

Luke 2:8-14 (NRSV)

⁸In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

¹⁴“Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

Romans 1:1-6, 14-17 (NRSV)

Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, ² which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, ³ the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh ⁴ and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, ⁵ through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name, ⁶ including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ,

¹⁴I am a debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish ¹⁵ — hence my eagerness to proclaim the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

¹⁶For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. ¹⁷For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, “The one who is righteous will live by faith.”

*Can you feel the anticipation mounting? The day of the Lord's arrival is nearly here.
Not a moment too soon, it will be “Glory to the newborn King!”*

Suppose you had a HUGE, really, really, HUGE announcement to make and you wanted the whole world to hear it. How would you do it? Giant billboards? Television ads? Press conference? An internet something-or-other?

2,000 years ago, God had a big announcement and sent angels to proclaim God's Good News.¹ But, of course, it was a job too big even for the angels, so God sent many others to proclaim the gospel. A wild man from the wilderness named John, who lived on honey and locusts. A fisherman named Peter from the small town of Capernaum. Even a formerly believer-persecuting Pharisee named Paul, who carried the proclamation to the doorstep of Caesar.² God sent out many messengers then and God still sends out many more.

The first carol in this sermon series, “O Come, O Come Emmanuel,” with its haunting melody and plaintive lyrics, drove home that the coming of Jesus Christ is the long-awaited light in a darkened and aching world. Last week's carol, “Joy to the World,” proclaims that all creation -- people, mountains, and trees -- sing with joy at coming of the long-awaited Savior and King. Today's carol focuses us on the Good News of Christ that is brought by the angels and all God's messengers. This is a hymn of proclamation.

“Mild he lays his glory by, born that we no more may die”

You're not going to do better than lyrics by Charles Wesley and music by Felix Mendelssohn. Few of our great composers have matched Mendelssohn's gift for memorable melody. Fewer hymn-writers have matched Charles Wesley's gift for marrying

¹In the ancient Greco-Roman world, *evangelion*, a Greek word, was used to signify a proclamation of great importance, often carried by messengers who would proclaim the good news across the empire. In the New Testament, *evangelion* is variously translated as “good news,” “gospel,” and “glad tidings.” The word “angel” comes from the Greek, “*angelos*,” meaning “messenger.” It was a word used to describe a human envoy but especially a non-material, spiritual being. The angels who come to the shepherds are referred to, in today's carol, as “heralds,” an old-fashioned word for official messengers or criers, akin to the town criers that many communities once used to shout the news of the day.

²The various Caesars wrapped around themselves words like “gospel,” “savior,” and “lord.” Indeed much of the Greek vocabulary applied to Jesus in the New Testament was regularly applied to Caesar.

poetic word and Christian theology. Charles' hymns have always been an important source of doctrinal instruction within Methodism. Like so many of Wesley's hymns, this well-known, oft-sung carol is, as Kenneth Osbeck writes, "a condensed course in biblical doctrine in poetic form." Here are just a few of Wesley's well-packed phrases:

- "God and sinners reconciled" – Why has Christ come? To restore the relationship between God and a sinful, prideful humanity; to undo the tragedy of the Garden of Eden.
- "Joyful all ye nations rise" – As we saw last week, Christmas is not just for Christians. The angels' proclamation of Good News is for all peoples everywhere.
- "Veiled in flesh the Godhead see, hail th'incarnate Deity, pleased with us in flesh to dwell" – Not surprisingly, Wesley gives the Christian proclamation of incarnation – that the baby in the manger was God in the flesh – a *triple* phrase. Is there a more shocking, surprising, or profound claim that we could make? The creator of the universe, born to a woman in the most meager of surroundings, amidst animals and shepherds!? What does this tell us about the God we worship?
- "risen with healing in his wings" – Charles doesn't neglect Jesus' resurrection in this Christmas hymn.
- "mild he lays his glory by" – As Paul wrote, Jesus "did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing" (Phil. 2:6-7, TNIV).
- "born to raise us from the earth" – Charles even manages to work in our proclamation that just as Jesus was bodily resurrected, so shall we all be bodily resurrected. This is an ever-needed reminder that when we say the Apostles' Creed and affirm our belief in "the resurrection of the body," we are talking about our own bodies, not Jesus' body.
- "born to give us second birth" – Another ever-needed reminder that, by definition, all Christians are new creations (2 Cor. 5:17), born a second time, born from above (John 3). The phrase "born again" is mistakenly used when it is used to refer to a subset of Christians. All Christians have been born again.

