

Hark! the Herald Angels Sing

December 19, 2021

Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

Isaiah 9:2-7

So today, as we make our way to the end of this Advent season and really start to turn our heads toward Christmas which is just...wait for it...*six days away*...we are continuing our series of messages based on Christmas songs that speak to the heart of Advent. We started with the classic Advent hymn "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" as we explored the theme of hope, searching for those reminders that God is coming – God is here even now, amidst the brokenness and turmoil in the world. The next week we turned to the theme of love, as we explored the lesser-known song "Love Came Down at Christmas." And we remembered the simplicity of the heart of the Christmas message. God loves us. And God calls us to love. Period.

Last week we turned to a favorite Christmas song: Joy to the World, as we explored the theme of joy. But not just joy when things are going well and as expected. Joy when life is throwing us massive, life-altering curveballs and we are struggling to make sense of it.

And this week, we round out the Advent season with the theme of Peace.

Peace is one of those things that I think is very often misunderstood, at least from a biblical perspective. Most of us, when we think of peace – when we are asked to define peace – the picture that most often comes to mind is simply an absence of conflict, or an absence of chaos. Like when a mom of five is at the end of her rope because it is a week before Christmas and her little ones can't stop buzzing around like noisy, excited little mosquitoes with no volume control, and she says "I just want a moment of peace and quiet." Meaning, "stop the noise."

Or when Miss America contestants say that they want "World Peace," what they usually mean is "we want wars to stop."

Or when politicians talk about a "Peace treaty," they are usually talking about an agreement between two countries not to blow each other up.

The dictionary definition of peace is tranquility, calm, quiet. Sounds really good right about now.

But calm and quiet; an absence of conflict or war or chaos – those are actually *not* what is meant when we see the word "peace" appear in scripture.

The way it appears in our scripture today:

*For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.*

That word “peace” comes from the Hebrew word *shalom*. Which means completeness. Oneness. Soundness. It means to make amends, or make restitution, to make whole. It is generally other-centered, referring to the wellness of other people, and specifically to the wellness of community. It is a state of being whole, complete, without deficiency and without want.

In the New Testament, the word peace comes from the Greek word *eireinei*, meaning quietness and rest. Its root is the Greek word *eiro*, meaning to join or to tie together. Bringing multiple parts together to form a whole.

So in both the Old and New Testaments, peace is not just a moment of stillness in the frenzy; and it is not a lack of conflict. Conflict and peace are actually not mutually-exclusive. They can – and I would say sometimes *must* exist together. Peace, in the truest sense of the word, is the active work of bringing together what is divided, and working for the common good of all, despite differences. Peace means working together to make sure everyone is okay and has what they need, even if we have fundamental differences over...say...religion or politics or masks or, name your issue.

Peace doesn't mean that we all think the same way, or act the same way, or even believe the same way. It simply means that we recognize that although we may be different, we still work for the good of one another. And we do so sacrificially, if necessary. When our scripture talks about the Prince of Peace, it is this kind of sacrificial, selfless, other-focused love – the love demonstrated by God both at Jesus birth and at his death – that we are talking about.

So as we talk about peace on earth (and mercy mild); as we hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace, we turn to our Christmas song for today. This one is truly one of the greats. It's not an Advent hymn that I am trying to pass off as a Christmas song; it's not an obscure little ditty that nobody except the people who compile the hymnal seems to know. If we were to make a list of favorite popular Christmas songs, I would be surprised if “Hark the Herald Angels Sing” didn't make it near the top of the list.

And even better, as United Methodists, this song is part of our heritage. It was written by Charles Wesley – one of the two brothers who founded the Methodist movement – in the year 1739, just about one year after Charles Wesley's conversion to Christianity.

The story goes that he was walking through London, listening to the bells tolling, and the sound of the bells inspired the writing of this Christmas poem, that he wrote to be read in that year's Christmas service.

The words to this song are powerful, and deep, and profoundly theological in their own right. But there is a deeper beauty in this song that I really like, that lies not in the music, or in the lyrics, but in the history – particularly this week as we talk about peace.

So, when John and Charles Wesley were in college, at Oxford, they started a “club” on campus, that was basically nicknamed the “holy club.” Folks would get together for prayer, and fasting, and worship, and mutual accountability, and they were very methodical in everything that they did. So methodical, in fact, that people would speak disparagingly of them, calling them “Methodists.” And the name stuck.

One year, a young college kid by the name of George Whitefield found his way to the holy club, and he and the Wesleys became hard and fast friends. They all shared a mutual enthusiasm for Christ and for the mission of Christ's church. And the three of them made a great team. John was a natural organizer. Charles was the poet and theologian. And George was a gifted and passionate preacher who excelled in evangelism.

