

The Carol of Belief

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First Christian Church, Hamilton, Illinois, January 3, 2016

Matthew 1:18-25

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit.



Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" — which means, "God with us."

When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And

he gave him the name Jesus.

If I were to ask you which Christmas Carol is your favorite, I think most of you would answer, "Silent Night, Holy Night." That's become the traditional "candlelight carol" we sing to conclude our Christmas Eve service. We love carols like "Silent Night," that evoke the beautiful or memorable imagery we associate with Christmas. Above Bethlehem's "deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by," with "angels bending near the earth to touch their harps of gold" "on a cold winter's night that was so deep." In the stable of Bethlehem, "the cattle are lowing; the poor baby wakes, but little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes," as shepherds "come to Bethlehem and see him whose birth the angels sing."

We love those carols that make us feel especially "Christmasy" because of the images they bring back — perhaps memories of Christmases past, happier times with family and friends that, somehow, seem to elude us in this present world with all its challenges and difficulties. Without those carols, we feel, something of Christmas would be lost. It just wouldn't be the same to have Christmas without them — not only not to sing them in church, but also not to hear them on our car radio, or scratched out from tinny loudspeakers on Main Street, or wafted from the muzak of our favorite store.

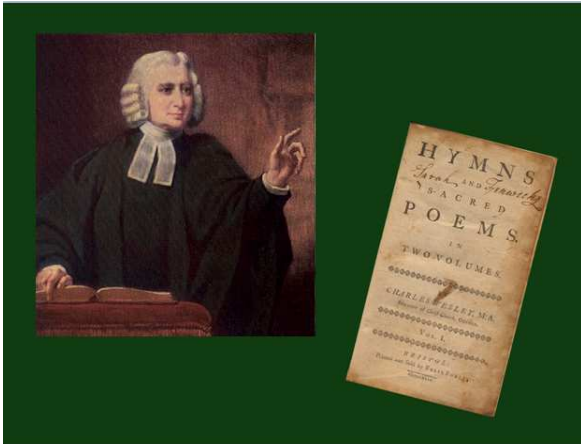
But if I were to ask you which carol most completely expresses our Christian belief, and the meaning of the coming of Jesus, what would your answer be? There's one carol that stands out from most of the others we usually sing. It's a little different, because it doesn't evoke all those familiar images — at least, not in the same way. Instead, this carol focuses on the beliefs, or doctrines, we hold because we're followers of Jesus, and it refers again and again to the teachings of Holy Scripture that form the basis for those doctrines. Well, you guessed it: it's the carol with which we began our worship today, "Hark! the Herald Angels Sing."



The words to "Hark the Herald Angels Sing" were written by Charles Wesley, who wrote many of our favorite hymns. But those weren't Wesley's original words. When he published the carol in 1739, under the

title "Hymn for Christmas Day," the carol began "Hark how all the welkin rings, 'Glory to the Kings of Kings.'" (*Welkin* is a word we don't use any more, but it means the heavens, or the sky above.) In 1758 the evangelist

George Whitefield changed the opening words to those familiar to us. In 1855 an English musician, William H. Cummings, gave us the familiar tune we sing by adapting a piece by the German composer Felix Mendelssohn, so in hymnals today the tune is known by the name "Mendelssohn."



But I began by highlighting this carol as the one that presents the fullest panorama of Christian doctrine. So I'm going to go through the carol line by line to bring out the scriptural basis for what Wesley wrote. The carol begins this way:

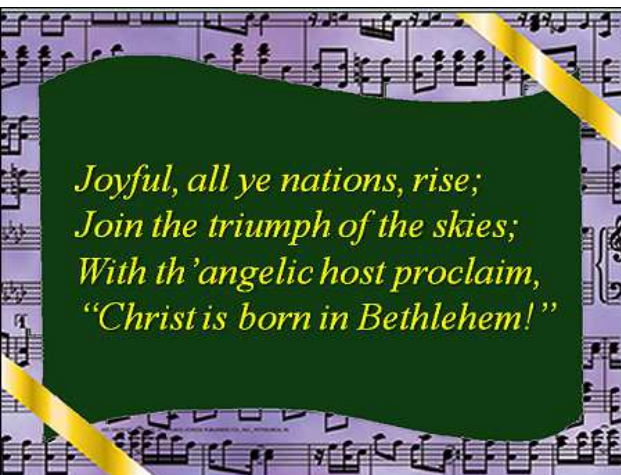
*Hark! the herald angels sing,
"Glory to the new born King;
Peace on earth and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled!"*

We're reminded of the song of the heavenly host at the birth of Jesus, in Luke 2: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests" (Luke 2:14). This world cries out for peace, and Christian believers everywhere stand on the promise given to the prophet Isaiah: "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6). The rule of Messiah Jesus over this earth, when it comes to fulfillment, will be a kingdom of peace.