Paul's proclamation to the Romans

In much the same vein as Wesley's hymn, Paul opens his letter to the Christians in Rome with a ringing proclamation of the gospel, the good news, about Jesus Christ, who is the long-promised Son of God and Lord, resurrected, descended from David, whose own faithfulness reveals the righteousness of God, that is, God's own faithfulness to the covenant made long before. As the angels brought the proclamation to the shepherds, so Paul is obligated to bring this good news to Jew and Gentile alike, for this gospel is the saving power of God. Truly, this is "good news of great joy."

The Story of "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing"

In his book, *101 More Hymn Stories*, Kenneth Osbeck tells us the story of this popular carol¹:

"Hark! the Herald Angels Sing" is another of the more than 6,500 hymns from the pen of Charles Wesley that have enriched Christian hymnody. It is thought to have been written approximately one year after his dramatic Aldersgate conversion experience of 1738. This text, along with "Jesus, Lover of My Soul," is generally considered to be one of Wesley's finest. According to John Julian, noted hymnologist, this is one of the four most popular hymns in the English language. It certainly has become one of the classic, Christmas carol hymns to the present time, sung thousands of times every year all around the world. The text first appeared in *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1739), with the first stanza beginning:

Hark, how all the welkin (archaic for "heavens" – "sky") rings,
Glory to the King of Kings!

The text was altered to its present form in George Whitefield's, *Collection of 1753*. In its original version, the text consisted of ten four-line stanzas. Although there have been various alterations made on this text through the years, the present version is still basically the product of Charles Wesley.

Continued in the page 3 textbox

K. Osbeck's Story of "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing"

(cont. from the p. 2 textbox)

Like so many of Wesley's hymns, this text is really a condensed course in biblical doctrine in poetic form. Following the re-telling of the angelic visit to the shepherds in the initial stanza, the succeeding verses teach such spiritual truths as the virgin birth, Christ's deity, the immortality of the soul, the second or new birth, and a concern for Christ-like living. As the late Eric Routley, noted English hymnist, observes in his book, *Hymns and Human Life*: "These [Wesley] 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."

The tune [for this carol], "Mendelssohn," was contributed by one of the master composers of the early nineteenth century, Felix Mendelssohn. He was born into a Jewish-Christian home on February 3, 1809, in Hamburg, Germany, and died at Leipzig, Germany, on November 4, 1847. Mendelssohn was a highly acclaimed boy prodigy, making his first public appearance as a pianist, at the age of nine. Felix Mendelssohn was not only a noted performer and conductor, but also a prolific composer throughout his brief life-time. His works included symphonies, chamber music, concertos, as well as much organ, piano, and vocal music. His most popular work still widely performed today is the oratorio, *The Elijah*, first performed in England on August 26, 1846. The "Mendelssohn" hymn tune was adapted from the composer's *Festgesang*, Opus 68, composed in 1840. This was a work that Mendelssohn wrote to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the invention of printing. The hymn setting of this music was made by William H. Cummings, a noted English musician and scholar, and was first published in Richard Chope's *Congregational Hymn and Tune Book* of 1857. Although other tunes have been tried with Wesley's text, the "Mendelssohn" has become the recognized music for this carol hymn.

