

**Sing it Like you Mean It! Confessing the Carols  
Hark the Herald Angels Sing – Ps 29:1-11, Mal 4:1-6**

Well brothers and sisters, as we continue on with our “Sing it like you Mean It!” series on the Carols of Christmas you might be wondering... how exactly... are Psalm 29 and Malachi 4 relevant to the carol that we are looking at this morning?

Well don’t worry that will become much clearer as we go along - but before we get started on that I have a bit of a game to play with you this morning. By a show of hands, how many of you can finish the following song lyrics? “I once was lost...” Ok \_\_\_\_\_ how does it go? And what song is that from?

What about “Then sings my soul...” Ok \_\_\_\_\_ how does it go and what song is that from?

Ok last one here “These are the days of...” Ok \_\_\_\_\_ how does it go and what song is that from?

Alright well done everyone – now how well do you think you would do if I asked to you tell me the scripture verses which those lyrics are based on? Without using Google... That would be a bit tougher wouldn’t it.

Now some of you might be going – *“oh, we just read a scripture verse about God sending Elijah, what was our second scripture passage this morning, Malachi something or other.”*

Don’t worry I’m not going to quiz you on that, but the point of this little exercise is to demonstrate how much easier it is to remember something when it is set to music and we’ve sung it over and over again.

And that brothers and sister is also an important part of why we sing in church.

First and foremost, as we learned last Sunday, we sing because it is what God’s faithful people do - in obedience to the command that we are to worship God – we sing praises to

Him. Psalm 149:1 *“Sing to Yahweh a new song, his praise in the assembly of his faithful people.”*

But singing also helps us to remember what we are singing about, the things we are praising God for, and what we are stating to be true about God – who He is, what He is like, and what He has done and how we can respond in obedience to that. Singing these things etches them into our memory and helps us to remember them.

So, there are two implications that come from this. First, its important that what we are singing is biblically based, correct and theologically true. And second, If we’re singing it like we mean it – then what difference does it make in our everyday life?

Now the first implication about being theologically true is why there are a few songs that don’t make it on to the play list here at Valleyview and why I used one of them – Days of Elijah - in the guessing game we played earlier on.

Because that particular song is a good example of how lyrics can be biblical in one sense, we heard the reference in our scripture reading from Malachi about Elijah – but at the same time be theologically incorrect, because in this instance the song gets the covenant timeline and its fulfillment in Christ all messed up.

But yet it’s a catchy tune and very singable so it’s become popular and Christians can remember the lyrics quite well – which shows how its much easier to remember lyrics, even incorrect ones, than it is to remember correct theology and scripture references.

And this is an unfortunate indicator that biblical literacy and theological understanding are at very low levels among Christians in North America these days. However, the good news is that we can work to improve this by simply improving the level of correct biblical and theological content in the songs that we sing in church.

So that's what I did, I took Days of Elijah, made a few lyrical modifications put in an additional third verse, and now we have a song that helps us remember the proper relationship between the old and the new covenant and the coming Kingdom of God – I called it Days of the Kingdom.

Now this is not the first time in the history of the Church that biblical literacy and theological knowledge have been wanting. Prior to the invention of the Printing Press, and the Protestant Reformation the lack of bibles in the common language and the ability of people to actually read them was a serious challenge for the teaching ministry of the church.

And even after the invention of Printing Press, and the Reformation's gift of translating the bible into the vernacular – the low levels of public literacy and education meant there were still a lot of people who wouldn't be able to read the scriptures and use them to gain theological understanding.

Now what does all of this have to do with our featured carol this morning? Well, it relates to the historical context of how Hark the Herald Angels came to be.

And this particular back-story starts on May 21 of 1738 with Charles Wesley experiencing what some call a conversion but is better described as the empowering work of the Holy Spirit.

After this experience he felt a renewed strength to spread the gospel and began to write poetry that would be set to music and become hymns, and over the course of his lifetime Charles wrote more than 6000 hymns – including the carol that we are looking at this morning, and his goal in doing so was to teach the poor and illiterate correct theology and biblical knowledge through singing.

In fact, his brother John Wesley – the founder of the Methodist Church - said that the best theological book of his time was his brother's Hymnbook.

So, this is why we started off this message talking about music and lyrics and correct theology – because it very much forms the context for the writing of Hark the Herald Angels Sing.

Now, the original version of this carol was written by Charles about a year after his empowering experience. It was Christmas morning and he could hear the church bells ringing and apparently this was the inspiration for his opening line “Hark! How all the welkin rings!” and from there on Charles wrote the remaining five verses for his Christmas day hymn.

Now it’s a bit lengthy but I think its important for us to take a moment to familiarize ourselves with that original version. So, let me read it for and we’ll also have it up on the screen as well.