But notice that Wesley has captured the key to world peace: "God and sinners reconciled." Peace among people and nations can come about only when people have made their peace with God, and placed him on the throne of their lives instead of their own selfishness and pride. The apostle Paul, writing to the Corinthians, laid out the role you and I have in bringing about this reconciliation with God:



If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us (2 Corinthians 5:17-20).



How you and I live with our fellow church members, our friends, our family, and our community at large plays a part in when, in the end, God and sinners *will* be reconciled, and when this war-weary, oppression-laden world will at last know the blessing of peace.

*Joyful, all ye nations, rise;
Join the triumph of the skies;
With th'angelic host proclaim,
"Christ is born in Bethlehem!"*

In concluding the first stanza, Wesley has caught the Bible vision for the role of God's Messiah: not only to deliver you and me personally from our dysfunctional patterns of life and get us connected with the Lord, but also to *deliver the nations* of the world from their false ways and destructive paths. The Psalms proclaim Messiah's universal

rule. In Psalm 2 the Lord asks, "Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain?" And he adds, "I have installed my King on Zion, my holy hill." To his Messiah God declares, "You are my Son; today I have become your Father. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession" (Psalm 2:1, 6-8). Psalm 110 begins this way: "The LORD says to my Lord: 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.' The LORD will extend your mighty scepter from Zion; you will rule in the midst of your enemies" (Psalm 110:1-2).

This is the vision the Scriptures have for God's Messiah, and why the risen Jesus can tell his followers, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matthew 28:18). Because the Prince of Peace will establish his rule, "Joyful, all ye nations, rise; join the triumph of the skies." We go on to the second stanza:

*Christ, by highest heaven adored,
Christ, the everlasting Lord!*

The rule of God's Messiah is to be an everlasting reign. "For he is the living God," we read in Daniel 6:26, "and he endures forever; his kingdom will not be destroyed, his dominion will never end." Speaking in the Lord's name to King David about the ruler who was to come after him, the prophet Nathan declared, "I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever" (2 Samuel 7:13). He is to be "Christ, the everlasting Lord."

*Late in time behold him come,
Offspring of the virgin's womb.*

If you've ever wondered why we sing "Late in time behold him come," we have only to turn to the words of Paul in Galatians 4:

But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father" (Galatians 4:4-6).

Jesus doesn't really come "late," as Wesley's words might suggest to us, because God is never "late" in what he does. Rather, he comes *at the right time*, or as Paul says, "in the fulness of time." Sometimes, when we concentrate on the teaching of the New Testament and the preaching of the gospel, we overlook the fact that there's a history in the Bible of several thousand years — or perhaps millions of years if we go back to the creation of the universe — during which God's purposes are being worked out.

To rehearse it briefly, first God makes the universe, and then he creates mankind "in his image" to manage his world. But men and women, Adam and Eve, because they have free will, turn away from the Lord. As a result the Lord calls a special people, through Abraham, to take his name to all nations, and gives them his law to guide them. But the people God called to solve the problem become part of the problem, failing to perform the mission of the family of Abraham. One man, the Messiah or "anointed one," has to be the obedient man who would fulfill the mission the Lord has entrusted to Israel. The prophets of Israel look forward to the coming of this obedient Servant of the Lord. So Christians have seen the birth of Jesus foretold in the words of Isaiah to King Ahaz: "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel" (Isaiah 7:14). Therefore, as we sing in Wesley's words, he is the "offspring of the virgin's womb."

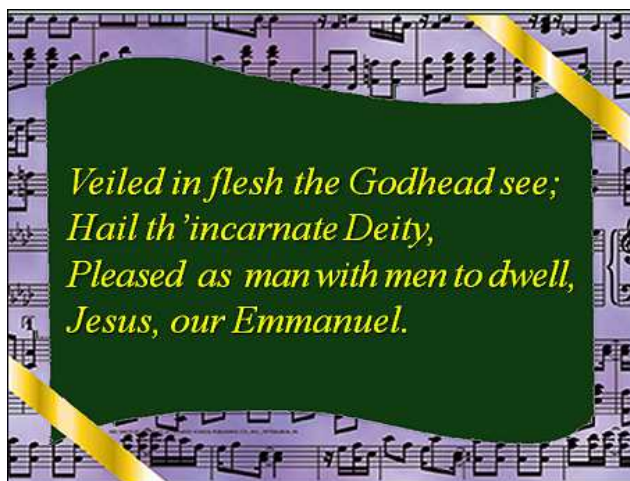
When Jesus is raised from the dead, it becomes clear that he is the Messiah, or Christ, and his resurrection life is the humanity God has intended to restore all along — which is why the apostle Paul calls him the "Second Adam." There's a verse of "Hark! the Herald Angels Sing" that's not in our hymnal, where Wesley brings this out:

