

It came upon the midnight clear
November 27, 2022 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

Well, here we are, the first week of Advent and that seems to me to be the perfect time to revisit our 'Unwrapping the Carols' series from last year. Given that I spent a lot of time in worship ministry before coming here, my instinct is to always make sure that you know and understand the words that you are singing to God and so we'll take the next few weeks here to unpack one carol each week so that we can better understand what it tells us about the birth of Jesus.

Now in that sense, the carol that we're going to look at today is a little strange because it doesn't actually mention the birth of Jesus. I don't know if you've ever noticed that before – 'It came upon the midnight clear' doesn't actually mention Jesus' birth. It talks about the night of Jesus' birth but it doesn't actually mention Jesus Himself.

That's okay with me though because this carol is more focused on the implications of Jesus' birth – not just what happened, but WHY it happened. It tells us WHY Jesus' birth is so important and that's what we're going to explore today.

So join me in 'It came upon the midnight clear' and we'll think about what Jesus' birth means for us today. If you look on the back of your bulletin today you'll see the words printed there so you can follow along.

So: 'It came upon the midnight clear.' Verse 1:

1 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, good will to men,
from heaven's all-gracious King."
The world in solemn stillness lay,
to hear the angels sing.

It took me a minute to realize this, but verse 1 is kind of like a time machine. It takes us back in time to the night when Jesus was born and tells us all about what happened that very first Christmas. It was a quiet night, a clear night. Round about midnight, angels appeared, bending near to the earth, to sing a song from God above. Verse 1 calls it 'that glorious song of old' because by the time the carol was written in 1849, it WAS an ancient song, a 'glorious song of olden times.'

And this is what they sang:

"Peace on the earth, good will to men, from heaven's all-gracious King."

Now since the rest of the carol is really just an exploration of the various ways that people respond to that song, I really think we need to think about what it means. So where have we heard that before? Peace on the earth, goodwill to men? It does appear in 'I heard the bells on Christmas day.' Where in the Bible does that appear?

Luke 2, Luke 2:14 actually. This is essentially the King James Version of what the angels sang the night Jesus was born.

14 "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests" (Luke 2:14 NIV).

That's the NIV. On the night that Jesus was born, the angels declared to the world that God Himself had extended peace to the world. And the KJV translators were right in saying that this is was act of goodwill from God to human beings; the extension of peace from God to man is good news! Now, the more we learn about ancient Greek, the more we understand its nuances and that's why more modern versions says 'peace to those on whom God's favour rests.'

Because ultimately, the peace that Jesus brings is for people who turn from sin to trust in Jesus – they are the ones on whom God's favour rests. But from our point of view though we don't know who they are who will receive this gift of peace and so frankly I'm ok with saying that the offer of peace God extended on Christmas Eve is an act of goodwill to all people. The angels want us to know that Christmas eve means peace.

And even more importantly, they want us to know that this peace comes from God Himself. It all comes from 'Heaven's all gracious king.' This isn't just 'peace on earth' like peace between human beings; this is true peace, lasting peace between God and humanity. It's not explicit in the song, but it's certainly there in the Bible – Jesus' birth is an olive branch from God, it's the extension of peace and forgiveness from God to humanity.

See when a lot of people think about God, they think in terms of a kindly old grandpa who loves everyone and they just assume that we start off on good terms. "He's so loving; He just automatically loves us."

In a sense that's true but in another, it's entirely wrong. Colossians 1:21 tells us that before Jesus was born, we were alienated from God and enemies in our minds because of our evil behaviour.ⁱ James 4:4 says that when we choose to live for the world, we become enemies of God!ⁱⁱ Before Jesus' birth, there was no peace on earth because earth was essentially at war with Heaven.

But then God, because of His great love for us, even when we were His enemies, sent His one and only Son to save us from sin and win us back for God. Romans 5:8 says:

8 But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Verse 10 (paraphrase) while we were still God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son.ⁱⁱⁱ

That's what the angels' song is talking about – the offer of amnesty, the offer of forgiveness, the offer of peace that God is extending to the world, in the person of His Son, Jesus.

