

## 12.21.25 **Forgotten Verse s~ Hark! The Herald Angels Sing**

### ***Luke 2:8-14 NRSVUE***

Now in that same region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid, for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.”

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

This is the Word of God for the people of God...

Friends, what a grace it has been to walk these Advent Sundays together—to take the carols we’ve sung our whole lives and listen again...

more carefully, as if God is whispering thru the verses we usually skip,  
Or don’t know by heart.

On the 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday we began by praying an Advent carol:

*O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*—calling on the many names of Christ,  
and daring to believe that God is not far away...  
but near, present, and still coming.

Then through *O Little Town of Bethlehem*, Jeremiah reminded us  
of something our hearts need to hear again and again:

that God delights in doing extraordinary things  
thru what may seem small & obscure—a tiny town, an ordinary life,  
a humble church...a quiet act of kindness...  
simple things that change someone’s whole day.

And then came our Cantata on a snowy, beautiful Sunday morning  
Last week—what a gift!

All our worship teams lifting the Christmas story through many voices & music—a tapestry of praise and longing and hope.

It felt like the sanctuary itself was singing the Gospel:  
that even when words fail us, music carries the truth—and sometimes the Spirit does its best work not only through a sermon point...  
but through a melody that reaches the deep places.

And today we now arrive at the Fourth Sunday of Advent—  
having lit the final candle: **Love.**

- Love that comes down.
- Love that takes on flesh.
- Love that refuses to stay distant.
- Love that enters the world not with fanfare, but with faithfulness...  
And in surprising ways.

And friends, we need that Love. Because it is hard to make a joyful noise  
when the world's troubles press in on us—  
when headlines feel heavy and hearts feel tender with emotions raw.

~We watch the ongoing suffering of civilians in war-torn places—  
and horrific violence on our campuses and during faith-filled gatherings.

~We know of families displaced, communities grieving,  
children caught in what they did not choose.

~We feel the strain of economic uncertainty across our nation  
& our families—budgets stretched, decisions harder,  
anxieties creeping to the surface.

~And closer to home, many among us are carrying private burdens:  
a diagnosis, a strained relationship, a child you worry about,  
grief that doesn't take a holiday, addictions that rob us of so much,  
or an empty chair at the table that still takes your breath away.

So yes—sometimes it is incredibly difficult to hear the angels' voices  
saying, “Do not be afraid.”

It can feel like the darkness is so loud...

But Advent is the season that insists—**the Light of the World is louder.**

And Love is not sentimental—Love is strong.

~Love speaks through angels.

~Love shows up in a stable.

~Love takes on skin and bone and breath.

~Love comes near—Emmanuel, God with Us. Amen?

This Advent, carols have been a LIGHT that shines in the darkness!

And today we dig into our own Charles Wesley's masterpiece:

**“Hark! The Herald Angels Sing.”**

Friends, it is not just a Christmas song.

It is a declaration that God has come close enough to be known,  
and powerful enough to heal what is broken—in us, and in this world.

So let's open our hearts again—to this powerful carol we sang earlier,  
And not just to the parts we know by heart,  
but to the deeper verses that tell us of the fuller story...  
and let Love be lit among us anew.

Now being a total Methodist nerd, and admittedly biased,  
I believe no hymn writer has a better sense of the seasons  
of the church year than Charles Wesley did,  
and it was his **gift** to put into his poetry,  
with its striking imagery and economy of words,  
a concise and marvelous expression of our faith.

Wesley's hymns have the gift of leading us  
to an ever closer relationship with Christ.

Charles Wesley was an English Methodist leader and hymn writer.

He penned in his lifetime over 6000 hymns and some 3000 poems.

He was the brother of John Wesley, our founder of Methodism,  
who once said that his brother's hymnal  
was the best theological book in existence.

Charles used hymns to place profound biblical truth in the mouths  
and hearts of every day, ordinary people—  
so faith could be learned, sung and lived.

Hark! The Herald Angels Sing, written in 1739,  
reveals exactly who this Newborn King is.

This beloved carol did not arrive in the form we know today.  
Charles originally titled it “*Hymn for Christmas-Day*, ”  
and the opening line wasn’t even “Hark! the herald angels sing,”  
but “Hark! how all the welkin rings”— welkin?...  
that’s a phrase that needed translation even in his own time.  
A welkin is a “vault of heaven” where angels dwell. FYI.

Wesley’s friend and fellow revivalist, **George Whitefield**,  
recognized the power of the hymn but adapted it  
for congregational singing—changing that opening line,  
refining the language, and helping the hymn travel beyond  
Methodist societies into the wider church to which we use today.

And then, nearly a century later, the carol truly found its voice.  
Composer **Felix Mendelssohn**, writing music for a secular cantata,  
One that he never intended for church use...  
somehow—through God’s own mysterious ways—  
this bold, triumphant, almost “march-like” melody  
was joined to Wesley’s text.

What emerged was a carol that does more than soothe the soul.  
~It powerfully **announces** something.  
~It **declares** something.  
~It **proclaims** that heaven has broken into earth—  
and nothing will be the same.