Verse 1: *HARK how all the Welkin rings / "Glory to the King of Kings, / "Peace on Earth, and Mercy mild,/ "GOD and Sinners reconcil'd! / Joyful all ye Nations rise, / Join the Triumph of the Skies, / Universal Nature say / "CHRIST the LORD is born to Day!*

Verse 2: *CHRIST, by highest Heav'n ador'd, / CHRIST, the Everlasting Lord, / Late in Time behold him come, / Offspring of a Virgin's Womb. / Veil'd in Flesh, the Godhead see, / Hail th' Incarnate Deity! / Pleas'd as Man with Men t' appear / JESUS, our Immanuel here!*

Verse 3: *Hail the Heav'nly Prince of Peace! / Hail the Sun 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*

Verse 4: *Come, Desire of Nations, come,/ Fix in Us thy humble Home, / Rise, the Woman's Conqu'ring Seed,/ Bruise in Us the Serpent's Head./ Now display thy saving Pow'r, / Ruin'd Nature now restore, / Now in Mystic Union join / Thine to Ours, and Ours to Thine.*

Verse 5: *Adam's Likeness, LORD, efface, / Stamp thy Image in its Place,/ Second Adam from above,/ Reinstat*

*Love./ Let us Thee, tho' lost, regain, /Thee, the Life, the Inner Man: O! to All Thyself impart,/ Form'd in each Believing Heart.*

So, there we have the original version of the carol and its pretty easy to see which lyrics were carried forward to the current version and also easy to notice what was left behind, its also rather obvious that the original version was very theological, especially verses 4 and 5.

Charles makes reference to the covenant promise in Gen 3 where God says to Eve that one of her offspring (seed) will crush (bruise) the head of the serpent. And he brings up the concept of Mystic Union – thine to ours and ours to thine which is another way of saying what I often say when we celebrate the Lord's supper “that our life is in Christ and His life is in ours.” And Charles also makes references to the first Adam and the second Adam from 1 Cor 15:45, and references to our being made in the Image of God.

So, lots of deep theological concepts packed into these verses – and while the song doesn't elaborate on them, at least those

who would sing it would become familiar with and remember the references and terminology and that would support opportunities for deeper understanding and further instructions to take place through preaching and teaching in on these subjects at church.

And that is what the original version of Hark! seeks to do with the Birth of Christ. The original version has nothing to do with Angels singing, rather it is recital of all the significant implications which the birth of Christ brings and will bring about for our world.

Now I have to confess that as a minister I much prefer the original version, however... as much as poetry and music can lend their services to assist in the teaching of theology and matters of the faith, poetry and music are not theology and doctrine, they are separate entities created by God in their own rights and subject to their own design and laws.

So, all that is to say that no matter how poetically you are able to express theological concepts – five verses crammed full of

theology is a bit too much. And – since the original music that Charles had commissioned for these lyrics was slow and solemn and contemplative... well you can see that it wouldn't be a very popular hymn and neither would it teach very effectively.

Now, you might find it odd that a Christmas day hymn would be slow and solemn, but remember at this point in history the public celebration of Christmas was more like our Stampede week. While Christmas day church services focused on the birth of Christ, celebrations outside the church were just an excuse for drunken revelry and excess and were largely viewed as a public nuisance. So, the last thing the Church wanted to do was encourage this kind of behavior through exuberant and lively celebration and songs.

Which then begs the question of how the original Hark! became the upbeat carol Hark! the Herald Angels Sing that we are all so familiar with today? Well brothers and sisters, that occurred in two stages.

The first occurred in 1758 when Charles' friend and fellow Methodist preacher George Whitefield changed the opening line to "Hark! The herald angels sing." George made some other changes as well but these were less notable and did not make it into the final version of the carol.

The second round of modifications occurred almost one hundred years later in 1855 when musician William H Cummings finally set these words to the triumphant joyful upbeat melody that we now enjoy.

But this music was not his own, it was written fifteen years earlier by the famous German Jewish composer Felix Mendelssohn to celebrate the anniversary of Guttenberg inventing the printing press – so that's how the printing press ties into all of this.

Cummings heard this music and somehow figured it was the right melody for Charles Wesley's Christmas Hymn and with a little lyrical adaption to include a chorus line after each the three verses, it fit perfectly!

Cummings version dropped the last two verses and thus the final version of Hark The Herald Angels Sing - which we are all familiar with - finally came into being, and was published in the Church Hymnbook in 1877.

Now its all very interesting to learn this information about this particular Christmas carol - but so what - right?

Well let me share some relevant applications that I think both the back-story of this carol and the content of the carol itself have for us at Christmas this year.