*Adam's likeness, Lord, efface,
Stamp thy image in its place,
Second Adam from above,
Reinstate us in thy love.*

Let's go on, then, to the end of Wesley's second stanza:



*Veiled in flesh the Godhead see;
Hail th'incarnate Deity,
Pleased as man with men to dwell,
Jesus, our Emmanuel.*



Here Wesley refers to a central Christian teaching, the doctrine of the Incarnation. (*Incarnation* means “becoming flesh,” or meat. If you eat *chili con carne*, that means it has meat in it.) In the opening of the Gospel According to John we read these words:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. . . . The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:1-3, 14).

In Jesus, according to Christian teaching, we see the purpose and the action of God himself, the Creator of all things. Jesus told his disciples, “Anyone who has seen me

has seen the Father” (John 14:9). Skeptics have argued that the words John records were the church’s later invention; they assert that Jesus never claimed to be God, or represent God, and it took several generations for the early Christians to develop the idea of the divinity of Christ as the memory of his original humanity dimmed. But recent research has shown that from a very early time after the resurrection the followers of Jesus were calling upon him as one would call upon God the Father. As Paul says in Colossians 1:19-20, “In him all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.” Wesley refers to that “fulness” of the being of God when he refers to the Trinity: “Veiled in flesh the Godhead see” — “godhead” being a term that refers to our understanding of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Reasoning about these things, theologians have often begun by trying to describe God, in his universal majesty, and then tried to figure out how a man, like Jesus, could possibly be the “incarnation” of such a God. But the earliest Christians reasoned *in the other direction*. Don’t try to figure God out and then apply his features to Jesus; instead look at Jesus, and that will tell you what God is like! And so, from the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus we learn what the Creator of the universe is really like: not a severe, forbidding, unapproachable, impersonal force but One who loves, who forgives, who indeed *gives himself* to make life possible for his creation and all that fills it.

Wesley ends the stanza with the words we have quoted: “Pleased as man with men to dwell, Jesus, our Emmanuel.” Jesus was never called “Emmanuel,” of course, but rather *Yeshua* which comes out in Greek as *Iesous*. It’s the same name as Joshua, and means “the Lord saves.” But because Christians believe the Word of God has become incarnate in Jesus, we speak of him the way Isaiah did when he prophesied, “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.” That name, *Immanu-El* in Hebrew, means “with us is God.” It’s not just that God’s creative Word took human form in some abstract, remote sort of way; he is also *with us*, living in the midst his people. In our worship — our praise and song, our prayer, our teaching of the Scriptures — we do our best to realize the constant presence of the living Jesus with us. And, especially, we know that presence as each week we gather at his table and receive the bread and the cup, the bearers of his life in our midst.

We turn to the third stanza of “Hark! the Herald Angels Sing”:

*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.*

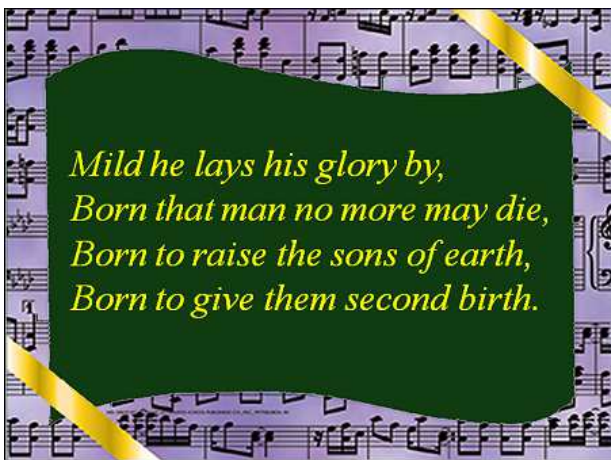
We’ve already mentioned Isaiah’s prophecy of the Prince of Peace, or peaceful prince — Israel’s vision of the coming Messiah who would rule over all nations. Here Wesley quotes another prophet, Malachi: “But for you

