

Folks, happy new year to you all. The service for January 3rd is now up on our YouTube and Facebook pages. Links are below. Rev. Ian.

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Hymns of Christmas: Charles Wesley January 3, 2021

A few weeks ago, our Philippians study group were introduced to one of Charles Wesley's famous hymns that we all have sung at Christmas: ***Hark the Herald Angels Sing***. He wrote it in 1739; it was a 10-stanza poem called "Hymn for Christmas Day." Wesley was reported to have averaged 10 poetic lines a day for 50 years. He wrote 8,989 hymns, 10 times the volume composed by the only other candidate (Isaac Watts) who could conceivably claim to be the world's greatest hymn writer. His practice was to take biblical phrases from the prophets, the Gospels, and the epistles, and weaves them together poetically to celebrate the birth of Jesus and to explain what the bible taught. In the case of ***Hark the Herald***, it was to explain why the Incarnation happened. Why did that particular hymn come up in our study, you may ask? Well, we were seeking to understand what Paul's poem or hymn inserted into chapter 2 of Philippians might mean regarding Christ's deity. It brought to mind Wesley's famous line from his hymn, *Hark the Herald Angels Sing*, which goes like this: ***Veiled in flesh the Godhead see Hail the incarnate Deity Pleased as man with man to dwell Jesus, our Emmanuel!*** Evidently Wesley had a high Christology in which Christ was God.

As I was exploring this hymn, I noticed something I hadn't known. I looked through our Presbyterian hymn book and discovered to my surprise that Charles Wesley's hymns are well represented. You also might be surprised to know that there many of our favourite hymns in our hymn book were written by Wesley. For example, there are nineteen Wesley hymns in our book. Some you will recognize. For example, he wrote: Come thou long-expected Jesus (#110); Hark the Herald (#139) Jesus Christ is Risen today (#243) Christ the Lord is Risen Today (#247) Hail the day that sees Christ rise (#265) Rejoice the lord is king (#267) And can it be that I should gain (#267) Love divine all loves excelling (#371) Oh for a thousand tongues to

sing (#374) O servants of God (#459) Let saints on earth in concert sing (#615) Jesus, lover of my soul (#676)

I'm sure you recognize some of these. Many of these are certainly among the church's favourite hymns. It was also interesting to note that his son, Samuel Wesley, is also found in our hymn book. He was a prominent musician in the late 18th and early 19th century. He wrote the music to #479 The church's one foundation, and to these others hymns in our book: #503; #567; #575 Lead me Lord; #584; #597; #605; #767 Lord, speak to me.

And to mention the family of Charles Wesley is not to overlook the outstanding work of his brother John who formed the Wesleyan Church. Both brothers were clergymen in the Anglican Church and both went as missionaries to Georgia. John served as rector of Christ church in Savannah. Wesley's ministry in America was intended not only for English settlers but also for friendly native tribes in Georgia—with the hope, he once said, "of saving my own soul." The surprising fact is that John and his brother had not been converted to Christ. Relationship issues and political conflict forced them back to England; they were deeply disappointed and returned feeling spiritually drained and lost. But shortly after, through different influences, (John was converted at a religious society meeting on Aldersgate Street in London where he famously said "my heart was strangely warmed) both were converted to the faith. This radically changed their lives. Later, through the influence of George Whitfield both brothers were inspired to go outside the Anglican places of worship to preach the Gospel outside to huge crowds. They did this all over the country. Charles himself preached to over 20,000 in 1738, at Kennington Common.

I should note in an aside, that in my home town of Arbroath, approximately five hundred miles north of London, John Wesley opened the little Wesleyan chapel that still stands on the street I walked down every day. The Wesley family had an enormous influence on the spread of the Christian faith in England, Scotland and Wales.

Back to our "Hark the Herald Angels Sing": the first stanza focuses on the proclamation of the angels to the shepherds of the birth of Christ. During our Christmas Eve Service, we read this passage from Luke: ***Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good***

news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. (Luke 2:9-11)

Luke 2:13 and 14 say that suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!” The stanza invites all the nations to join the celebration of the angels. And look at the phrase “God and sinners reconciled.” That’s the whole point. It reminds us that the fundamental problem we all have is our separation from God. Our relationship with God may be broken, but the gospel proclaims that Jesus came to bring the human family back into relationship with God. Paul tells us that ***in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. (2Cor 5:19)***

Now we arrive at the heart of the matter in the next Stanza. ***Christ, by highest heaven adored: Christ, the everlasting Lord; Late in time behold him come, Offspring of a virgin’s womb. Veiled in flesh, the Godhead see; Hail, th’ incarnate Deity: Pleased, as man, with men to dwell, Jesus, our Emmanuel! Hark! the herald angels sing, “Glory to the new-born King!”***

Here Wesley draws his inspiration from several sources, both from the Old Testament and the New. The words, “late in time” is drawn from Paul’s writings to the Galatians that we read: ***But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. (Gal 4:4)*** Paul clearly means that the time was the most propitious. It came hundreds of years after the last Old Testament prophetic word; it came at a politically strategic time when the Rome had control of a vast empire. Their infrastructure of roads and bridges and waterways and trade, as well as a uniform Latin language, enabled the spread of Jesus’ Gospel to the far corners of Empire.

We should note, also, that Wesley wants us to know that Christ is the “everlasting Lord.” Again, he draws on many of Paul’s writings that confirm that this Jesus is no mere “teacher and healer”, or “witty storyteller”, all of which he was of course. But he is much more! All over Paul’s writings, as

well as the other apostolic writers, we read lines like this: ***He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. (Col 1:15ff)*** It is Paul's high Christology that Wesley draws on in the lines of this hymn.

The next phrase, "offspring of a virgin's womb...Jesus our Emmanuel", also draws on both Old and New Testaments. These words come directly out of Isaiah the prophet: ***Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. (Isaiah 7:14)*** remember so well our professor at college reminding us that the Hebrew text is properly translated "young woman", not "virgin". In fact, the word "virgin" only enters our New Testament in Matthew 1:23 when he quotes the Isaiah passage from the Septuagint version which was translated in the third century BC. The Greek translates Isaiah's Hebrew word "young woman" to be "virgin". I know this is a technical point, but an important point nevertheless. I suspect Isaiah is really talking about a son his wife will have that will be a sign to Ahab the king. He, Jesus, is our Emmanuel, or God with us! And I love the phrase ***veiled in flesh the Godhead see, Hail, th' incarnate Deity.*** This is an echo of John 1: ***And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:1ff)***

In the final stanza Wesley captures the central purpose of Jesus' birth. It goes: ***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 son of earth, Born to give them second birth. Hark! the herald angels sing, "Glory to the newborn King!"***

Prince of Peace is the title given at the end of Isaiah 9:6, ***For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*** When we sing "Mild he lays his glory by," we are reminded of the great

Christological hymn of Philippians 2, which includes the phrase “**he emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men**”. And we sing “Born that man no more may die,” and “Born to give them second birth,” as Peter reminds us. **Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. (1Peter 1:3)**

Yes, this is more than a simple Christmas hymn. Wesley succeeds in capturing the central essence of the faith: Jesus is God in flesh who came to save us from our sins and bring us back into right relationship with God the Father. This is the central affirmation of this hymn and reflects Wesley’s evangelical faith that was born the day he found his Saviour. The last line of the hymn expresses this beautifully: **Born that man no more may die: Born to raise the son of earth, Born to give them second birth.**

It is this second birth that shaped Wesley’s life and mission. So next time we sing this hymn perhaps the words will have a deeper meaning for each one of us.

Amen