

WHEN ANGELS SING

Sermon, December 26, 2021

Text: Revelation 5:11-14

“Hark the Herald Angels Sing”, sung here Christmas Eve and played during our prelude this morning, is arguably the most widely sung of Charles Wesley’s hymns; in fact, this hymn is reported to be one of the four most popular hymns in the English language. Charles and his older brother John were two of nineteen (!) children; their father was an Anglican clergyman who obviously believed church growth strategy began in the home! Charles went on to be the master hymnwriter of the family, composing nearly seven *thousand* hymns in his lifetime. Some of you may remember, though, that the original words penned by Charles Wesley were “Hark, how all the welkin rings! Glory to the King of Kings!” “Welkin” is an archaic English word for “heavens” or “the universe.” Charles Wesley never wrote that the angels sang, because the Scripture does not say the angels sang at Jesus’ birth. When the angels appeared to the shepherds with their message of “Glory to God in the highest, etc.”, the text says they were *speaking*, not singing. In fact, there seem to be only two times recorded in all of Scripture, two biblical references, about angels specifically singing. The first is Job 38:7: “The morning stars sang together, and all the angels shouted for joy.” (“Morning stars” refers to the angels, messengers of light. You’ll remember the line from the carol, “The morning stars together, proclaimed Messiah’s birth”). Job 38:7 is describing how the angels’ sang at creation; this took place before the entrance of sin into creation, before Adam and Eve sinned. The next reference to angels singing in our pew Bibles is that prophetic passage all the way at the end of the Bible, Revelation 5, our text this morning. John saw many angels, “...numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. In a loud voice they sang: “Worthy is the Lamb, etc. Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing...” John sees in this divine vision that one day, after the Lamb completes His work of redemption and restoration, everybody and every thing is breaking out in exultant song!

So, our pew Bibles seem to tell us, the angels sang before the fall of man, before the grand harmony of God’s good creation was shattered. And the angels will sing again, after God’s work of redemption and restoration is fully complete ... and all the redeemed will be singing with them! In the meantime, though, it seems the angels do NOT sing. Some have speculated that they find it hard to sing while things are still so “broken,” and they will not sing again until all is finally and fully restored, until all is made right. In the meantime, however, the angels continue to minister and serve and obey and honor their God and Maker with the utter confidence and hope that all will be made right. In the face of sin’s corruption, in the midst of how it is, the angels remain faithful to carry out their God-given duties. The angels know the end of the story; they’ve read the back of the Book and know that it all turns out great! It ends with justice, with restoration of what is lost, with the healing of relationships between people and nations, it ends with you and me joining the rest of creation in a grand mutual “A-Ha!” chorus of really and truly understanding and celebrating that “**God is good!**” Then and there, at the end of the “Book,” at the end of HIS story, history, we will “get it,” we will finally and fully understand how it all fit together. In the meantime, like the angels, we are encouraged to stay faithful in our service and dedication to God.

As John sees it, at that point all in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea and all that is in them.... will let it rip in a mighty chorus, the grandest choral concert and cantata of all time! And probably the biggest baritone bellowing out over them all will be God Himself, Who will be singing over all of us with exultant joy and triumph (Zephaniah 3:17)! That’s the joyful and triumphant climax of the story of redemption ... which is really just a prologue to eternity, to life eternal and everlasting. It isn’t here yet, but it sure is coming! It is coming because, as Isaiah saw in his prophetic vision, “... unto us a Child has been born, unto us a Son has been given.” In the meantime, we still live in the difficult fallen-ness of this broken world. But, like the angels, we live and serve and obey and hope in optimistic confidence, knowing that “... of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end. The zeal of the Lord of Hosts will accomplish this.”

The carol we just sang also captures something of this message of hope in the midst of fallen creation. It was not written originally as a carol; it was a poem slightly revised and set to music in 1872. The poem, “Christmas Bells,” was written by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow on December 25, 1864. 21½ years earlier, July 13, 1843 Longfellow had married his wife, Fanny, in Cambridge. Their first child, Charles, was born ten months later June 9, 1844. In her journal, Fanny recorded her first Christmas with baby Charles on Dec. 25, 1844: “If our Father in heaven feels anything like the joy over his children we have over our single one, what an infinity of happiness is His. I can now better understand His long-suffering patience with our infirmities.” Another son, Ernest, quickly followed, and not long after that, their third child and first girl was born. More than the usual excitement accompanied the birth of the girl, and not just because she was the first daughter. Mrs. Longfellow was one of the first women in New England to give birth to a child under the anaesthetic influence of ether; it bordered on the scandalous at the time. Puritan New England was not pleased by the lifting of Eve’s curse! Shortly after giving birth, Fanny wrote to her sister in law: “I am very sorry you all thought me so rash and naughty in trying the ether ... [but ether] is certainly the greatest blessing of this age!”

