

3. Hark The Herald Angels Sing

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Luke 2:8-14; Luke 15:3-7

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See the heavenly celebration at Jesus' birth and the heavenly celebration that accompanies our own second birth.

It was 1993. I was in the 12th grade, and it was the night before the prom. But that didn't matter because there was an even bigger party planned. A group of friends and I headed into Sydney. We went straight to the Sydney Harbor foreshore, where you have the Opera House on one side of you, and the Sydney Harbor Bridge on the other. There were giant TV screens set up, and a crowd gathered shoulder to shoulder all the way around the iconic Sydney harbor. Music was pumping and the atmosphere electric as we waited for the biggest announcement of our lives.

We waited. We danced to the live DJs. We yelled over the noise of the crowds to strangers who were holding up signs that said "Istanbul" and "Manchester." And then finally the wait was over.

At 4:17am, the President of the International Olympic Committee said these words: "The winner is Sydney."

Of course, I'm talking about the announcement that Sydney had won the 2000 Olympic Games.

The crowd erupted. There was something about that moment I'll never forget. The elation, the jubilation, the cheers of a hundred thousand voices that all seemed to be cheering as one. It was pure joy expressed, and shared.

By the time the cheering stopped, the sun was rising behind the Opera House, illuminating the harbor. It was almost 6am – we had been cheering for an hour and a half. It felt like only a minute had passed.

I wonder if you've ever experienced a moment of jubilation like that? A moment of pure joy and celebration so potent that it still touches you years later?

As humans, we love to celebrate. It's a universal impulse. All over the world right now, people are hanging decorations, preparing feasts, selecting gifts that they know will spark joy in those who receive them, those they love. There is something about

celebration that breaks the rhythm of the every day. Celebrations give us something to look forward to. Celebrations create memories that we look back on fondly.

It's almost like we are made to celebrate... And that's because celebration is built into the fabric of the universe that God has created.

So as we open the Bible today, why don't we pray that God will show us what a life of celebration looks like?

Our heavenly Father, will you bring the spirit of celebration into our hearts today as we look at the next part of the Christmas story. Fill us with joy, we pray. In Jesus' name. Amen

Well, all through December we are thinking about Christmas through the lens of Christmas carols. With their timeless words, and tunes that transport us back to our childhood, Christmas carols are part of our Christmas ritual. They are part of our celebration.

But Christmas carols also capture deep truths about Jesus and the Christian faith. And that's what I want to dig into as we look at our carol for today, *Hark the Herald Angels Sing*.

BTW is this anybody's favorite Christmas carol? Towards the end of the sermon I'm going to tell you why this is **almost** my favorite carol – and how you could possibly make it my all time number 1 Christmas carol. But I'll keep you in suspense for now ;-)

First a little bit of trivia about the hymn itself.

Hark! The Herald Angels Sing was originally written in 1739 by Charles Wesley. Wesley was one of the leaders of the great Christian revival that occurred in the 1700s across Britain and North America. Wesley himself wrote approximately 6,000 hymns, although many of them aren't in existence anymore.

Hark the Herald Angels Sing didn't always sound like this either. For its original tune, Wesley had asked for slow and solemn music. The tune we have today wasn't added until more than 100 years later, adapted from a piece by Mendelssohn. The original first line is also a bit different:

Hark how all the Welkin rings. (on your handout)

Welkin is a Middle English word of Germanic origin. Our Dutch and German speakers might recognize it as similar to the word for clouds. Welkin meant clouds or heavens. So: *Hark, how all the heavens ring...*

This is a carol about the moment that angels filled the skies when Jesus was born, and the heavens rang out with joyous celebration.

A Heavenly Celebration

So what exactly were the angels celebrating?

First, the angels were celebrating the birth of the newborn king.

The angels are called ‘heralds’ in our Christmas carol. A herald was an official messenger, someone who brought news. Heraldry is often pictured in the movies blowing a trumpet, announcing official news on behalf of the king. That’s what these angels were doing. They were announcing official news on behalf of God that a new king had been born.

But not just any king. Israel had had other kings, and none of their births was accompanied by angelic hosts. This king was special. This was the long-awaited Christ, the Messiah.

