

**A TIME OF SALVATION****2 CORINTHIANS 5:18-19, 21**

I'm still kind of amazed by it. What? A couple of years ago, our then 4 year old granddaughter, Joyhannah, learned all the names of the American presidents from Washington through Trump. Yes, of course, she's naturally brilliant due to her genetic link to her grandfather. Be that as it may, it was still pretty astounding. How had she learned it? The list of presidents was set to a melody. Knowing the melody helped Joyhannah remember the names. It underlines something all of us have learned. If you want to remember something, set it to music. It's often been said Christians learn more of their theology from the hymns and songs they sing than from Sunday school classes or pastors' sermons. Why? Because of that unique combination of words and notes that sticks in your memory bank. Churchgoing Christians know more about the fundamental doctrines of the church—from incarnation to salvation, from creation to eschatology—from the hymns and songs they sing, rather than from any other source.

Christmas carols are a prime example. They're an integral part of the season. They're also part of our heritage as followers of Jesus. We enjoy singing them faithfully every December, but we even hear explicitly Christian Christmas carols played and sung on secular radio, in the shopping mall, and at events that have no intent or desire to be Christian. People with little or no allegiance to Jesus can get all misty-eyed singing "Away In A Manger" or "Silent Night." Maybe much loved Christmas carols are a sneaky way God continues to knock on the door of our culture asking people to consider who Jesus is and why He came into this world.

So, this Christmas season, I'm going to feature several well-known, much loved Christmas carols during my messages. Sing we now of Christmas! Each one of them underline or illuminate aspects of the message of Christmas. Today, we'll see how they emphasize the fact Christmas is a time of salvation. Many of the stories behind who wrote these carols, how they got written, and why they became popular are really interesting. We'll look at the words of these carols and see how they support and promote the more important words of Scripture itself. Now, today, I want to talk about two of the most beloved carols of all that we sang today. Here's the first one...

**"HARK! THE HERALD ANGELS SING"**

The author of the lyrics was Charles Wesley (1707-1788), an Englishman. He was the youngest of 18 children and the brother of John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church. Charles became a pastor like his brother, John, and both of them were pretty controversial spiritual leaders in their day and time. Charles was deeply frustrated by a lot of the music he heard in the churches of his day and time. He did more than complain about it! He went out and wrote some 3,000 brand new hymns many of which are still sung today. His hymns are well-represented in our hymnal. You might recognize "O for A Thousand Tongues to Sing," "Christ the Lord Is Risen Today," and "Rejoice, the Lord is King" – just to name a few. He believed Christians should be singing energetic, enthusiastic songs packed full of their personal experience of Jesus. He was a great student of the Bible and spent hours daily writing music.

While working on a new Christmas song in 1739, he came up with this lyric: “Hark! How all the welkin rings, Glory to the King of Kings.” Those were the original lyrics of the carol we sing today. What? What on earth is a “welkin”? It’s a very old word – no longer used today – that refers to the vault or the bowl of the sky above us. It appears often in Shakespeare’s plays. It was often teamed up with the verb “ring” – as Wesley did here - to suggest a very loud noise. I think Wesley was trying to convey the idea that when Jesus was born, it was as if the great expanse of the sky itself rang out in praise like a great, clanging bell. Wesley published it and it got sung at his church at least.

But fifteen years later it reappeared as “Hark! the herald-angels sing, Glory to the new born king.” How did that happen? George Whitefield (1714-1770), an old college friend of Charles Wesley, was responsible. Whitefield became a famous evangelist well known in both England and America. It was Whitefield who changed the wording of the first line and then published it without ever consulting Wesley. Wesley was not pleased! While being extraordinarily gifted as a great preacher, Whitefield’s knowledge of Scripture wasn’t as strong as Wesley’s. Did you know it doesn’t say anywhere in the Bible that angels ever sang at or about the birth of Jesus? No, not even in Luke 2:13-14 (NLT), “Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others—the armies of heaven—praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased.’” Probably because of Whitefield’s editing of this carol as well as several other carols that feature singing angels, most people today believe angels sang at Jesus’ birth. Maybe they did, but the Bible doesn’t teach it. Charles Wesley wasn’t happy with Whitefield’s editing of his carol, because it wasn’t biblically accurate. Apparently, he refused to ever sing Whitefield’s version!

