

HARK THE HERALD ANGELS SING**Psalm 148; Luke 2:8-14****(Read Luke 2:8-14)**

Intro: Charles Wesley wrote HARK THE HERALD ANGELS SING in 1739 on his first birthday. It's amazing that, already, he was such an accomplished poet.

You see, John and Charles Wesley were brothers and also priests in the Church of England.

A quick aside here: You might recognize the name, John Wesley, as the founder of Methodism so named because of the methodical discipleship and accountability that characterized their teaching. By the way, Wesleyan teaching is a huge part of our tradition as Brethren in Christ which has three different streams, with Wesleyanism being one of them.

The Wesley's had been missionaries in the American colony of Georgia and while they were there they had come into contact with missionaries from the Moravian Church. They also had further contact with Moravians who were traveling with them on the same ship as they returned home to England. What they saw in these saints was a warm relationship with God that they were not experiencing in the Church of England. It moved them to intense searching and seeking and their quest was successful as God revealed himself to them in a magnificent way and they had a new and transforming experience with Jesus in May of 1738.

That is why, one year later, in celebration of his first year as a new believer, Charles wrote the song we now know as HARK THE HERALD ANGELS SING. He didn't name it that. Instead his first title for it was A HYMN FOR CHRISTMAS DAY and it was included in a hymnal entitled HYMNS AND SACRED POEMS that the brothers published.

Another quick aside: Charles Wesley wrote a lot of hymns – I mean A LOT! As many as 9,000. At least 15 of those songs are in the Blue Hymnal we have in your hymnal racks. You are familiar with quite a number of them – here are just six:

And Can It Be That I Should Gain?

Christ the Lord Is Risen Today

Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus

Love Divine, All Loves Excelling

O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing (It had 18 verses – our hymnal has 5)

Rejoice, the Lord is King

Back to Hark the herald: the interesting thing is, the original song that Charles produced began with this line Hark how all the welkin rings! and it was preacher and theologian, George Whitfield, their colleague and friend who changed the opening words to Hark the herald angels sing. This was a good thing. And here's why. Let me quote one of my sources, I can't remember which one, but they say it better than I can:

"While there are other differences, the first line is what stands out. What on Earth is a "welkin" and why should it ring? Well it comes from the Old English word "wolcen" and simply means cloud, sky, or heavens, ringing because of the joyful exaltation of the heavenly host. The word appears not to have been very commonly used in Wesley's day, and is pretty much non-existent in our vocabulary today. In fact, I would say that it's completely non-existent. Old English was very, very old, even in Charles Wesley's day."

So, Wesley had good intentions, but one really wonders why he used this Old English term *welkin* which means the high heavens? If I took a show of hands of how many people have heard of it I'm sure the only ones that would even know about it would be the ones that know this hymn story. Knowing artists as I do it was probably some kind of artistic flourish on Charles's part – but that is purely conjecture. One thing, however, is that Wesley was definitely trying to get a theological point across that heaven rejoiced at the arrival of Jesus Christ into humanity. This is because this was the intention of everything the Wesley brothers did. The problem is, by using *welkin*, almost everyone would miss the point.

So in the 1750s Whitfield changed the words to what we have today. The word is the Wesley's probably weren't very happy with this since they didn't like people tinkering with their words – they meant what they said. For instance, one reason they probably didn't like that Whitfield used, "Hark the herald angels sing", was because, as you recall from what I read as I began this talk, that there is no place in Luke 2 in the angel's announcement where it said that the angels actually sang. Charles and his brother, John, wanted accuracy, which is a really good thing. You see, they tried to teach theology with their hymnology, and so they didn't want people messing

with their work. But they trusted the intentions of their friend because they knew his theology was sound and they sooner or later needed to concede that the word "welkin" was not appropriate. This is evident in the fact that by the 1780s they included Whitfield's lyrics in their latest hymnal.

The tune that we use for the song was written about one hundred years after Charles wrote the lyrics by another Jewish composer, Felix Mendelssohn. Mendelssohn had written the tune as part of a festival cantata that celebrated 400 years since the invention by Johannes Gutenberg of the movable type printing press. So it was not intended as a Christmas song. But a few years later, one of the performers in that cantata, by the name of William Cummings, paired the song with Wesley's lyrics to HARK THE HERALD ANGELS SING, and the rest is history.

So, that's the backstory – now some takeaways:

Whether its welkin or angels or shepherds or wise men or anyone, *at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.* Philippians 2:10b -11. For Charles Wesley, when he was writing this on the occasion of the one year anniversary of his conversion to a genuine relationship with Jesus Christ, he was actually rejoicing that the angels were rejoicing. He wrote the song as a hymn for Christmas, but it was also his birthday party poem.

In Luke 15 Jesus tells three parables: The first is about a lost sheep that has been found by a vigilant shepherd (Luke 15:3-7), the second about a lost coin that was found by a determined widow (Luke 15:8-10), and the third is about a lost son who realizes his waywardness and returns home (we know it as the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32). In those three situations, Jesus tells us there is a party every time that which is lost is found. Two of the times it says practically the same thing: Listen, *I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.* Luke 15:7 and *I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.*" Luke 15:10.

It's probably familiar, but let me remind you: in the Prodigal Son parable, the father gladly slaughters the fatted calf and has a huge celebration for his returned and repentant son.

So Wesley was spot on, it's just that he used a word that nobody else knew. Whether it's an unknown word or not, the truth is: **SALVATION IS A VERY BIG THING IN HEAVEN**, and that's why Jesus came. God so loved the world that he gave his son. He sent him to a manger, to a peasant family. His message was for the lowliest and for the most elevated. In fact Jesus came to humanity and leveled the playing field.

Now, let's take a quick look at the lyrics:

*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 hosts proclaim,
"Christ is born in Bethlehem!"*

This is good news! Jesus came to save sinners.

*Christ, by highest heaven adored,
Christ, the everlasting Lord,
late in time behold him come,
offspring of the Virgin's womb:
veiled in flesh the Godhead see;
hail th'incarnate Deity,
pleased with us in flesh to dwell,
Jesus, our Immanuel.*

All creation has been crying out for deliverance. Jesus was long desired when he came to the manger. He still is, but people are looking for deliverance in everything else but him. They miss the fact that in Jesus they have God with us.

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 we no more may die,
born to raise us from the earth,
born to give us second birth.*

The last words of Wesley's song, at least the ones we have in our hymnal, are a visual of the fact that this was his birthday song. One year before, Charles had been searching because he knew there was more. He thought that he knew God but he knew there was more. He celebrated in Hark the Herald that in May of 1738, he found Jesus in a more wonderful way. Heaven had a party and all welkin celebrated. Amen.