It is interesting to note briefly the history of our Christmas carol hymns. The word "carol" is derived from the word "carola," which means a ring dance. Carols, then, have long been thought of as an early form of sacred folk music, dating in time from the early middle ages. During this period they seem to have been an integral part of the early mystery and miracle plays which were widely used by the medieval church for teaching its religious dogmas. The carols were sung during these plays as an intermezzo between the various scenes, much like the role of a modern-day orchestra between the scenes of a drama production. Then, in 1627, the English Puritan parliament abolished the celebration of Christmas and all other "worldly festivals." During the remainder of the seventeenth century and well into the eighteenth century, there was a scarcity of these folk-like carol hymns in England. Charles Wesley's "Hark! the Herald Angels Sing" represents one of the relatively few, important carol hymns to have been written during this time.

READING WITH HEART & MIND, DEC 16 – DEC 22

These are lectionary readings for the third weekend of Advent. Here is the key question to ask yourself about each of these readings. Why do you think it was selected by church leaders as especially appropriate for Advent? Or to put it another way, when they had the entire Bible from which to select, why these passages?

Sunday, Isaiah 35:1-10 What joy at being brought home from exile, being led out of the darkness and into the light!

Monday, Zephaniah 3:14-20 More from the prophets on the joy of God's coming and the redemption of his people.

Tuesday, Luke 1:47-55 What is most striking to you about Mary's song. What will the birth of her son mean for the world?

Wednesday, John 1:6-8, 19-28 John's depiction is markedly different from the synoptic gospels? In what ways does John's portrait stand out from the others?

Thursday, James 5:7-10 This passage is about patience in suffering. Why would it be an Advent Scripture selection?

Friday, 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24 This passage is filled with lots of instructions about how to build and sustain good relationships within the community of believers. How could you put some of this teaching to work during this Christmas season?

Saturday, Philippians 4:4-7 What will you rejoice about this Christmas? Will you rejoice in the Lord? What do you think that means?

Sermon Notes

A Dickens of a Christmas

In Scott Engle's Sunday morning class, we are looking at the world-transforming coming of Jesus Christ through the familiar Charles Dickens' story, *A Christmas Carol*. Without ever referring to Jesus by name, Dickens created a memorable story about the power of Christmas (hint, Christ!) to transform lives.

This four-week series continues through Sunday, December 23.

It is never too late to join us, as each week stands on its own.

Scott's class meets every Sunday in Festival Hall at 11am.

Coming in January: *Exploring World Religions*

**The Winter Bible Academy registration is now open at
www.thebibleacademy.com**

We've got another great class line-up including the enormously popular Alpha class on marriage, as well as the Alpha introduction to religion and faith. We have a Sunday morning class with Rev. Doug Meyer on holy habits. We're also offering two one-day Saturday workshops: Rev. Michael Reeves will be teaching us *How to Study the Bible* and Laura Zuber will repeat her workshop on spiritual gifts. Scott Engle will be teaching classes on Jesus and on David. There is much more and we hope that you'll sign up for one of our many daytime and evening classes. Childcare will be provided.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. In this study, I gave you a head-start on understanding the Christian theology of Charles Wesley's hymn for today. You might grab a UMC hymnal and go through a similar exercise using one of his Advent carols, "Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus" (#196). Go through the hymn, phrase by phrase, and try to put it in your own words. What is Charles' saying about Jesus and his work? For example, why is Jesus "long-expected?" Why is he "Israel's strength and consolation?" Is he really the "dear desire of every nation?" How does Jesus release us from our "fears and sins?"
2. There are fifty-one hymns by Charles Wesley in the UMC hymnal but only these two (#196 and #240) are meant for Advent and Christmas. Why do you think this would be? The page three text box gives a clue.
3. There's no question that Paul's letters can, at times, be difficult to read and understand (see 2 Peter 3:15-16 for confirmation of this!). You might take Romans 1:1-6 and express it in your words. Using several different translations might help you in this. What is it about Jesus that Paul wants to lift up to his readers in the opening sentence of this very long letter? What does Paul say about himself? How is this a proclamation, similar to that brought to the shepherds by the angels?