

“God and Sinners Reconciled”

Luke 2:1-20

What's your favorite Christmas Carol?

This year we asked our Divinity members to write down our favorite Christmas hymn and place it in the sermon note box. The enticement was that we would use the voting to choose Christmas hymns for worship. We had to write down our name so people wouldn't stuff the box but that didn't work when some folks wrote their name on several ballots, but I only counted one of them.

These were our top three hymns and an interesting tidbit about each . . .

By far, the top vote getter was “Silent Night, Holy Night”. It was written in 1818 by Joseph Mohr. His father was a mercenary soldier often away from home. His mother was a seamstress. A local parish priest at the Salzburg Cathedral in Austria raised him, became his foster father, and looked after his education. Mohr sang in the Salzburg Cathedral choir, was ordained, and went as an assistant priest to St. Nikolaus Church in Oberdorf, Germany.

On Christmas Eve 1818 the organ was not playable at St. Nikolaus. Mohr wrote the text, took it to the parish organist on Christmas Eve, and asked him to come up with a tune utilizing two voices, choir, and guitar.

The organist wrote the tune as requested, and priest, musician, and choir sang the hymn at the service that night with the organist accompanying them on a guitar.

The second hymn you chose is “Joy to the World” which was not written for Advent or Christmas. It is the second half of a paraphrase of Psalm 98 written by Isaac Watts in 1719. In the old green hymnal, it was the first Christmas hymn. In our red hymnal it’s the last Advent hymn. It has always been sung as the transitional hymn between Advent and Christmas because it describes the Messiah’s coming and kingdom.

The third hymn you chose?

Charles Wesley’s carol, “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing” is based on the lyrics sung by a choir of angels who startled some shepherds in a field outside Bethlehem. One angel has a solo part, and then comes the chorus: “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!” (v. 14). This announcement, known as the “Gloria,” has been the foundation for many popular carols, including the “Gloria in excelsis Deo” of “Angels We Have Heard on High.”

Charles Wesley was John Wesley’s younger brother, and together they founded the Methodist movement in the early 18th century. John was the organizer and preacher, and while Charles preached as well, he is most famous for the thousands of hymns he wrote, only a fraction of which are in most of our hymnals.

For Wesley, and for Luke, the birth of Jesus is a *sign of heaven and earth coming together, which brings peace and reconciliation between God and humanity*. It's an announcement that the story of God's rescue plan for the world — a story that began in Genesis when God revealed a plan to bless the broken world to another shepherd named Abraham — was becoming a reality. Abraham would shepherd a family that became a nation, whose mission had been to be a light to the other nations, bringing them back to God.

But when we look at the whole story of Scripture, we see that Israel, delivered by God from slavery and settled in a promised land, struggled with that mission (in Hebrew, the word "Israel" means "striving or wrestling with God"). Israel sinned by following after other gods and a series of corrupt kings, which led to their exile away from the land God had promised them. Some of the exiles returned from Babylon, but for the next 500 years, many of the people still believed that Israel was in exile, still under foreign domination.

Luke explains that when Jesus was born, Rome was in control and Caesar Augustus was the emperor. Augustus considered himself a "son of god" (in his case that "god" was his murdered great uncle and adoptive father, Julius Caesar) and a "prince of peace." He had coins minted that proclaimed those titles to the world. His divinity was self-proclaimed, and his idea of peace involved eliminating all of Rome's enemies.

In fact, this was the way of every emperor. When a new emperor came to the throne, it was heralded by messengers around the Roman world as “good news,” but it was good news only for those in power, whose peace was maintained at the point of the sword.

For Israel, the real good news would only come when God’s true king, the Messiah, would come on the scene and pave the way for God to save them from these tyrants.

And then, an angel came and announced to another group of shepherds that this ancient plan had been fulfilled. “I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people,” proclaimed the angel (v. 10).

God’s promised return was happening, but in a way that no one expected. God was not returning as a conquering hero, a glorious cloud-surfing warrior coming back to destroy Israel’s enemies.

No, the “sign” given to these shepherds was a leaky, burpy, dirt poor little baby, born in a cave in a nowhere town called Bethlehem.

And yet, this is why the whole sky was ringing — a glimpse of heaven and earth coming together, as God had intended from the beginning. God was coming to dwell with his people to redeem and save them. The long-awaited Messiah, the true king, was the Lord himself, wrapped in the swaddling clothes of a tiny baby, fully human and fully divine.

And so, as Charles Wesley put it, “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing” with this news. “Peace on earth and mercy mild,” he writes, echoing the message of the angel host.

This is a very different kind of peace than that of the likes of Augustus, or any other earthly power then or now. This is a peace that isn’t just offered to some, but to “all whom God favors,” to all of humanity created in his image (v. 14). God’s grace, offered to Israel, is now offered to everyone who chooses to follow this unlikely leader, perfect in his humanity and perfect in the image of God.

Broken humanity can be restored because God has come among his people to save them from their sins, to renew creation and restore the peace of God’s good world.

God’s rescue mission was becoming a reality in a manger in Bethlehem.

The carol puts it nicely: “God and sinners reconciled.”

“Joyful, *all ye nations* rise. Join the triumph of the skies. With angelic hosts proclaim, ‘Christ is born in Bethlehem!’” Here in Wesley’s carol, based on the message of the angels, is the essence of the gospel: “Peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled!”

This is the best message we can hear (and sing) on Christmas Eve: “Be reconciled to God!”

How does that happen? It happens through faith, trusting that, through Jesus, God’s rescue plan for the world includes sinners like us. Whatever old life we’ve struggled with, whatever sin

hounds us, wherever peace of heart, mind, body and soul eludes us, the good news is that the peace of Christ can overcome them.

Take this thought home: *God has stepped toward us in Jesus. Will you step toward God?*

Will you be reconciled to God?

Heaven and earth are ringing with praise to God for what God has done by coming in person in Christ.

Let's join the story from Luke 2:1-19 . . . ¹In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. ⁸In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see — I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior,

who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ¹⁴"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" ¹⁵When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." ¹⁶So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.