We have three verses in our current hymnal but Wesley actually wrote 5,  
each speaking to the gift of who Jesus **is** for a hurting and needy world.

Each stanza of “Hark the Herald Angels Sing” reminds us  
that Jesus is the reason for the season.

“Hark! The Herald Angels Sing” greets us with “Peace” in the 1<sup>st</sup> verse—  
*Peace on earth & mercy mild...God and sinner reconciled! PEACE!*

And also greets us with “Joy” in each refrain—  
in the angels’ song *“Glory to the Newborn King!  
Joyful all ye nations rise, join the triumph of the skies;  
with th’angelic host proclaim ‘Christ is born in Bethlehem.’”*  
So...Be JOY-Filled!

And friends, this is not just joy we sing about—  
it is joy we are called to live.

At FMC, joy looks like choosing connection over isolation,  
generosity over fear, welcome over judgment.  
~It looks like showing up for one another when life is heavy.  
~It looks like refusing to let bitterness or despair have the final word.

“Peace on earth and mercy mild” is not sentimental poetry—it is a calling.  
A calling to be people who practice reconciliation.  
Who speak grace instead of blame.  
Who dare to believe that God is still at work—right here, right now,  
**through us.**

When we sing these words, we are not escaping the world’s pain.  
We are proclaiming that Christ’s love is stronger than the pain.

Wesley’s second stanza sings our incarnational theology.  
Christ adorned in heaven, comes to earth as the son of a virgin,  
thus clothed in flesh, Jesus makes the invisible God...visible.  
*“Veiled in flesh the Godhead see; hail th’incarnate Diety,  
pleased with us in flesh to dwell, Jesus, our Emmanuel.”*

Wesley carol echoes Scripture:

- From Jn’s Gospel, *“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us,  
And we have seen His glory, the glory as of a Father’s only son, full  
of grace and truth.”* (Jn 1:14)

- And in Mt, *“Look a virgin shall conceive & bear a son, & they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, “God is with us.”* (Mt 1:23)

Words of comfort and hope when we need it the most...  
and can then sing it robustly in joy-filled praise and gratitude.

And Charles continues to bring us God’s hope...  
nearly every phrase in the third stanza has a biblical reference:

~“Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace” from the Prophet Isaiah 9:6.

~The image of the Messiah as the “Son of Righteousness”  
risen with healing wings is from the prophet Malachi 4:2.

~Light and Life to all He brings echoes John’s first chapter (1:3-4).

Friends, this is not abstract language.

~Light means clarity where there has been confusion.

~Life means hope where there has been exhaustion.

~Healing wings mean restoration where there has been harm—  
in bodies, in relationships, in communities, and in nations.

Wesley reminds us that Christ does not simply illuminate the world  
from a distance—NO...Christ enters the world.

Walks with us through it.

And transforms it from the inside out.

This is the promise we cling to...

when darkness feels persistent and wounds feel slow to heal.

~Born to give us second birth reminds us of Jesus’ exchange with  
Nicodemus in Jn’s 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter of being born again.

New life in Christ is the gift that keeps on giving!

These verses remind us of ALL God’s promised Word  
come to dwell with us.

Now beyond these 3 verses in our current hymnal,  
Wesley had more forgotten verses of this carol.

The 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> stanzas invoke the desire and need we have  
for the Newborn King, not only in our lives,  
but also in the world.

*Come, Desire of nations, come,  
Fix in **us** Thy humble homes;...  
Now in mystic union join  
Thine to ours and ours to Thine.  
Reinstate **us** in Thy Love.  
Let **us** Thee, though lost, regain,  
Thee the Life, the inner Way:  
O, to **all** Thyself impart,  
Formed in each believing heart.*

The whole story of Jesus' birth, life, death and resurrection is glorified  
in this Carol...and we begin to see exactly what "the Newborn King"  
will do for the world...

What Jesus Christ can do...and be...for us here, right now.

Each time we sing "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing!"...  
we must remember that Christ is born again and again in the heart  
of those who need God's love and grace and hope.

This Great carol of the church,  
and all the ones we' have sung and explored these Sundays of Advent  
and all the ones we will sing on Christmas Eve...  
& throughout the days of Christmastide...

Remind us of the hope that comes in and through Jesus Christ...  
& the promises of God for the world, & for each & every one of us.

Today we celebrate Jesus...  
the One who came and the One who is coming still!

~May Christ be born in Bethlehem and beyond—  
bringing light and healing to all.

~May Christ's light and love be born anew in places marked by tragedy and violence—in Providence, Rhode Island, and in Sydney, Australia—bringing peace to grieving families & strength to wounded communities.

May Christ be born in Moorestown, Mount Laurel, Maple Shade—  
in our neighborhoods, our schools, our workplaces,  
Our church and our homes.

And may Christ be born again and again in the heart of every believer—  
until love casts out fear,  
light overcomes darkness,  
and heaven's song becomes our own.

**Glory to the Newborn King! Amen and amen!**