who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings” (Malachi 4:2). We think of Jesus as the “Sun of Righteousness,” and in English this makes a good wordplay between S-U-N, the sun that gives light to the earth, and S-O-N, the Son of God. But in the Hebrew language of Malachi (and Wesley knew this) the word for “sun,” *shemesh*, is a feminine gender noun. The Scripture isn’t holding up the sun as an object of worship comparable to the Son of God; in fact, God’s Law forbids the worship of the sun or any astronomical body (Deuteronomy 17:3) — a type of worship common among the pagan peoples of the ancient world. The sun is only one of God’s creations, and as important as it is to life on this earth the sun (to put it bluntly) is just a big ball of hot gas! Malachi is comparing the coming of God’s rule to the way the light of dawn breaks upon us as the morning sun peers over the horizon. And Wesley’s words simply reflect that thought: when Jesus appears, it’s a new and different day for those who place their faith in him.



It’s logical to make that comparison: “Light and life to all he brings, risen with healing in his wings.” The Gospels are filled with reports of how Jesus healed peoples’ diseases and rescued them from demonic oppression, and Christians through the ages down to our own time have testified that Jesus still heals the sicknesses of our bodies, and the pain and agony of our souls. Submitting to the authority of the risen Jesus, and living in conformity to the Word of God, is how people can get delivered from dysfunctional and toxic behavior patterns and have their most precious relationships restored. I can testify to this truth from my own life, and I’m sure many of you can do the same. So daily we pray that the “sun of righteousness” will dawn upon the lives of those near and dear to us. We pray that, by being connected to Jesus, they will come to know the faithfulness of God and receive the ability to live righteously, in the happy and successful way God intends people to live.

*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.*



We come to the final strain of our carol, which Wesley begins with a reference to the way Jesus came to us in humble human form — not as an overbearing, pompous presence but as one like you and me. Here Wesley echoes the words of Paul in Philippians 2:

Being in very nature God, [Jesus] did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death — even death on a cross! (Philippians 2:6-8)

To take our sins to his cross, Jesus had to “lay his glory by” so that his death could be our death as well — and his new life our life. As Paul writes in Romans 6:

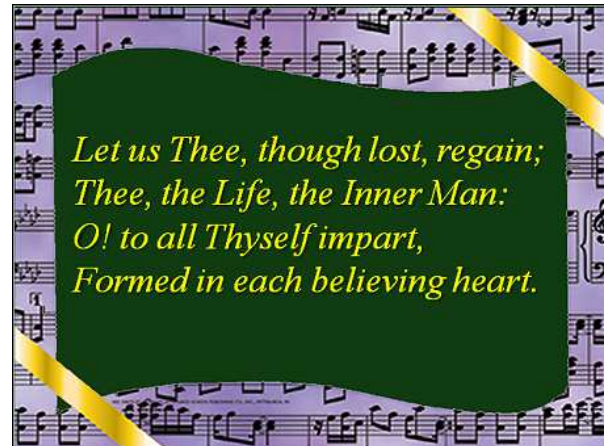
Don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life (Romans 6:3-4).

The pathway into that new life is the new birth, as Jesus told Nicodemus: “You must be born again” (John 3:7). Each of us is born into a certain culture, with a certain worldview or way of thinking about our life and the world around us. To be “born again” means to change our way of thinking, to repent or undergo a “change of mind” (which is what the Greek word for repentance, *metanoia*, means). As Jesus tells us,

“Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life” (John 5:24). In this way we experience the difference Jesus makes for us, who was “born to raise us from the earth, born to give us second birth.”

*Hark! the herald angels sing,
"Glory to the new born King.*

So we've examined the “carol of belief,” or we might also call it “the theologian’s carol” because it summarizes many of the most important aspects of Christian doctrine about the gospel of Messiah Jesus. If, in a thoughtful moment, you ever ask yourself, “What do I really believe about Jesus?” just open your hymnal or sing from memory the words of this carol, and you'll have a good part of your answer. It will help you not only to confirm yourself in your faith, but also to witness to others what it means for Jesus to come to them. You see, it's wonderful to sing hymns and carols as our expression of worship. But when we do, it's also important to pay attention to the words.



Charles Wesley wrote another stanza of this hymn that isn't in most of our hymnbooks. It expresses what it means for Jesus to come not only to the world at large, but also to live within each one of us. Let it be our prayer as we conclude this discussion:

*Let us Thee, though lost, regain;
Thee, the Life, the Inner Man:
O! to all Thyself impart,
Formed in each believing heart.*

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