

Hark! The Herald Angels Sing

Luke 2:13-14

The glory of Christ's incarnation fills the air with music during Christmastide. Music is glorified speech, and so men and angels naturally sing praise to God for what He has done. Hark! The Herald Angels Sing was written by John Wesley in 1739 and took its current form when edited by George Whitefield in 1753. Wesley penned over 6000 hymns, reviving the theological depth and evangelical strength of the Church's music.

Summary of the Text

A multitude of the heavenly host suddenly appears, joining the initial messenger, to praise God: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!" (vv. 13-14). Picture the angelic company filling the sky to belt out the Hallelujah Chorus. When it comes to what we will be doing in heaven (and the resurrection), we see through a glass darkly. But one thing we know is that we will sing and make music. This unique scene features an angelic concert on earth. Usually prophets and apostles witness musical worship in heaven as John does when he sees the twenty-four elders each with a golden harp singing "a new song, saying: 'You are worthy to take the scroll, and to open its seals; for You were slain, and have redeemed us to God by Your blood out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation, And have made us kings and priests to our God; and we shall reign on the earth'" (Rev. 5:9-10). He then looks and hears the voice of many angels around the throne "and the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice: 'Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom, and strength and honor and glory and blessing!'" (vv. 11-12). People made in God's image are *homo adorans*, worshipping man, created to honor God and raise our voices in song—none excluded. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs (Col. 3:16).

The Rise of Hark

Charles Wesley (1707-1788) first named this song "Hark How All the Welkin Rings", where *welkin* means the sky or vault of heaven. It ran ten stanzas to a somber tune that didn't take off. George Whitefield, the greatest preacher of the colonial era who transformed America in the First Great Awakening, changed the first line to "Hark! the herald angels sing." Wesley didn't like nor to our knowledge ever sing Whitefield's version, but he probably does now. In 1855 the English musician William Cummings took music that Felix Mendelssohn wrote in 1840 to celebrate the 400th anniversary of Guttenberg's printing press and formed the melody for Wesley's hymn. It featured in a Methodist Hymnal in 1857 and in ten years had become a world-renown carol. Though Mendelssohn thought his music better fitted "a national and merry subject" rather than a sacred one, and Wesley took issue with alterations to his theological lyrics, Cummings combined the two to form a melody that proclaims the power and glory of Christ's incarnation sung by millions today.

Joyful, All Ye Nations Rise

The first stanza begins and all five stanzas conclude with the refrain: "Hark! the herald angels sing, 'Glory to the newborn King!'" Not just individuals but nations are told to rise up joyfully with the angels and proclaim the good news of Jesus' birth—glory to God! Christmas is the public declaration that the eternal Son of God has taken on flesh and been born among us. Paul tells Agrippa and Festus that Christ's resurrection did not happen in a corner. So also His birth was public *news* and still is.

*Hark! the herald angels sing,
"Glory to the newborn King,
peace on earth, and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled!"
Joyful, all ye nations rise,
join the triumph of the skies;
with th' angelic host proclaim,
"Christ is born in Bethlehem!"
Hark! the herald angels sing,
"Glory to the newborn King!"*

Hark! The Herald Angels Sing

Luke 2:13-14

Veiled in Flesh the Godhead See

“Late in time” means recently, as in God “has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things” (Heb. 1:2). For thousands of years prophets have foretold and angels wondered when God would send the Messiah, how He would rescue us not just from injustice, alienation, and exile, but from our own sin that drives all of these woes and leads to death. The fellowship we had with God in the garden of Eden has been restored and minds of all the philosophers broken as eternal God takes on flesh and is born of the virgin Mary. Behold the infinite wisdom of God laying in a feeding trough in the village of Bethlehem.

Ruined Nature Now Restore

After the fall God wasted no time providing the hope of the gospel: “And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel” (Gen. 3:15). Christ dwells in us by means of His Spirit (2 Cor. 6:16), and while the serpent has already been defeated on the cross (Col. 2:15), the kingdom of God advances as the nations are discipled (Matt. 28:18-20; Rom. 16:20). This happens as Christ sanctifies His bride, the Church, renewing us in true righteousness and holiness—the way we were created to be, by nature bearing the image of God. The Lord told Haggai He would shake all nations and they would come to the Desire of All Nations; the glory of the latter temple would be greater than the former (Hag. 2:6-9).

Second Adam From Above

Just as Adam plunged us into sin and death, setting us at enmity with God, the Second Adam propitiated His wrath and reinstated us in His love: “But the free gift is not like the offense. For if by the one man’s offense many died, much more the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abounded to many. And the gift is not like that which came through the one who sinned. For the judgment which came from one offense resulted in condemnation, but the free gift which came from many offenses resulted in justification” (Rom. 5:15). Though outwardly we are dying, inwardly we are renewed day by day as Christ is formed in each believing heart.

Born to Raise the Sons of Earth

Jesus did not come to die and helicopter us out of this forsaken world. His Advent was a sunrise of righteousness, as Malachi promised, “With healing in His wings; and you shall go out like stall-fed calves” (Mal. 4:2). Jesus rose from the dead, bringing all the sons of earth with Him. By the new birth we call on Him to forgive our sins and begin the joy of eternal life that will be completely ours at the last trumpet when the dead are raised incorruptible (1 Cor. 15:52). Merry Christmas!

*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,
pledged as man with man to dwell,
Jesus, our Emmanuel.*

*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.*

*Adam’s likeness, Lord, efface,
Stamp Thine image in its place:
Second Adam from above,
Reinstate us in Thy love.
Let us Thee, though lost, regain,
Thee, the Life, the inner man:
O, to all Thyself impart,
Formed in each believing heart*

*Hail the heav’n-born 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.
Hark! The herald angels sing,
“Glory to the newborn king!”*