

"MEDITATIONS ON THE MUSIC OF CHRISTMAS"

John 14:6 Ezekiel 34:6, 11-12, 15-16; Genesis 3:17-19; Psalm 98:4-9; Isaiah 57:17-19; Matthew 9:35-36

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SCRIPTURE John 14:6,7

Jesus said ..., "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷ If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him."

HYMN "I Wonder As I Wander"

*I wonder as I wander out under the sky, How Jesus the Savior did come for to die.
For poor on'ry people like you and like I... I wonder as I wander out under the sky.*

*When Mary birthed Jesus 'twas in a cow's stall, With wise men and farmers and shepherds and all.
But high from God's heaven a star's light did fall, And the promise of ages it then did recall.*

*If Jesus had wanted for any wee thing, A star in the sky, or a bird on the wing,
Or all of God's angels in heav'n for to sing, He surely could have it, 'cause he was the King.*

SCRIPTURE Ezekiel 34:6, 11-12, 15-16

My sheep were scattered, they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill; my sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with no one to search or seek for them.

For thus says the Lord GOD: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. ¹²As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness.

I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.

REFLECTION "For Poor Ornery People"

In the beginning, before they were called "Christians," Christians were known as the "followers of the Way." I like that, especially when you hear it alongside Jesus' words, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life." It says something about the nature of our faith – we follow not just a set of beliefs, but a path of life; we follow not just a way of life but a *person* – a Savior with whom we have a relationship of love. Of course, we don't always follow either very well. We wander. Sometime we wander pretty far afield from both the path and the relationship. We want to make our own easier path. We forget that Jesus' way is a way of love and compassion, and try to make it about rules and judgement. We have a hard time accepting the love that Jesus comes to us with. It's so complete, so vulnerable, so utterly self-giving that we can't make sense of it or believe we could deserve it. And... well, we *are* ornery. We're told we're loved –

we insist we aren't lovable. We're assured that the grace of God is a free gift – we set about trying to earn it. We're reminded we have gifts to offer – we decline to use them. We're asked to love our neighbor – we say "who is my neighbor, anyway?" We are presented with ample evidence that we are lost, but we insist we don't need directions. There's a lot to wonder about, and as the song says, "how Jesus the Savior did come for to die for poor orn'ry people like you and like I" IS cause for wonder.

The only explanation (if you can call it that) is what we read in Ezekiel. That we belong to God, and for that reason God is prepared to go to whatever lengths necessary to seek us out wherever we have wandered, to rescue us, bring us back, bind up our hurts, strengthen us, and (I love this line) "feed us with justice." Wherever we go out under the sky, this is cause for wonder and amazement.

SCRIPTURE

Genesis 3:17-19

And to the man God said, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree about which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

Psalm 98:4-9

Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises. Sing praises to the LORD with the lyre, with the lyre and the sound of melody. With trumpets and the sound of the horn make a joyful noise before the King, the LORD.

Let the sea roar, and all that fills it; the world and those who live in it. Let the floods clap their hands; let the hills sing together for joy at the presence of the LORD, for he is coming to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity.

HYMN

"Joy to the World"

*Joy to the world, the Lord has come! Let earth receive her King
Let every heart prepare Him room
And Heaven and nature sing, And Heaven and nature sing
And Heaven, and Heaven, and nature sing*

*Joy to the World, the Savior reigns! Let us our songs employ
While fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains
Repeat the sounding joy, Repeat the sounding joy
Repeat, repeat, the sounding joy*

*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, Far as the curse is found
Far as, far as, the curse is found*

*He rules the world with truth and grace, And makes the nations prove
The glories of His righteousness
And wonders of His love, And wonders of His love
And wonders, wonders, of His love*

REFLECTION

“With Truth and Grace”

“Joy to the World” is many people’s favorite Christmas hymn. It’s certainly one of mine. And yet, if you paid close attention to the words, you may have noticed that it says not one word about Jesus birth: there’s not a mention of Bethlehem, a stable, Mary and Joseph, shepherds, angels, magi or a star. Instead there is a whole lot of theological language. The words do talk about the Lord coming, about making room in our hearts to receive him, about “heaven and nature singing” (which sounds *kind of* like it might be about the angel chorus), and of course about love and joy, which dovetails nicely with the themes of Christmas. But none of that is *specifically* about Christmas.

