

Christmas in Five Carols, Part 3: Hark, the Herald Angels Sing
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Pass-A-Grille Beach Community Church (UCC)
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Scripture: Luke 2:8-14

I. Queen and John Wesley

Have you ever heard of the songs “Radio Ca Ca” or “Mongolian Rhapsody”? Of course not – at least, not by those titles. These were the original names of Queen’s mega-hits, “Radio Ga Ga” and “Bohemian Rhapsody.” Sometimes, a slight change of words makes the difference between an epic failure and a cultural phenomenon.

Similarly, have you ever heard of a Christmas carol titled “Hark, How All the Welkin Rings”? That was the original 1739 title of Charles Wesley’s famous hymn, “Hark, the Herald Angels Sing.” *Welkin* is an old English word for “sky” or “heavens.” The hymn languished for fourteen years until a friend suggested revising the opening line to what we know today. Wesley wasn’t thrilled with the change, feeling it narrowed the focus from the whole cosmos rejoicing over Christ’s birth to just a handful of angels. Begrudgingly, he accepted the edit – and the carol took off.

Let’s reacquaint ourselves with this carol by singing the opening verse:

*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 th’angelic host proclaim,
“Christ is born in Bethlehem!”*

Refrain:

*Hark! The herald angels sing,
“Glory to the newborn King!”*

People have always been fascinated by angels. Today, they seem more popular than ever. Angels appear in TV shows like *Touched by an Angel* and *Supernatural*, and in movies such as *City of Angels* and *Angels in the Outfield*. They’re also big in merchandising, used to sell everything from Victoria’s Secret lingerie to designer angel tarot card sets.

Do you believe in angels? Frankly, for most of my life, I was skeptical, even cynical. That changed after my father died in 2013. Since then, I’ve had experiences that convinced me beyond reasonable doubt that he is not only alive in spirit but has

communicated with me and others. If my own father can deliver messages from the spiritual realm, why couldn't other spiritual beings do the same?

So, I've become a "true believer" in angels, even if I'm uncertain about who they are or their exact nature.

II. Angels, Jinn, and Us

My favorite understanding of angels comes from the Qur'an, which identifies three classes of spiritual beings: angels, jinn, and humans. While Jewish and Christian scriptures don't mention jinn, they do describe different kinds of spiritual beings, such as seraphim and cherubim. The Qur'an's framework offers a thought-provoking perspective.

According to Islamic theology, angels are sinless and completely obedient to God because they lack free will. As an imam friend once explained, angels are like divine robots – they fulfill God's will perfectly because they are programmed to do so.

Jinn, on the other hand, are spiritual beings with free will, like humans. Some jinn, like Iblis (Satan), use their free will to rebel against God, while others obey. The key difference between them and us is that jinn have greater spiritual awareness than humans, which makes our faithfulness to God even more remarkable.

Here's the fascinating part: the Qur'an suggests that humans, despite being "lower-born" as a mixture of spirit and matter, have the potential to surpass both angels and jinn in glory. Why? Because when we freely choose to follow God, our obedience carries a depth and beauty that angels, who cannot choose, and jinn, who know better, cannot match.

It's like two students admitted to Harvard – one with every privilege imaginable and the other overcoming poverty and hardship to get there. Whose achievement feels more significant? Similarly, our capacity to choose God, even with our limitations, reveals a potential for greatness that neither angels nor jinn possess.

III. Christianity's Unique Viewpoint

Admittedly, this Qur'anic view of humanity contrasts somewhat with Christianity's perspective. Our scriptures teach that humans, as descendants of Adam and Eve, are inherently predisposed to sin. In essence, the choice to eat the forbidden fruit created a spiritual mutation in our DNA.

The Qur'an assumes no such fall. It views sin as a product of ignorance, not an inherent flaw. Humans can rise above sin and surpass the heavenly host with proper guidance.

Christianity, however, holds that something dramatic – something only God can do – must intervene to restore us. Our carol reflects this belief in verse 2:

*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 th'incarnate Deity,
Pleased with us in flesh to dwell,
Jesus our Emmanuel.*

Refrain

Through Christ, God offers a divine intervention that restores us. When we accept Christ into our hearts, we become a new creation, shedding our old identity as offspring of the original couple. The final two verses of our carol, rarely sung today, declare this mystery:

*Come, Desire of nations, come,
Fix in us Thy humble home;
Rise, the woman's conqu'ring Seed,
Bruise in us the serpent's head.
Now display Thy saving pow'r,
Ruined nature now restore;
Now in mystic union join,
Thine to ours, and ours to Thine.*

Refrain

*Adam's likeness, Lord, efface,
Stamp Thine image in its place:
Second Adam from above,
Reinstate us in Thy love.
Let us Thee, though lost, regain,
Thee, the Life, the inner man:
Oh, to all Thyself impart,
Formed in each believing heart.*

Refrain

Orthodox Christianity, like the carol, teaches that this transformation occurs “in each believing heart.” According to this understanding, your spiritual DNA remains unchanged if you do not believe in Christ or invite Him into your heart. The mutation persists, creating a malignancy that leads to spiritual death.

