

It Came Upon a Midnight Clear

Carols of Christmas Series #2

Luke 2:8-14

Dec. 6, 2020 Second Sunday of Advent

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In that 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 God favors!"

Luke 2:8-14 NRSV

Today we continue our series on Christmas carols. I will be exploring some of the lyrics and history of "It Came Upon A Midnight Clear."

Midnight. Are you up at midnight? Usually I am asleep around 11:30 pm, but there are nights I cannot fall asleep. My thoughts are racing. Reading helps. Midnight. One of the times in my life I remember being up at midnight and 2 am and 4 am was those first weeks and months with our boys when they were born. Jackson was born early in mid-November so December was a long month of minimal hours of sleep. One thing I remember about that year was when I would pick him up out of his bassinet and sit in the rocking chair to nurse him, I felt the need to sing to him. All I could remember in my sleep-deprived state were Christmas carols. So there we were, mother and child, in December on some very cold Wisconsin nights, held in love and musical notes at midnight. It came upon a midnight clear that glorious song of old...

Midnight can be a holy hour, can't it? It certainly was when we imagine the biblical story of Jesus' birth. Every year our church enjoys special Advent services that culminate in the Christmas Eve services. There is something particularly powerful about worshipping at night. The service is packed with beautiful music. Every year, we sing.

Music, singing in particular, aligns our whole bodies, our entire brain, our spirits all with the holy in a deeper way. Something about the harmony and melody, the rests and the lyrics, comfort us or challenge us, the words that are on our lips slowly sink into our minds and hearts. Some of us are currently singing at home, singing in the shower, or singing in our cars because singing in public has been shown to be dangerous during this pandemic. This is one of the hardest and harshest realities parts of this very challenging year.

Music is important in the life of faith all year long, but there is something special about Christmas music. It is holy. Literally. Holy means set apart; That is probably why we love Christmas Carols so much – because they are set apart from the rest of the year, like egg nog and gingerbread cookies. We sing these sacred songs only a short time each year. The carols of Christmas are set apart for they tell a certain story. Let's look at today's carol.

It came upon a midnight clear, that glorious song of old, from angels bending near the earth to touch their harps of gold...

This carol is ironic in that it is a song about a song. The words are not actually about the birth of Jesus, but about the song that the angels sang on that night, the sound of the music that floated in the air, as if this good news could only be shared in music. Words were not enough.

Bending near the earth with their harps – Harps. When have you heard a harp played? A wedding? A concert? What a joy to hear harpist Bertina Mitchell in our service today. I have a confession to make. In every church I have served, I do my best to encourage, or persuade or convince, the worship committee to arrange for harpist to play during Advent and hopefully Christmas Eve. There is something about the sound of the harp for me that makes me get teary and I feel a lump in my throat. It might be my Celtic ancestors speaking to me from my musical family tree.

Years ago I remember going alone to hear two Celtic harpists in New Jersey at a small library. I was going through a very difficult time in my life. When I heard them play, it was like a prayer that someone else was offering for me, a prayer for the brokenness of my heart but expressing a deep hope. The harp was that prayer for me that day so maybe it was just the right instrument for the angels to play as they sang,

Peace on the earth, good will to all, from Heaven's all Gracious King. The World in solemn stillness lay to hear the angels sing.

Peace. Peace is the candle that we lit this morning. Peace is something we hope for and strive for every day. It's what parents of young children yearn for when their preschoolers are having a meltdown in the middle of the living room floor, and the prayer of an anxious heart fearful of the future. It is the call of God's Spirit to center ourselves and to create space for the Holy. This time of year Peace is often portrayed by images of quiet snowfalls, Christmas trees aglow and a dinner table set. But that image of peace is incomplete.

Peace has been the cry of men and women ravaged by war, injustice, and fear for generations. We look at the wars of our time in Afghanistan and the Congo, Israel and Palestine and Syria - the tensions with Iran and North Korea. We read the news and we pray for justice and peace in communities like Chicago and Minneapolis and Washington DC, but also peace and justice for black families and young people with dark skin or the wrong

citizenship or the wrong social status. We consider the way of our world the increase in consumerism and nationalism and we cry to God for peace, shalom. The peace of which the angels sing...

There are moments I wonder if this global pandemic has helped us see our connection to one another and may provide a path for peace. The virus does not respect borders between countries. As a human family, we need to work together for peace and wholeness. This a vision the biblical prophets offered. It was not Pax Romana – not the peace the Roman Empire forced through oppression and violence. Luke tells us the angels were speaking of a good news that was needed on that midnight clear just as it is needed today. Peace on earth. But there is nothing in this song that suggests that the peace the angels sang of was some kind of magical antidote offered like a vaccine. It is a vision, a hope, a peace in our inner life knowing all are deeply beloved and a peace in our outer life, choices we can make.

And still their heavenly music floats o'er all the weary world.

This line is one of my favorites in this carol. When have we heard the music of angels in the midst of our own weariness? Where have you heard the heavenly music of peace? We are weary – weary of the coronavirus wreaking havoc in the world and causing so much death and loss, weary of staying at home, weary of not celebrating with family and friends, weary of leaders who constantly deny facts. The song of peace comes to us when life doesn't make sense, when we are overcome with fear or anger or sadness or anxiety or despair...that is when the angels song is heard the loudest and the clearest.

