

“Hark! The Herald Angels Sing”

Luke 2:8-14

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This morning, we continue to look at our favorite yuletide carols and hymns by examining “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing.” Although this famous song has long been credited to Charles Wesley, the brother of John Wesley and founder of Methodism, it’s actually the work of several persons. It is said that upon hearing the church bells peal in London on Christmas Day in 1739, Wesley wrote the lyrics to it with the original opening being “Hark! How all the welkin rings/Glory to the King of Kings,” the “welkin” being another name for the firmament or highest heaven. The tune he originally used for it was the same as his Easter hymn, “Christ the Lord is Risen Today.” Fourteen years later, the famous preacher George Whitfield, a close associate of the Wesleys, edited it for a collection of hymns he was planning to publish. He altered the first stanza to what we have today: “Hark! The herald angels sing ‘Glory to the newborn king.’” In 1855, William Cummings took Wesley’s lyrics and put it to a tune that had been written by the German composer Felix Mendelssohn resulting in the popular Christmas carol we have today.

This magnificent hymn tells of the sudden appearance of “herald angels” and their announcement to a group of shepherds of the birth of Jesus, Judah’s long-awaited king. In ancient times, the heralds were persons who went to a town or village before the king had arrived to announce that the monarch was coming and that the kingdom was at peace. Wesley’s intent here is to announce that with the birth of Christ, the peace of God’s kingdom has now come into the world with God and sinners being reconciled. In the FIRST stanza, he urges the rest of the nations to join the chorus of angels in rejoicing at the news that Christ is born in Bethlehem: “Glory to the new-born King!” In the SECOND stanza, the identity of that child is revealed, that he is God in the flesh, the fulfillment of divine prophecy; Christ is “Emmanuel” or “God with us.” With the THIRD verse, the inhabitants of the earth are exhorted to hail this “Prince of Peace,” this “sun of righteousness” who brings light and healing in his wings. God has voluntarily laid aside the privileges of divinity that he might become “one with us” and that through him, we might receive new life. As the recipients of such grace, we find OURSELVES joining in with the angels and the rest of the hosts in heaven in singing, “Glory to the newborn King!”

Thus, what we really have here is Wesley’s retelling of the angels’ song as related in our New Testament lesson when they praised God singing, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased!” This is the first doxology or hymn of praise in a gospel—Luke--that could be called the “Gospel of praise.” For instance, a few verses later, Simeon praises God at Jesus’ dedication at the Temple. In chapter four, we are told that our Lord was glorified by many who heard his teachings in the synagogues. Throughout Luke, there are numerous references to praise offered up by persons who witness or are the recipients of his healing power. His triumphal entry into Jerusalem is accompanied by the praises of those who line the street to welcome him, and even upon his death, the Roman centurion glorifies God for what he had witnessed there at the cross. Finally, after the risen Christ departs from his disciples, we are told they returned to Jerusalem with great joy and were continually in the Temple praising God. The testimony of scripture and personal experience is that when people

undergo a personal encounter with the living God through Jesus Christ, they cannot help BUT respond with awe and wonder and praise and adoration. And WHY? At the birth of Jesus, the angels along with the heavenly host announce to the world the birth of him through whom we will find HEALING for our infirmities, FORGIVENESS for our sins, and RECONCILIATION with our God; he who will bestow upon us his personal Spirit and thus make our heart his home so that we will never be separated from either his presence or his love. It is the birth of him who by his resurrection from the dead will share that same new life with US so that death—ETERNAL death—will no longer have any hold over us- THIS was all bound up in the angels' expression of praise and adoration.