And so it's no wonder that the angels are singing this song that first Christmas eve – 'Peace on the earth, good will to men, from Heaven's all-gracious King.' Because of the baby born in Bethlehem, the gracious high king of Heaven is extending peace and goodwill to the people on earth.

And according to this carol, the people there in Bethlehem that night lay in solemn stillness, listening to the angels sing. Mary might have had a different perspective on this, what with the cattle lowing and

the baby crying, but the point in verse 1 is that the people that first Christmas eve heard the angels' song and received it with solemn stillness.

That's verse 1. Now verse 2 jumps forward in time to the present day (which when the song was written was 1849). And it says –

2 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.

Verse 2 imagines that the angels are still singing the song that they started singing on Christmas eve. Peace on earth from God in heaven. Over a weary world, over sad and lowly plains, over the noise we make, the 'babble, babble, babble' – over all the busyness of the world, the angels continue to tell us that God is for us.

But notice, that reference to 'Babel' gives this verse an ominous tone. What does Babel represent? Conflict. Confusion. The attitude of 'let's build a tower to assault the heavens.' The spread of nations all around the world and the division of people into us vs them. Nationalism, racism, xenophobia; verse 2 introduces the idea that as modern people, we may not be very good at hearing the angels' song and understanding that peace from God means goodwill among people.

Now verse 2 introduces that idea and verse 3 drives it home. But here we need to do some reconstruction because verse 3 in the hymnbook is not verse 3 in the original song. And that's why I didn't point you to the hymnbook in the first place. For whatever reason, a lot of hymnbooks leave out the original verse 3. Which is actually a shame because I would argue that verse 3 is actually the key to the whole song. Here's verse 3 -

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.

According to verse 3, the angels have continued to sing the song of peace that they sang on Christmas Eve, and yet for two thousand years since, war has continued, because we've failed to hear and comprehend their song. 'Man at war with man hears not the love song which they bring' and so despite the offer of peace that God has extended, violence has had its way on earth.

And this is actually where the real world of the composer makes this song all the more interesting. The man who wrote this song, a pastor named Edmund Sears, wrote this song the year after the Mexican-American War in 1849.

I know that the Mexican-American war is not super well known because of the Civil War that happened ten years later and the two World Wars but the Mexican-American war saw its fair share of bloodshed. Essentially this war saw America annex Texas for itself plus parts of or all of Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah, and Wyoming. As spoils of war, America took a lot territory from Mexico.

Which created a new problem. The slave-holding South was running out of room expansion and they thought that that new land should be opened up to become slave states. But a lot of people in the North were reluctant to let slavery extend any further. And so within a decade, brother would be fighting brother in the Civil War, which took countless more lives.

Edmund Sears, as he's writing this carol, is looking at the world around him on one hand and the offer of peace from God on the other, and says 'this is an utter contradiction. This is totally out of whack!' The gracious high king of Heaven has offered peace between Himself and us and yet we're too busy fighting each other to realize that peace with God means peace with others. And so what does the carol say?

Stop it! Ye men of strife! And hear the angels sing. Listen to their song. Think about what it means for the way you treat other people.

That's verse 3; given that, I think verse 4 then takes on a whole new meaning. Because wherever there is war, wherever there is conflict, there are people caught in the crossfire. There are people who want nothing to do with the fighting and yet get caught up in the suffering nonetheless.

And I think that's what he's talking about in verse 4 –

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

I can picture the composer saying these words to slaves who have escaped to the North (Sears was an abolitionist), refugees fleeing from the violence, people whose land and property has been requisitioned for the war. And admittedly, you don't need to be at war to feel the weight of the world. Maybe you're struggling to beneath life's crushing load, struggling to make ends meet, to keep your family together, to get through another day – to all of us, the carol says -

look now! for glad and golden hours
come swiftly on the wing.
O rest beside the weary road,
and hear the angels sing!