As time went on, though, a wedge formed between Whitefield and the Wesley brothers. It's kinda strange – this wedge started as just a minor theological difference, but it got personal, as happens from time to time. They argued at length over the nature of God's grace, and God's sovereignty. Whitfield believed in the Calvinist notion of predestination, and the Wesleys outright rejected that, emphasizing instead human free will. It got heated. Add to that, their personalities. Whitfield was likeable and charismatic, and Wesley...well...John got kicked out of more than a couple of pulpits, and got run out of town on his missionary journey to Georgia when a fling with a girl went wrong – all the while George was back in England signing autographs and well on his way to becoming the next Billy Graham. It got to the point that these former friends would barely speak. They didn't have many nice things to say to or about one another.

In truth, they had a lot more in common than they had that divided them, but sometimes the little things that divide us can seem like the biggest things in the world. And that was definitely the case for them.

And then, their followers joined the battle. Whitefield's followers wouldn't talk to Wesley's followers – and their followers were often more divided than even Whitefield and the Wesleys were. Over time, though, the leaders were able to cool off a bit, even if their followers wouldn't. They reached a mutual “agree to disagree” truce, and learned to work together again.

So, what in the world does this have to do with Christmas? And specifically, today's Christmas carol?

So, originally, the first stanza of "Hark the Herald Angels Sing" was titled "Hymn for Christmas Day" and it went like this:

*Hark how all the welkin rings!
Glory to the King of Kings.
Peace on earth and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled.*

What in the world is a welkin? It is an archaic English term, that even in back the 1700s would not have been well-known or understood by most people. It's basically a term that refers to the highest firmament of heaven and the grandest, loftiest celestial beings.

In the 1750s, this hymn was taken up by none other than the Wesleys' former friend-turned-foe George Whitefield. And George re-wrote those first two lines into what we know and sing today:

*Hark the herald angels sing:
Glory to the newborn king.
Peace on earth and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled.*

This version of the hymn was published in 1753, and interestingly, two years later Charles Wesley was able to write "Come on, my Whitefield, since the strife is past! And friends at first are friends again at last." And while their separate groups of followers were never really able to come together, Whitefield and the Wesleys managed to re-ignite their old friendship, and remained friends until Whitefield's death in 1770. And at Whitefield's request, John Wesley preached the funeral sermon.

Here's what they discovered: these three friends had some serious differences. At times during their lives, they would have said that they had irreconcilable differences. They grew angry with one another. They disagreed a lot. They disagreed about the fundamental nature of who God is – and for three preachers and theologians, that's pretty bad.

But they also discovered that all three of them, despite their differences, were better off together than apart. They made each other stronger. They needed one another's gifts. John needed George's people skills. George needed John's organization. Charles needed both John and George to help get his head out of the clouds, and John and George both needed Charles's heart to keep them grounded.

So when we sing this classic Christmas song, it's a song of coming together. A song of reconciliation. A song that, in its very writing, models the peace about which it sings.

Peace on earth and mercy mild,

God and sinners reconciled.

The miracle of Christmas – the miracle that the angels are heralding – is not just that God came to earth to put back together again our broken relationship with God, and bring about peace that way. That's part of what God does, of course. That's a huge part of it. But the other part is that the work of God is also to help us put right our relationships with one another. To heal the brokenness between us. God and sinners are reconciled, yes. But even before that, peace on earth and mercy mild.

God is bringing Peace. Shalom. Healing and wholeness, oneness, unity, to us. God is at work putting the pieces back together again.

And yes, we have a lot of pieces. And lest we think that that is simply impossible; lest we look around at our broken and fractured society and are tempted to just give up because it is divided beyond all repair – Democrats vs. Republicans; Vaxxers vs. Anti-Vaxers; Christians vs. Atheists; Liberals vs. Conservatives; Millennials vs. Boomers; Steelers fans vs. Bengals fans (too soon?) – lest we think that it would take a miracle to see us cross the divides and work together for the common good and come to a place of peace, miracles are what we celebrate this season.

We have a Wonderful Counselor. A Mighty God. An Everlasting Father. A Prince of Peace. A God who would move heaven and earth; who would cross the greatest divides of all time to bridge the gap between earth and heaven. A God who would come and model for us how to love our enemies, even as far as the cross.

Yes, this work is impossible. Yes, our world is broken. Yes, we have a long, uphill climb ahead of us. Yes, sometimes it feels like the differences between us and others are downright irreconcilable.

But if the Christmas story tells us one thing, it is that we have a God who is in the business of dealing in the impossible.

So, with all of the hope, and love, and joy, and peace that we can manage today, let us lift our voices and sing together – the Wesleys and the Whitefields singing in harmony once again:

*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.
Hark! the herald angels sing,
Glory to the newborn king.*