more question: "Santa, can you help me?" Before Eric could answer, the boy died in his arms. "I cried all the way home," Schmitt-Matzen told the Knoxville News Sentinel. "I was crying so hard, I had a tough time seeing good enough to drive."

Some day like that little boy we will all face death. You do not get into heaven by being Santa's number one elf. The little boy said "Santa, can you help me..." There are many different religions and philosophies that say they can help. But light and life is found in only one person. It is only by the gift of life that Jesus offers that we have true hope and healing.