Who wrote the music? For more than a hundred years any and all versions of it were sung to the tune of “Christ the Lord is Risen Today.” Then in 1856, William Cummings (1831-1915), an English musician, adapted and arranged a melody written earlier by the great composer, Felix Mendelssohn. Cummings set it to Whitefield’s edited version of Wesley’s carol which was then printed in a Methodist hymnal in 1857. Within just one decade, the revised carol became one of the most recognized and treasured Christmas carols all over the English-speaking world. The other carol I want to feature today is...

### **“JOY TO THE WORLD”**

Isaac Watts (1674-1748), another English pastor, wrote the words to this great carol. Like Charles Wesley, Watts was no fan of the church music of his time. He found most of it to be uninspired and monotonous. He didn’t experience any joy or emotion coming from the people when either choirs or congregations sang. When he was a young man, Watts complained bitterly to his father about the archaic language of the psalms sung in the worship services he attended. His father challenged Isaac to come up with something better. So he did! Isaac Watts ended up writing some 600 hymns and hundreds of poems. Despite being heavily criticized, Watts wrote and published many new songs including ones we still sing today like “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross,” “O God, Our Help in Ages Past,” and “Alas! And Did My Savior Bleed.” It was while he was studying Psalm 98 – and especially v. 4 – that Watts got inspired to write this

famous song. That verse says, “Make a joyful noise unto the LORD, all the earth: make a loud noise, and rejoice, and sing praise.” (KJV) He published it. But because Isaac Watts had dared to rewrite the psalms in a contemporary way, few British Christians of his day and time ever embraced the song. Worship wars – the 18<sup>th</sup> century edition!

“Joy To The World” was originally sung to the tune of another well-known hymn we still sing today: “Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing.” But then a man by the name of Lowell Mason (1792-1872), an American banker who pursued his love for music in his spare time, got a hold of it. Mason himself also wrote over 600 hymns such as “My Faith Looks Up To Thee” and “Nearer My God To Thee.” He wrote a new tune in 1836 and set it to Watt’s song three years later.

Did you know it’s kind of a mystery how this song became so well-known and loved as a Christmas carol? Apparently, that wasn’t Isaac Watt’s intent. After all it, it was inspired by an Old Testament Scripture and it has no words that even remotely allude to Jesus’ birth other than the phrase “the Lord is come.” We could sing “Joy to The World” in July just as appropriately as in December. Maybe we should! But for reasons that are still unclear, it got embraced as one of the most beloved Christmas carols of all time. Perhaps because of its jubilant spirit, it just felt like a Christmas song. Now I suggest these two carols support the central and overarching truth that Christmas – the coming of Jesus into this world – was a time of salvation. I hear in them three distinct, important themes – call them “melodies” – that we also hear in Scripture. Here’s the first one,

### **THE MELODY OF RECONCILIATION.**

Charles Wesley wrote in verse one, “Peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled.” That word “reconciliation” means the mending of a relationship that was broken. When you’re reconciled to your spouse, you call off plans to get divorced. When you’re reconciled to your child, you have conversations and spend time together again. When you’re reconciled to a friend, you restore a relationship with him or her by either offering or receiving forgiveness for some kind of offense that was committed.

It might be a surprise to many people today to learn that the relationship between God and human beings was utterly broken and in pieces before Jesus came into the world. The Bible reminds us in numerous places that God is absolutely holy and morally perfect. When we human beings decided as a collective group to reject God’s loving guidance over our lives and live just anyway we thought best, God was deeply offended by our sinful attitudes and actions. The relationship was shattered. Reconciliation started to happen in Bethlehem when Jesus was born. It became real and actual some 33 years later in Jerusalem when Jesus died on the cross and rose again. That’s why the Bible says, “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them.” (2 Cor. 5:18-19 NIV)

