

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the newborn King,
Our Savior, Jesus Christ, amen.

What's your favorite Christmas carol? If you took a poll o on Christmas Eve, you'd probably get a variety of answers. "Silent Night, Holy Night," "Joy to the World," "O Little Town of Bethlehem," "O Come, O Come Emmanuel," "The First Noel" and "Once in Royal David's City" are certainly in this conversation. There's a good chance that one of the top five will be the song my granddaughter, Lexie played for us on her violin. That was Charles Wesley's, "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing." In fact, it's number five with a bullet on Classic FM's list of top Christmas songs. It also happened to be my favorite Christmas Carol. I admit I do change the words slightly. I sing "Hark, Harold the Angel Sings" because my dad, rest his soul is with the angels and his name was Harold... But I recently found out I'm not the first one to change the wording of this famous hymn.

In 1739, Westley published *Hymns and Sacred Poems*, which contained this famous hymn we know as "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing." This wasn't the original title. In Charles Wesley's original, the hymn begins with, "Hark ! How all the welkin rings." Huh? What's a "welkin"? It's an old English word that refers to the sky, the firmament or the "vault of heaven" that contains the stars and all the heavens. In an ancient cosmology, the welkin was like a set of crystal spheres that would ring (as in "the music of the spheres," which we also sing about in another

hymn, “This is My Father’s World”). The first line of this carol went like this:

“Hark! How all the welkin rings, glory to the King of Kings.”

The message is that the whole cosmos was ringing with the news of the birth of the world’s true and long-awaited king. That’s quite different than the version we sing now, which is actually the result of an unauthorized edit to Charles Wesley’s original work by his friend George Whitefield. Whitefield changed the line to read: “Hark! The herald angels sing, glory to the newborn king.” The change made Charles Wesley furious, not only because it was done without permission, but because it made the hymn a little less biblically powerful. Wesley noted that the angels in verse 13 don’t “sing,” they “say.” And the glory given by the angels is to “God in the highest heaven” (v. 14). Yes, the “newborn king” is God in the flesh and worthy of praise, but Wesley wanted to express the message of the angels as a sign that the whole cosmos, both heaven and earth, gave glory to God at Jesus’ birth, which is really the thrust of the biblical narrative.

The birth of Jesus is a sign of heaven and earth coming together, which brings peace and reconciliation between God and humanity. It’s an announcement that the story of God’s rescue plan for the world — a story that began in Genesis when God revealed a plan to bless the broken world to another shepherd named Abraham — was becoming a reality. Abraham would shepherd a family that

became a nation, whose mission had been to be a light to the other nations,
bringing them back to God.

When we look at the whole story of Scripture, we see that Israel, delivered by God from slavery and settled in a promised land, struggled with that mission. In fact, the Hebrew word “Israel” means “striving or wrestling with God”. Israel sinned by following after other gods and a series of corrupt kings, which led to their exile away from the land God had promised them. Some of the exiles returned from Babylon, but for the next 500 years, many of the people still believed that Israel was in exile, still under foreign domination. At the time of Jesus’ birth the latest ruling Empire was Rome.

Luke explains that when Jesus was born, Rome was in control and Caesar Augustus was the emperor. Augustus considered himself a “son of god” (in his case that “god” was his murdered great uncle and adoptive father, Julius Caesar) and a “prince of peace.” He had coins minted that proclaimed those titles to the world. His divinity, however, was self-proclaimed, and his idea of peace involved eliminating all of Rome’s enemies. In fact, this was the way of every emperor. When a new emperor came to the throne, it was heralded by messengers around the Roman world as “good news,” but it was good news only for those in power, whose peace was maintained at the point of the sword.

For Israel, the real good news would only come when God's true king, the Messiah, would come on the scene and pave the way for God to save them from these tyrants. And then, an angel came and announced to another group of shepherds that this ancient plan had been fulfilled. "I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people," proclaimed the angel (v. 10). God's promised return was happening, but in a way that no one expected. God was not returning as a conquering hero, a glorious cloud-surfing warrior coming back to destroy Israel's enemies. No, the "sign" given to these shepherds was a leaky, burpy, dirt poor little baby, born in a barn in a nowhere town called Bethlehem. And yet, this is why the whole welkin was ringing — a glimpse of heaven and earth coming together, as God had intended from the beginning. God was coming to dwell with his people to redeem and save them. The long-awaited Messiah, the true king, was the Lord himself, wrapped in the swaddling clothes of a tiny baby, fully human and fully divine.

And so, as Charles Wesley put it, "all the welkin rings" with this news. "Peace on earth and mercy mild," he writes, echoing the message of the angel host. This is a very different kind of peace than that of the likes of Augustus, or any other earthly power then or now. This is a peace that isn't just offered to some, but to "all whom God favors," to all of humanity created in his image (v. 14). God's grace, offered to Israel, is now offered to everyone who chooses to follow this

unlikely leader, perfect in his humanity and perfect in the image of God. Broken humanity can be restored because God has come among his people to save them from their sins, to renew creation and restore the peace of God's good world.

God's rescue mission was becoming a reality in a manger in Bethlehem. The carol puts it nicely: "God and sinners reconciled." These lyrics echo the words of the apostle Paul, who saw the arrival of Jesus, his birth, death and resurrection as the means by which God was "reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them" (2 Corinthians 5:19). For Paul, the birth of Jesus heralded the promise of peace promised to the shepherd Abraham long ago and to shepherds in a field outside Bethlehem. Because of Jesus, heaven and earth are at peace with one another. That's good news enough to make all the welkin ring!

Paul says, it's such good news that it needs to be shared often. The "ministry of reconciliation" is the Christian mission, proclaiming God's peace, God's grace and God's new creation made possible in Christ to the whole world. "For our sake he made him to be sin, who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

That'll preach but, even better, it will sing! "Joyful, *all ye nations* rise. Join the triumph of the skies. With angelic hosts proclaim, 'Christ is born in

Bethlehem!”” Here in this beautiful carol, based on the message of the angels, is the essence of the gospel: “Peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled!” In fact, this is the best message we can preach or sing on Christmas Eve: “Be reconciled to God!”

How does that happen? It happens through faith, trusting that, through Jesus, God’s rescue plan for the world includes sinners like us. Whatever old life we’ve struggled with, whatever sin hounds us, wherever peace of heart, mind, body and soul eludes us, the good news is that the peace of Christ can overcome all of them. Here’s the takeaway: God has stepped toward us in Jesus. God has made the first move toward reconciliation. You have been saved by the birth, life, death, and resurrection of the man-God Jesus Christ. Now what are you going to do? Will you step toward God? Will you be reconciled to God?

The whole welkin is ringing with praise to God for what God has done by coming in person in Christ. Let’s join the song! May God’s message of peace and reconciliation be with you all, merry Christmas! Amen!