First, the history of this carol reminds us there was a time when Christmas celebrations were very different from what we know, and how the Church observed the birth of Christ with a simple service and encouraged its members to refrain from the raucous socializing and partying that went on in the rest of society.

Do you remember how we had to do things differently during that first Christmas of the pandemic?

Many of our traditions and customs were put on hold and set aside and at that time it became even more important for us to focus on actual implications of the birth of Jesus Christ in our lives – much in the same way that the original version and history of this carol reminds us what those implications are.

Instead of a Christmas trip to renew us – we had to reflect on Christ renewing the creation. Rather than being sad and depressed that your holiday plans are crushed – we had to focus on rejoicing that the head of the serpent was crushed!

We can do the same thing now as well brothers and sisters...

Instead of Santa Claus coming down the chimney or coming to town, what about a focus on the Word be-coming flesh, coming down to dwell among us? Instead manipulating kids with the fear of being on the naughty list – what about modeling the gratitude that our savior was born to save us from THE naughty list... which we are all on! Focusing on this as the essence of grace – getting something good that we aren't able to be good enough to deserve...

Instead of dreaming of a white Christmas, why not dream of and anticipate the day when the creation is restored when Christ returns- on his white horse! You see how this works?

This history of this carol calls us out of the way in which our present customs and celebrations actually obscure the theological implications of Jesus birth and reorients our perspective about what is actually significant about it.

The second application comes from what this carol has in common with Psalm 29, which we read this morning.

Both of them have references to angels praising God right? In Psalm 29 we read that in vs. 1-2 where it says *“Ascribe to the Lord, you heavenly beings... (angels) glory and strength... the glory due his name; worship the Lord in the splendor of his holiness”* and in the carol, well... it says “Hark the Herald angels sing, glory to the newborn King!”

So they both are about angels praising God – AND both are also examples of taking some music that did not previously

praise God and turning it into something that does. We know the story behind of the music for the Christmas carol, but did you know that Ps 29 used to be sung as a hymn of praise to the pagan god Baal – until King David took it and modified it and re-directed it, redeemed it to become a hymn of praise to Yahweh? And now its in the bible! It’s true.

So, one of the significant implications of Christ’s incarnation at His birth is that it redeems us as Humans. It takes our rebellious human nature, redeems it and reforms it so that we desire to seek God, to serve God and give praise to God.

And just as God does this with us, we are called to do this with the world around us. Just like a secular melody was conscripted, redeemed for sacred purposes – we are called to redeem our culture, our business, our scholarship, sports, family, everything... so that it serves God’s kingdom, so that it is reformed to become sacred and no longer secular.

So, what is Christ putting on your radar that requires you to take it from secular and make it sacred? Is it something at



work, in your school, in your community, in your family? And what needs to be done to make that happen – do you just need to put some different words to it? Like the Mendelssohn melody? Or do you need to just correct some of the words – like I did with Day of Elijah? Or is it a complete 180 degree shift that needs to occur – like Psalm 29, to go from praising an idol to giving praise to the true God – born at Christmas?

So this carol is an example of how we are to live out the implications of Christmas by making the secular sacred.

And lastly, the three verses of this carol contain a number of significant theological truths, but there is one in particular which underlies all the rest which I would like to highlight so that whenever we sing this carol – you will remember it and be reminded of it.

So in verse 1 let's highlight the key line "God and sinners reconciled..." This describes the peace that has come to earth, it is the result of the mercy mild, and it is why the nations joyfully rise and join the triumph of the skies.

Then in verse 2 let's highlight "hail the incarnate deity..." this is where God takes on our human nature through the virgin's womb, he becomes veiled in flesh, pleased as a man with men to dwell, Emmanuel God with us.

And finally, in verse 3 let's highlight "born that man no more may die..." The death and brokenness in our world are why we need the prince of peace, of shalom, restoration, wholeness. It is why the sun of righteousness has healing in its wings – a messianic reference from the passage we read from Malachi 4 this morning.

Now what ties all of this together is the biblical and theological truth that we are all completely and totally affected by sin, under the power of sin, guilty of sin, and bear the consequences of sin.

And everything that has just been highlighted is necessary to know and understand and believe, and we consider it to be good news and worth celebrating because it addresses our

sin, it deals with debt our sin, it frees us from the power of sin and undoes the consequences and curse of sin.

So, brothers and sisters, let the words of this carol reminds us of this truth, and to sing it... to sing it like you mean it... and this the truth that it highlights, is to proclaim and confess that ***you are a sinner in need of a savior!***

That is why we need Christmas brothers and sisters - that is why Jesus needed to be born, and this is why the angels sing, it is ultimately what this carol is all about.

So believe it, put your faith and trust in it... and I think its time to get the band back up here so that we respond – and let's sing it like we mean it!

Amen.