But in addition to “Glory to God in the highest,” the angelic hosts sing “and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased,” a peace which will be "good news" to the poor. But this "peace on earth" was NOT a MILITARY peace, that is, a peace which is often enforced at the end of a spear or a gun, nor was this merely some INTERIOR peace, an emotional sense of well-being which we might feel about ourselves. Nor was it considered to be some FAR OFF peace, limited to peace in heaven after we have died. Rather, such a peace involved reconciliation RIGHT HERE AND RIGHT NOW, between persons on the basis of God's reconciliation WITH US. This was a REAL peace, A CONCRETE ACT OF GOD IN HUMAN HISTORY AND IN ALL RELATIONS- a peace that begins with that child's birth and offers great joy to ALL the people; a peace that would restore their hope and lift their despair. Jesus was the proof of God's love and reconciliation with us, and he therefore becomes the peace in our relation with ALL OTHERS REGARDLESS of age or race or gender or ethnicity; regardless of one's social status or sexual orientation, one's religious commitment or political affiliation.

In their “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased!” they give us the proper order in which the song is to be sung as praise and thanksgiving must ALWAYS PRECEDE the peace that follows it and NOT the other way around. We don't first go about trying to construct peace in our lives and in our relations with others and then praise God for it. No, we begin by first praising and thanking God for WHATEVER situation we happen to find ourselves in, confident that God not only understands our predicament and knows what we are feeling, but that God pledges his enduring love and care and support to us so that we are never completely overwhelmed by what it is we are facing. Regardless how trying or tragic our life may be at any one moment, we can be assured that God is with us, and that more than just “feeling our pain,” God is already at work helping to solve the particulars, providing a way out for us. Only when we acknowledge THIS through our praise and thanksgiving can we then begin to experience the kind of peace of mind and spirit that can lead to a REAL peace, a DEEP peace, and a PERMANENT peace- around us and in the world. I repeat: as counter-intuitive as it might appear, praising and glorifying God must PRECEDE peace—both peace in ourselves and with others--and NOT the other way around!

Few sermons have ever affected me like the one that Rev. Martin Niemoller delivered to a small group of persons based on this morning's text. There was no title given to it other than the date on which it was preached: Christmas Eve, 1944. First a few words about Rev. Niemoller himself. He was a prominent German anti-Nazi theologian and Lutheran pastor who became one of the founders of the Confessing Church- a group of churches which opposed the nazification of the German Protestant churches under Adolf Hitler. He was the one who famously said concerning the cowardice of Germans following the Nazis' rise to power and the purges that followed: “First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out- because I was

not a Socialist. Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out- because I was not a Trade Unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out- because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me- and there was no one left to speak for me.” For Niemoller’s opposition to their deadly philosophy and control over the churches, this courageous man of faith was imprisoned for eight years in two of the WORST of the Nazis’ concentration camps- Sachsenhausen and Dachau. Throughout his imprisonment, he never knew whether he’d live from one day to the next much less ever see his family again. STILL, he continued to faithfully represent Jesus Christ to the rest of the prisoners with faith and joy and peace in his heart.

On Christmas Eve, 1944, almost eight years into his imprisonment, he preached a sermon to his fellow comrades based on this morning’s text: “Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.” He began by acknowledging that celebrating Christmas while in captivity can be a rather dismal affair. Fear, confusion, anger, and helplessness often become one’s closest companions under such conditions and there is little chance to experience the kind of joy that was once known in Christmases past.

But then he reminded them of the significance of that night, how many centuries before and under the most precarious of circumstances, a feeble, helpless and homeless child was born to a poor couple in the back of a dirty cattle stall. That child, for whom there was no room at the inn, became a sign that almighty God had entered into the brokenness and extreme poverty within his own creation. Niemoller told them, “No man is so weak and helpless that God does not come to him in Jesus Christ, right in the midst of our human need; and no man is so forsaken and homeless in this world that God does not seek him, in the midst of our human distress.”

Niemoller reassured his listeners that from the one wrapped in those swaddling clothes came this call: “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” This is what he found so distinctive about the Christian message, that one does not need to go in search for God for God is the one continually seeking US out, that God was EVEN THERE, in THAT concentration camp with all its stench and suffering and death close to each one of them in the man who as a child lay in that manger. He reminded them that in that babe born in Bethlehem was one who came to bear everything that weighed so heavily upon THEM, and that it was only when they grasped that truth--how God stands in solidarity with each one of them—that they could THEN experience the great joy that the angels announced to the world. That child was called “Emmanuel” or “God with us,” and in HIM God had built a bridge from himself to them!