In fact, Isaac Watts, who wrote the words, almost certainly was thinking more about Christ coming again than about the story of Jesus birth. You could probably hear how the words echo the Psalm’s vision of God’s ultimate judgement – just and fair – of the world. In this respect the hymn is eminently suitable for Advent, which is intended to be both a season of preparation for Christmas *and* a looking ahead to a time when Christ comes again to bring God’s reign of justice and peace.

There is a bit of hard truth in this hymn, especially in verse 3, which acknowledges that we have sins and sorrows which proliferate. It makes reference to the Genesis story which likewise acknowledges that sin has this all-pervasive effect on human life and even on the natural world (and that life is *hard*). Doesn’t sound very joyful! But the good news is that God promises it will not be this way forever.

“He rules the world with truth and grace.” It’s such an important line. The truth must be told. All is not well with the world or with us. There is no healing unless we acknowledge that truth... and the clarity of Truth is what Jesus brings us, simply through who he is: we see what we are meant to be, and how far we are from that. But Christ’s reign comes not just with truth but with grace. So the truth brings not the harsh anger of retribution but the gift of forgiveness and healing. And so it is that joy and singing are appropriate, so much so that the whole creation will join in.

Does this song really belong in the Christmas season? I think it does. Because if we really understand what Jesus’ first coming means, if we really welcome him and follow him and seek what he seeks, we don’t stop at the manger. We follow him out into the world, and every day we are looking, longing, praying, working, living into that vision of a future of justice and peace.

SCRIPTURE

Isaiah 57:17-19

Because of their wicked covetousness I was angry;
I struck them, I hid and was angry; but they kept turning back to their own ways.

I have seen their ways, but I will heal them;
I will lead them and repay them with comfort,
creating for their mourners the fruit of the lips.

¹Peace, peace, to the far and the near, says the LORD;
and I will heal them.

Matthew 9:35-36

Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

REFLECTION

“Light and Life to All”

In contrast to “Joy to the World,” “Hark, the Herald Angels Sing” is undoubtedly a Christmas hymn; in fact, Charles Wesley titled it “A Hymn for Christmas-Day.” (The first line of his original version, however, was “Hark, how all the welkin rings,” “welkin” being an archaic English word meaning “sky.” I think we can agree that the change, made by Wesley’s preacher-colleague George Whitefield, is much better!) Wesley’s poem was first sung, at his request, to a slow and solemn tune, only later being put to the joyful music by Mendelssohn which we know so well and which seems to fit the words perfectly.

“Hark” is like “Joy” though in one important respect: it is a richly theological hymn. (I wonder if that’s why these are two of my favorite carols?).

It’s been said, though, that it’s not a particularly orderly theology in Charles Wesley’s words: “the focus shifts rapidly from angels, to us, to nations.” He mixes joyful exclamations with commands to praise God and many scripture references. “Hark the Herald Angels Sing” incorporates phrases from the gospels of Luke and John, from the prophets Isaiah and Malachi, from 1 Peter, and from the letters of Paul.

Some of its phrases evoke scenes from the Christmas story, while others reflect briefly on some of the big concepts of faith: mercy, peace, righteousness, reconciliation, resurrection. The central theme seems to be healing, reconciliation, and peace: healing for us, for our relationship with God, for the earth, for the nations.

I want to you pay attention when we sing it in a minute to how the text incorporates many different names for Jesus: King, Prince of Peace, Sun of Righteousness, Incarnate Deity, Christ, Emmanuel. The *person* of Jesus is key to the healing and reconciliation we are singing about. Not so much what he says or does, but *who* he is.

For me I always feel that the heart of the text is in the third verse: "Light and life to all he brings, ris'n with healing in his wings." Jesus is the one who brings light and life. He IS the light. He IS the life. With the angels, we sing "glory."

*HYMN

"Hark, the Herald Angels Sing"

*Hark! the herald angels sing: "Glory to the newborn King!
Peace on earth and mercy mild God and sinners reconciled"
Joyful, all ye nations rise Join the triumph of the skies
With angelic hosts proclaim: "Christ is born in Bethlehem"
Hark! the herald angels sing: "Glory to the newborn King!"*

*Christ by highest heav'n adored Christ the everlasting Lord!
Late in time behold Him come Offspring of a Virgin's womb
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see; Hail the incarnate Deity
Pleased in flesh with us to dwell Jesus, our Emmanuel
Hark! the herald angels sing: "Glory to the newborn King!"*

*Hail the heav'n-born Prince of Peace! Hail the Son of Righteousness!
Light and life to all He brings, Ris'n with healing in His wings
Mild He lays His glory by Born that weno 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!"*

Resources

Psalter Hymnal Handbook, quote on hymnary.org