Eventually the Longfellows had a family of five children: two boys, Charles and Ernest, then three girls, Alice, Edith and Allegra. By all accounts, they were a loving happy family. In 1859, a contented Longfellow, sitting in his study next to the home library, penned his well-known poem, "The Children's Hour," which contained the stanza: *"From my study I see in the lamplight, Descending the broad hall stair, Grave Alice, and laughing Allegra, and Edith with her golden hair."* He concisely immortalized the three girls in these words: the utterly serious, grave oldest sister Alice; the carefree, giggly middle sister Allegra; the long-haired, serene and beautiful youngest Edith. He was a contented father, a successful writer, a happy husband ... the life of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was just right. For now.

A three month period between April 12 and July 10, 1861 saw the tranquility of his life shattered. April 12 was the attack on Fort Sumter, plunging our nation into civil war. Then came July 10, a very hot and humid day in Cambridge. He was at work in his study next to the library. His wife Fanny, wearing a light summer dress, sat before an open window in the library. Two of the three daughters, Edith, seven, and Allegra, five, stood at their mother's side. Earlier, Fanny had trimmed some of Edith's long golden hair to help relieve her from the heat; as this was the first major haircut of Edith's beautiful curls, Mom decided to preserve the clippings in sealing wax. She lit a candle, and began melting a bar of sealing wax ... and drops of burning wax fell unnoticed on her dress. At that moment, a breeze gusted in through the open window. The light material of her dress suddenly caught fire; in an instant, she was wrapped in a sheet of flame. Her husband ran in, grabbed a throw-rug off the floor, and threw it around her. He embraced her in an attempt to smother the flames; his face, arms and hands were severely burned in the process. Fanny Longfellow died the next morning. The subsequent burns on Henry Longfellow's face made it impossible to shave, that's why he grew that trademark very full beard.

Like all Americans at the time, Longfellow experienced the loss of national peace; and he also experienced the painful loss of personal peace. December 25, 1861, the first Christmas after Fanny's death, an excerpt from his daily journal: *"How inexpressibly sad are the holidays!"* A year later, December 25, 1862: *"A Merry Christmas say the children, but there is no more for me."* And during the third Christmas season, 1863, the tragedy of the Civil War hit home: Charles, his oldest son and a lieutenant in the Army of the Potomac, was severely wounded. Longfellow made no journal entries on Christmas Day that year. It was if he couldn't write, he couldn't "sing", while his world was so shattered. But one year later, now the fourth Christmas after his dear wife's passing, the year after his son's crippling injury, and the fourth year of the Civil War, on December 25, 1864, Longfellow sat at his desk in his study and listened to the church bells ringing and ringing. It was then that he wrote *(the words we just sang)*:

I heard the bells on Christmas Day,
Their old familiar carols play.
And wild and sweet the words repeat
Of 'peace on earth, good will to men.'

I thought how as that day had come
The belfries of all Christendom
Had rolled along th' unbroken song
Of 'peace on earth, good will to men.'

And in despair I bowed my head:
"There is no peace on earth," I said,
"For hate is strong and mocks the song
Of 'peace on earth, good will to men.' "

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;
The wrong shall fail, the right prevail,
With peace on earth, good will to men.

Till, ringing, singing on its way,
The world revolved from night to day,
A voice, a chime, a chant sublime,
Of peace on earth, good will to men.

Originally, there were seven stanzas; the two omitted stanzas contained many references to the Civil War. For three years he had found it hard to write. Perhaps like the angels, he could not sing in his broken world. But this year, in the ringing of the bells on Christmas Day, he heard and grasped something of the hope, the intangible yet very real hope, of the angels. The fourth stanza is a statement of that grace and hope, a divine gift of optimism, perhaps a personal revelation he received from God that, indeed, the wrong shall fail and the Right will prevail.

Longfellow found, as many of us have found, that our broken places can actually become our best altars for encountering God. The grace of God came to Longfellow on the broken altar of his disrupted life.

It should also be noted that when he wrote this stanza the war was not yet over, his son Charles still suffered excruciating and crippling pain, his wife was still gone ... but the Christmas message of HOPE rang loud and clear through the storms, through the fallen-ness, through the difficulties ... and this year, he grasped hold of that message. All will be made well. The "story" isn't over yet; the future is still on the way. For unto us a Child has been born. A Son has been given. And the increase of His government will see no end. The zeal of the Lord of Hosts will ... fully and completely and forever ... accomplish this.