What makes this sermon PARTICULARLY inspiring is how under the most appalling of circumstances, Niemoller never lost his faith or his joy in Christ; that even after eight years of torture and imprisonment (including solitary confinement), he could STILL praise God with a full and grateful heart. He never despaired to the point of just giving up on life entirely, or cursing God or his fate for the seeming unfairness of it all. Rather, whatever situation he found himself in, he praised God for his continual love and mercy; he glorified him for leaving the security of heaven to identify with us in every way, even if it meant being born in a lowly manger or becoming a prisoner in a concentration camp. As a result, he knew that God understood his predicament right down to the bouts of anger and fear and loneliness which he and his fellow prisoners experienced on a daily basis. That babe of Bethlehem was the source of his peace and he alone enabled him to endure his captivity with faith and hope and joy and love and grace every hour of every day. His song was INDEED the same as the angels on Christmas

night, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased!”

But the story doesn't end there. When I was in seminary, Don Buteyn, our Dean and Professor of Missions, shared with us how during the Second World War, he was an infantryman in America's Fifth Army. As the war in Europe drew to a close, he helped liberate a number of concentration camps including Dachau where hundreds of thousands of Jews had been gassed. Entering the camp, he went from barrack to barrack, gathering up the survivors, helping them to the trucks for transport out of there; he had never seen such human degradation in all his life. However, there was one fellow IN PARTICULAR he could never forget who was terribly gaunt and looked much older than his years. He had been personally arrested by Hitler and placed in the camp for more than eight years- it was truly a miracle that he had even survived that long.

As Don helped him into the truck, the man reached into his shirt, pulled out a silver cross and held it up to him to indicate to Don what it was that had helped him survive, to show him what had been the source of his hope throughout those difficult years. It was his faith in Jesus Christ. It was his belief in God's great love for him. It was the sense of his abiding presence. It was the knowledge that Jesus' mission was to the sick and the hurting and the oppressed for Christ HIMSELF had been a prisoner before Pilate and knew injury and oppression and abandonment personally. Don said that as that truck drove out of the camp, he could still see that man clinging to his cross as a sailor would cling to a life preserver.

Many years later, Don had the honor of meeting that same man once again and introducing him to the student body of our seminary- the very individual he had helped into that truck all those years before, the same person who had clung so tenaciously to his cross. It was none other than Rev. Martin Niemoeller himself, the fearless pastor who defied Hitler and Nazi tyranny and spent more than eight years in concentration camps ministering to other prisoners as a result of it. As Don recounted his experience of the liberation of Dachau, of helping this man into the truck and watching him display his cross, Rev. Niemoeller once again reached into his shirt and pulled out the very same cross he had produced that day thirty-five years before. You see, in all that time, that cross HAD NEVER LEFT HIS NECK just as his peace—GOD'S peace rooted in the birth of that child—HAD NEVER LEFT HIS HEART. And so whether in a cathedral crowded with Christian worshippers or amid all the squalor of a Nazi concentration camp, the song was ever the same for him. With gratitude and great gusto, Martin Niemoeller could STILL utter “Glory to the newborn king!” as those angels had so many years ago and may the same be said of US! Let us pray...

*Gracious God, our Heavenly Father, what led you to devise a plan so full of love to save a people so DEVOID of it we cannot fathom. And what led your Son, our Lord—Jesus Christ—to consent being born in the back of an old stable that he might experience the human condition with all its detriments and limitations--EVEN DEATH ITSELF--we cannot guess. But what we CAN acknowledge is that as undeserving as we are, in and through your Son Jesus who came and lived and even DIED for us, you have demonstrated what TRUE love is and convinced us how we have always been the ultimate object of your heart's desire. May the acknowledgement of that truth remain fresh in our OWN hearts that we may never stop praising you and expressing the gratitude you deserve from each one of us. In Christ's name we pray. Amen and amen.*