God took the initiative to heal the broken relationship you had with God by sending Jesus. The Bible also says, “For if, while we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled

to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!" (Rom. 5:10 NIV) It's a wonderful fact God took the initiative to fix our relationship with Him, because we were incapable of doing it ourselves. That's why it's so appropriate we partake of the Lord's Supper together today on this first Sunday of Advent. Right at the beginning of this Christmas season we need to be reminded that Christmas is all about salvation. We needed to be reconciled to God. The relationship was utterly broken, but God made reconciliation possible by taking the initiative even when we were still God's enemies spiritually. Jesus satisfied the need for justice to be done to our sins. He absorbed in Himself the penalty of our sin. The Bible makes it very clear, "For God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ." (2 Cor. 5:21 NLT)

Charles Wesley celebrated this great truth in verse 3 of "Hark! the Herald Angels Sing." "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." He alluded to two Old Testament passages that gave us titles for the coming Messiah. One of them says, "For a child is born to us, a son is given to us. The government will rest on his shoulders. And he will be called: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." (Is. 9:6 NLT) Jesus actually created peace with God or the opportunity for you and me to be reconciled to God by what He did at the cross and the empty tomb. The other Scripture says, "But for you who fear my name, the Sun of Righteousness will rise with healing in his wings." (Mal. 4:2 NLT) He combined those two verses with something else said about Jesus in John's Gospel, "The Word (yet another title for Jesus) gave life to everything that was created, and his life brought light to everyone." (Jo. 1:14 NLT) Jesus proclaimed Himself to be the light of the world as well as the way, the truth, and the life. Christmas is all about salvation. That's why you hear in many of our Christmas carols that strong, wonderful melody of reconciliation. You also hear...

### **THE MELODY OF INCARNATION.**

That's such an important truth to understand and keep front and center especially at Christmas: Incarnation. It simply means that Jesus, a human being, was and is God as well. You have a human nature. Jesus is the only Person who ever existed that has two complete, distinct natures. He's not half human and half God. No, He has a fully developed human nature and a fully developed divine nature in one Person. Charles Wesley waxed eloquent on the incarnation in verse two of his carol, "Christ, by highest heaven adored, Christ, the everlasting Lord." Wesley was verbalizing what the Bible teaches – the Son of God always existed in Heaven – the second Person of the Trinity – but then He also became a human being in Jesus of Nazareth.

Wesley continued, "Late in time behold Him come, Offspring of the Virgin's womb." The virgin birth of Jesus is not a "take it, or leave it" belief of the Christian faith. If Mary got pregnant with Jesus in the normal, human way, then Jesus could not also be God. You cannot somehow elevate an ordinary human being into being God. Jesus' conception in Mary's womb had to be something radically different. And it was. Somehow, the Holy Spirit took the divine Son of God and joined Him with a human egg in Mary's

uterus (I realize that sounds a little crude and inelegant) and the result was and is Jesus. “Veiled in flesh the God-head see, Hail th’incarnate Deity, Pleased as man with us to dwell, Jesus, our Emmanuel.” You probably already know that Emmanuel literally means, “God with us.” Jesus was and is God with us in human form.

There’s no clearer description of the incarnation than what we read in John 1. “In the beginning the Word (that’s another title for Jesus) already existed. The Word was with God, and the Word was God. He existed in the beginning with God.... So the Word became human and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father’s one and only Son.” (Jo. 1:1-2, 14 NLT) Because Jesus is God, we can know the truth about God and we can know what God is like. Because Jesus is God, His death and resurrection have ultimate significance. Because Jesus is human, it made it possible for Him to experience fully what it means to live here on Earth. God does indeed understand all the struggles of being a human being. Because Jesus is human, it made it possible for Him to die for our sins so that our relationship with His Father might be restored. You can fully appreciate the message of Christmas in the carols we sing if you listen for and hear the melody of the incarnation. But don’t forget to listen, also, for...