This is how gospel-writer Luke records it: (from handout)

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 that will cause great joy for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. (Luke 2:8-11)

Verse 2 of the carol puts it more poetically:

Christ by highest heav'n adored
Christ the everlasting Lord

Christ is adored. You know when you go to a concert, and the performance is incredible, and the audience doesn’t want to stop clapping and cheering? That’s because we adore

the performer. We pour out our appreciation and adoration and praise upon them because they are worthy of it.

All of heaven adores Jesus. In the book of Revelation in chapter 5, there is an image of this multitude of angels, thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand angels. And they surround the throne of Jesus and in a loud voice they are saying:

“Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain,
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength
and honor and glory and praise!” (Revelation 5:12)

This is the heavenly equivalent of an encore, where Jesus is the star. Because Christ is the everlasting Lord. The king who will rule forever. Not like an earthly king, born as the offspring of a husband and wife. Jesus’ birth is different. Verse 2 of the carol reminds us that Jesus is the:

Offspring of the Virgin's womb
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see
Hail th'incarnate Deity

Jesus is born to the virgin Mary, with no human father. Jesus is the son of God himself, God made flesh, deity incarnate. *Jesus our Emmanuel*, which means God with us.

When we see Jesus, we see God in human form.

Jesus himself said in John 14:9:

Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. (John 14:9)

Now, do you remember what happened in the OT any time someone saw God? What was it like when God showed up?

Think about Moses, when God passed in front of him in all his glory. Moses had to be hidden in the cleft of the rock because, as God said, “you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live.” (Exodus 33:20). And when Isaiah found himself standing before the throne of God, he fell on his face in terror. (Isaiah 6)

Whenever God shows up, he is accompanied by his **glory**. The manifestation of his presence, the representation of God’s holiness and power displayed in a way that we can see and understand, and appreciate with awe and wonder.

When the Israelites were escaping Egypt and the Egyptian chariots were chasing after them, God's glory appeared like a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. His glory separated God's people from certain death.

And then on Mount Sinai, God's glory appeared on the mountain top, thundering and rumbling like fire. And God's glorious presence was with his people in the tent of meeting, then in the temple, reminding his people that he was with them wherever they went.

And then on that dark Christmas night, God's glory appeared again. When that first angel appeared to the shepherds, we read that *'the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.'*

But the glory of the Lord is not meant to invoke fear in us. Instead it's meant to bring great joy. This glorious appearance of God's own Son is good news for all people, the angel says in Luke 2:10, because he is a Savior, born **for us**.

And that brings us to the second reason for celebration at Christmas.

Peace on Earth

I'm sure you can picture in your mind that iconic photograph that marked the celebration of the end of WWII – the kiss between a young sailor and a nurse in Times Square on August 14, 1945. He is wearing his sailor's uniform with the round hat, and she is dressed in a full white nurse's uniform. Around them everyone is smiling. The end of 6 years of war is something worth celebrating!

And celebrate they did. Something like 2 million people packed the streets of New York, partying for 2 days without stopping.

Peace on earth is something we all desire. Sadly the war to end all wars did not end all wars. I read somewhere that since 1776, America has only experienced 15 years without war.¹ And many other countries around the world are currently involved in conflict, or experiencing the residual effects of war. But we don't just need the peace that comes from the end of war. Just last week the news was filled with reports of yet another deadly shooting in a school. Our society struggles with violence every day. And each one of us experiences the pain of conflict in our personal relationships.

¹ <https://medium.com/traveling-through-history/only-15-years-of-peace-in-the-history-of-the-united-states-of-america-c479193df79f>

We long for peace.

And the promise of the Christmas story is that Jesus brings the peace that we so desperately desire.

Hail the heav'n-born Prince of Peace
Hail the Sun of Righteousness
Light and life to all He brings
Ris'n with healing in His wings

(BTW I mentioned earlier that Hark The Herald Angels Sing **could** be my favorite carol of all time. These lines are the reason why it could take out the #1 spot. I'm going to explain what I love about them in just a moment. But musicality is the real reason I love this hymn! There is a version of Hark The Herald Angels where these lines have an incredible harmony sung alongside the original melody, a high harmony called a descant. Look it up on Youtube – search for King's College Cambridge. The way they sing it, with the organ, it is like you can hear the angels singing for Jesus – I love it!)