Even if no one else will hear the song of peace and goodwill sung by the angels – you – stop and listen and gain strength and confidence by it because the peace that it promises is coming.

That what verse 5 says.

4 For lo! the days are hastening on,
by prophet seen of old, [= days are coming which the prophet of old had seen]
when with the 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.

This carol makes it clear that we're living in the 'in between' time. When Jesus has already come, but has yet to come again to set things right the way He promised. It says: 'look, right now, we're not living in the fullness of peace that God has promised, but God *has* promised peace and that day is coming.'

And to back that up, he makes reference to a prophet and to a prophecy and if I had to guess, I suspect that he's probably thinking of Isaiah 2 (which is actually repeated in Micah 4). Isaiah 2:1

NIV Isaiah 2:1 This is what Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem: [=the days seen by the prophet of old]

2 In the last days the mountain of the LORD's temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills, and all nations will stream to it.

3 Many peoples will come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths." The law will go out from Zion, the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

4 He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore.

"These are the days that the 'prophet of old foretold'" says the composer. Isaiah anticipated a time when, by the sovereignty of God, peace is the norm: when swords will be beaten into ploughshares, when tanks become tractors, when people are so caught up in helping each other, they have no time to consider hurting each other. "And those days are hastening on."

'That day is coming' Sears says. 'And when it does, we will all join in the chorus to sing the song that the angels sing now.' And the assurance that that peace is coming gives us strength and peace here and now.

Peace on earth from God on high. All the world will sing the song which now the angels sing.

So that's the carol; what do we take from it? How do we apply this in our lives? Edmund Sears took the angels' song and applied it to 1849; let's bring it the rest of the way and think about what it means to hear it in the year 2022.

In the words of this carol, the angels are still singing the song of 'peace on earth from God in heaven' that they sang the night Jesus was born. They haven't stopped for the last two thousand years. The fact

that Jesus came that first Christmas eve to establish peace on earth with God on high hasn't changed and so the song rolls on.

Are you listening? Can you hear it? Are you aware of the fact that in the little baby in the manger, God has offered you amnesty and forgiveness and love for all the times you may have said 'God I know you made me but I know better than you'? In Jesus we have peace with God, we experience His favour. Receive it.

And then – and this is key to this carol – extend it to others. "It came upon a midnight clear" reminds us that the offer of peace that God extended to us on Christmas Eve requires that we extend that same good will to others in our lives.^{iv} It does no good to receive the peace of Christ and then go to war with your brother. We need to hear the angels' song of peace and then extend that peace to others.

How do we do that then? I think Colossians 3:12-15 is really helpful. There Paul writes:

12 Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.

13 Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.

14 And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

15 Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. (Col 3:12-15 NIV).

That's how to be instruments of peace in a world of unrest – with humility, forgiveness and love.

Let us make the angels' song – 'peace on earth from God on high' – the soundtrack of our lives. May it echo in our words and attitudes and actions, rather than the 'babble, babble, babble' of the world.

The fact that Jesus was born means peace – peace with God, peace within ourselves, peace with others – hear the song, receive the peace then be channels of that peace to others.

BENEDICTION

Numbers 6:22-26 - "The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace."

ⁱ 21 Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. (Col 1:21 NIV).

ⁱⁱ Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. (Jam 4:4 NIV).

ⁱⁱⁱ 8 But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

9 Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him!

10 For if, when 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 5:8-10 NIV).

^{iv} One of the great church fathers, Athanasius, wrote: "Who is the one who has done this, or who is the one who has joined together in peace people who once hated one another, except for the beloved Son of the Father, the Savior of all, even Jesus Christ, who because of his own love suffered all things for our salvation?" On the Incarnation 52.1. (ACCS).

GG: It struck me as I read that that we are called to love others not because they are lovable but because Jesus loved us first. The peace that we extend to others is grounded in the fact that God Himself made peace with us. Be channels of that peace of others.