### **THE MELODY OF CELEBRATION.**

Isaac Watts had it right! “Joy to the world! The Lord is come; Let earth receive her King; Let every heart prepare him room, And heaven and nature sing. Joy to the earth! The Savior reigns; Let all their songs employ; While field and floods, rocks, hills, and plains - Repeat the sounding joy.” Indeed, the birth of King Jesus is the reason for the greatest joy possible. Even nature itself has every reason to rejoice, sing, and celebrate because Jesus has come. Earth’s Creator and Boss – that’s really what the title “Lord” means – has arrived. Of course, we should also rejoice with all our might! The Bible says, “You love him (Jesus) even though you have never seen him. Though you do not see him now, you trust him; and you rejoice with a glorious, inexpressible joy. The reward for trusting him will be the salvation of your souls.” (1 Pt. 1:8-9 NLT) Only Jesus followers have a reason to experience ongoing, perpetual joy. How do we – as Watts suggested - prepare room in our hearts for Jesus? Yes, we receive Him as Savior and Lord, to be sure, but that’s the beginning, not the end. We continue to give Him access to our lives consciously, thoughtfully, and with the greatest of joy. You could say all of life is about just preparing more and more room in our hearts for Jesus!

Both of the carols we’ve featured today give us ample reasons to celebrate. First, we celebrate at Christmas because it means sin and sorrow are no longer in control of our lives. Watts put it like this, “No more let sins and sorrows grow, Nor thorns infest the ground; He comes to make his blessings flow Far as the curse is found.” Watts was alluding to what happened after Adam and Eve sinned. It’s often referred to as the Fall. Even nature was affected adversely. Thorns and weeds appeared where apparently they didn’t before. Everything fell under a curse. But with the coming of Jesus, the effects of the Fall or the curse have been reversed. Sin and sorrow no longer have to be in control or dominate your life or mine. We’re meant for something far better.

Because Jesus came, the Bible says, "We know that our old sinful selves were crucified with Christ so that sin might lose its power in our lives. We are no longer slaves to sin. For when we died with Christ we were set free from the power of sin.... Now you do those things that lead to holiness and result in eternal life." (Rom. 6:6-7, 22 NLT)

Second, we celebrate at Christmas because it means we no longer have to endure permanent death or eternal separation from God. Instead we receive new spiritual life right now today and eternal, physical life in a resurrected body forever. Yes, we still die out of this world, but it's no longer permanent death because of what Jesus did. Charles Wesley put it like this, "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." Notice how Scripture links Jesus' coming with no longer having to fear death and dying. "Because God's children are human beings—made of flesh and blood—the Son also became flesh and blood. For only as a human being could he die, and only by dying could he break the power of the devil, who had the power of death. Only in this way could he set free all who have lived their lives as slaves to the fear of dying." (Heb. 2:14-15 NLT)

Third, we celebrate at Christmas because it means God always remains in charge. Watt's wrote, "He rules the world with truth and grace, And makes the nations prove - The glories of his righteousness, And wonders of his love." He rules. Present tense. Not past tense as if God used to rule, but He's no longer in charge. Not future tense as if everything is chaotic now, but one day in the future God will be in control. Paul, the great Christian leader, wrote, "This is a trustworthy saying, and everyone should accept it: 'Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners'.... (That led Paul to come to a wonderful conclusion.) All honor and glory to God forever and ever! He is the eternal King, the unseen one who never dies; he alone is God. Amen." (1 Tim. 1:15, 17 NLT) When we look around this world, we see so much evil and brokenness everywhere. Sometimes that darkness creeps into our own lives in various ways. It gets hard to believe God's in control. But Christmas is the constant reminder that things are not always what they seem. By faith, we say God is working out His will both in this world and also in each of our lives despite appearances. God will have the last word. Yes, Jesus rules the world and He reigns and rules in your life and mine, too. And His rule is marked by love, truth, grace, and righteousness. So, rejoice!

One summer day in June, Donald Castle, an Episcopalian priest, was waiting in a clinic for his doctor's appointment when an older couple arrived. The older gentleman greeted the room of people, "Merry Christmas! Merry Christmas!" His enthusiasm was infectious. Most of the patients ignored the outburst; but Donald decided to return the greeting, "Merry Christmas to you, too!" Sensing a sympathetic ear, the wife of the well-wisher explained the situation to him quietly: "It started this past year. For no reason, my husband would begin to get into the Christmas spirit. At first we dismissed it, but then we realized how much joy it brought him. So we started decorating the house, singing carols, having a spur-of-the-moment celebration. You know, after doing this a number of times, we look forward to it. Christmas can come any time, any place." Indeed, because Christmas is a celebration of God's salvation. And that salvation should always be a reason for the greatest joy. Joy to the world, the Lord is come!