Back to my train of thought...

The promise of the Christmas story is that Jesus brings the peace that we so desperately desire. Because the heaven-born Prince of Peace shines the light of righteousness into a dark world. God is good, and loving, and that means that he cannot stand by and watch injustice go unpunished. And so he sends his own Son into our world to bring justice. To bring righteousness. To mend the brokenness in our world. And to mend what is broken about us.

That line – *risen with healing in his wings* – it comes from the last book of the Bible where God promises that a day of judgment is coming. A date has been set when justice will be fully and finally executed on every evildoer. But for those who revere God's name, Malachi 4:2 says,

² But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its rays. (Malachi 4:2)

The birth of Jesus is the promise of healing, and of peace.

For some of us, healing is what we desperately need this Christmas. The holidays can be hard.

I've included a little quote from C.S Lewis at the bottom of your notes. It's from *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. In the story, the land of Narnia has been cursed by the White Witch.

"It is winter in Narnia," said Mr. Tumnus, "and has been for ever so long.... always winter, but never Christmas."

Sometimes life can feel like a never-ending winter, with no Christmas on the horizon. Nothing to look forward to but darkness...

Jesus' birth changes that forever. *Light and life he brings, Ris'n with healing in his wings.*

At the heart of the Christian message is a message of hope. Of light. Of restoration. Of healing.

As one writer put it:

Cursed as we are, cursed as this life so often seems, it will not always be winter. Christmas has come, and is coming... and I am longing for its blessings to flow far as the curse is found.² (Dr Steven Garber)

You see, Jesus came to undo the curse of sin, to see *God and sinners reconciled*.

Bringing peace on earth begins with bringing peace between God and ourselves. Now that's the Easter story of the cross and the empty tomb, but it all begins with Jesus' birth. And it ends with new birth for us...

The Other Heavenly Celebration

That brings me to the last big idea, which is the other heavenly celebration.

Hark The Herald Angels Sing finishes with these words:

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

² <https://washingtoninst.org/always-winter-never-christmas/>

At the heart of the Christmas story is the promise of new life for everyone who puts their trust in Jesus.

Jesus' life, death and resurrection set out a pattern of life, death and resurrection for us. And so even though we will face death one day, our death is the beginning of a life that will never again be tarnished by mourning or crying or pain. The sons and daughters of earth will be raised to life, just like Jesus was. Like a second birth, a new beginning, another chance at life. Isn't that something to look forward to when the world seems wintery?

But that second birth is not just a future promise. It's something that we can experience in this lifetime, today even. Because Jesus came to bring light, and life. He came so that we can experience life to the full (John 10:10). The enjoyment of a life lived knowing God's blessings, and God's forgiveness, and God's peace. A life where we bring blessing and peace and forgiveness wherever we go. A life where we are born again, a life lived in the footsteps of Jesus.

That's what Jesus wants us to enjoy today. It's the secret to happiness, and fulfilment. It's better than any Christmas gift you could receive, and it's the best Christmas gift you can give.

Now here's the surprise that accompanies our second birth. It's something that happens when we become a Christian, when we choose to live our life for Jesus' kingdom. At the moment that someone turns to Jesus for the first time, did you know that heaven erupts with the sound of angels celebrating the birth of a new child of God?

It's there in the Luke 15 passage on your handout. Jesus tells the story of a shepherd who lost one of his sheep. And so he goes out to search for the lost sheep, and when he finds it, he carries it home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together to celebrate, because his lost sheep is found. Jesus says that there is rejoicing in heaven *just like that* every time Jesus brings one of us home, every time that someone like you or me turns their life back to Jesus. The angels celebrate, just like they did on the day of Jesus' birth.

You see the Christmas story starts with the birth of Jesus, but it ends with new birth for you and for me, and a heavenly celebration that outshines any other.

That's worth thanking God for, isn't it?