And you beneath life's crushing load whose forms are bending low, who toil along the climbing way, with painful steps and slow...

This is not a pretty picture of Christmas. In verses prior we have heard the words weary, sad, lowly, Babel – and this verse is the heaviest.

The carol's words were written in Wayland, Massachusetts in 1849, by the Rev. Dr. Edmond Sears, a Unitarian minister. Though it would be another decade before the civil war tore the US apart, the debate over slavery was raging and the recently concluded Mexican American war was still on the hearts of the Northern dissenters. His poem spells out a call for peace and goodwill that echoes as "solemnly and stilly" as the call that resounded in his time, and still resounds today. Nowhere is Sears' message more obvious than in the poem's third verse, one that has been often left out.

Yet with the woes of sin and strife
The world hath suffered long;
Beneath the angel-strain have rolled
Two thousand years of wrong;

And man, at war with man, hears not
The love song which they bring:
O hush the noise, ye men of strife,
And hear the angels sing!

Sears didn't start from scratch when he wrote this hymn. Fifteen years earlier, he had written a poem entitled, "Calm on the Listening Ear." Based on the same concept – the song of the angels. After witnessing 15 years of ministry and war, social struggles all around him, he pulled that poem from his files, made some revisions, and "It Came Upon the Midnight Clear" was born.

Not only do the words of this hymn speak of the call for peace amidst a world warring with each other, but it speaks to the social unrest of his time as well. The California Gold Rush was creating excitement, but was also disrupting the lives of men and women caught up in Gold Fever. The Industrial Revolution was pulling people from their small, marginal farms to the cities, where they often just exchanged one form of poverty for another. Sears was clearly concerned about the world unfolding around him: wars for independence were being brutally crushed, economic depression, slavery, the Cherokee Trail of Tears, child labor. And, of course, the tensions over slavery, which would soon plunge the nation into a civil war, were already present.

As he struggled to write his Christmas eve sermon that year, it was the poverty and the hopelessness of the people he touched in the slums that sickened his heart and blocked his progress. He must have wondered how he could write about the Light of the world when the world seemed so very dark. There was something about to whom the angels announced the birth that inspired him. The angels came to the lowly, the marginalized – the shepherds. And in his mind, they come and sing over us still today. As a minister deeply committed to social causes, he understood the importance of hope, the importance of purpose – the importance of trusting that things can and will get better with God's help.

It was in that troubled and hopeful context that Sears wrote this hymn that emphasizes peace as a gift from God. He portrays angels bringing peace to a still-weary world—angels hovering above "sad and lowly plains." His words were not intended to create a warm feeling in your heart; they were intended to light a fire – to stir you to open yourself to a new way of being in the world. There are moments when we realize the message of peace has not yet been fully realized on earth. Then we sing "It came upon the midnight clear," and the power of the Incarnation and the message of love incarnate, Divine Love in us, in our bodies.

What if we allow ourselves to hear and sing this carol and hear the song the angels sing...of the peace of Christ? A peace that is sung through the burdens and crushing loads, whispering steadily through the shouts of chaos all around us and as the song reminds us: a peace that

the angels continue to sing about even now over the weary world. The carol is an invitation for today. Sears looked to the future when he wrote the last verse.

For lo, the days are hastening on, by prophet seen of old, when with their ever circling years shall come the time foretold; when PEACE shall over all the earth its ancient splendors fling and the whole world send back the song which now the angels sing.

Let's join in that song today, this week as we choose our words and actions. May live into this vision of Christ's peace over all the earth. Amen.

Parts of the sermon were based on information in the following resources.

Rev. Melanie Harrell Delaney, "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear." December 7, 2014

<http://www.goodshepherdchristianchurch.org/sermons/it-came-upon-a-midnight-clear>

Rev. Barbara Wells, "Hear the Angels Sing." December 8, 2002

<http://www.pbuuc.org/sermons/archive/sermons0203/heartheangelssing.html>

"Singing the Story of Christmas." Dec. 4, 2016

https://www.umcredbank.org/hp_wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/12-04-16-singing-story-xmas-midnight-clear.pdf

It came upon the midnight clear,
That glorious song of old,
From angels bending near the earth,
To touch their harps of gold:
"Peace on the earth, goodwill to men,
From heaven's all-gracious King."
The world in solemn stillness lay,
To hear the angels sing.

Still through the cloven skies they come,
With peaceful wings unfurled,
And still their heavenly music floats
O'er all the weary world;
Above its sad and lowly plains,
They bend on hovering wing,
And ever o'er its babel sounds
The blessed angels sing.

Yet with the woes of sin and strife
The world has suffered long;
Beneath the angel-strain have rolled
Two thousand years of wrong;
And man, at war with man, hears not
The love-song which they bring;
O hush the noise, ye men of strife,
And hear the angels sing.

And ye, beneath life's crushing load,
Whose forms are bending low,
Who toil along the climbing way
With painful steps and slow,
Look now! for glad and golden hours
come swiftly on the wing.
O rest beside the weary road,
And hear the angels sing!

For lo!, the days are hastening on,
By prophet bards foretold,
When with the ever-circling years
Comes round the age of gold
When peace shall over all the earth
Its ancient splendors fling,
And the whole world give back the song
Which now the angels sing.