This belief is why many Christians assert that only Christians can enter heaven, while all others are destined for hell. Yet this interpretation raises questions: If this were true, for instance, why didn't the Apostle Paul – who spoke extensively about Christ as the

Second Adam – ever describe hell as the ultimate fate of non-believers? You’d think he would find it important to warn people about hell if he believed that hell existed.

IV. Not Hell but Relationship

While I can’t speak for Paul’s beliefs, I can speak for myself. I believe that Christ’s death on the cross affirms our flawed spiritual DNA but replaces the notion of eternal damnation with eternal relationship and grace.

It provides proof that we’re flawed because the very best people in the world killed God’s own Son. Yet, if you want proof that eternal damnation has been taken off the table despite our sin, look no further than Christ’s prayer for his own crucifiers, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” This prayer reveals the very heart of God’s intention for all of us, not just those who rejected Christ 2,000 years ago. Our sin is countered by God’s grace. This doesn’t mean that sin is okay or that God doesn’t ask for our obedience. It means God acts more like a Divine Parent towards us than a Cosmic Judge.

Eternal relationship awaits us after we die, not eternal damnation. This means that our relationship may continue to have its ups and downs in the hereafter, yet it also means that God has a lot longer to heal our spiritual cancer than we previously thought. Just as certain physical cancers can be reversed and cured, wouldn’t you think that our spiritual cancer could be cured under God’s care?

Why else do you think Christ is known in our tradition not only as the Second Adam but as the Great Physician? He has the cure to what ails us and eternity to do his work!

What would your view of salvation and Christ’s coming be like if this idea of Christ as our Great Physician and God as our Loving Parent were your foundational assumptions?

V. How about this, instead?

In his Advent devotional entitled, *All I Really Want: Readings for a Modern Christmas*, author and UCC minister Quinn Caldwell gives us a glimpse of how things would look different if God is more of a Divine Parent than a Cosmic Judge.

How about this, instead? We’re not totally depraved; we’re just idiots, and we’re way more helpless than any of us wants to admit.

How about this? We’re capable of great things, but we’re all screwups, too. Sure, some of us may be deeply sinful, even broken. But mostly, we’re just huge dorks, lurching around and making messes while trying to do our best.

How about this? We almost never have all the information, so lots of our decisions suck.

How about this? We are to God as a two-year-old is to a well-adjusted parent.

How about this? We're easily distracted by shiny things and tend to wander off if you don't keep an eye on us.

How about this? God loves us not in spite of all this but because of it, because of the sheer depth of our goofiness and ultimate helplessness. Sometimes, all this really makes God mad; sometimes, it cracks God up. Eventually, God got tired of hollering down to us from upstairs to tell us to please stop fighting and just keep it to a dull roar. So Godself finally came down to break it up, to play with us a little, to give us some attention, to have some skin-contact time, and to see if he couldn't find something constructive for us to do.

How about this? God so loved the world that God wasn't about to let anything – not distance or our distraction, not danger or our disinterest, not our fractiousness or foolishness, and not even the threat of death itself – keep God away from us.

How about this? It's not about how good or bad we are. It's about how good God is.

VI. From King to Friend

I believe that one day, God's goodness will also be our goodness. It may take a few years or a few million, but eventually, God's love and grace will win us over.

Think back to when you were a child of perhaps 5 or 6. Didn't your parents seem like gods to you? Whether you felt loved by them or not, it seemed like they operated on levels that were so much higher than your own that you were like two different species. Yet, by the time you were a teenager, your parents didn't seem nearly as wise or as cool, did they? Then, when you hit your thirties, you realized that your parents were, in fact, wiser than you had imagined. Yet you no longer saw you and them as two different species. They were just a little further ahead of you.

Now imagine yourself at age sixty. The age gap between you and your parents is still 20-30 years, but now you are more alike than different. They are as likely to value your advice as you are to value theirs.

Imagine now that life doesn't end, and you're now 2,000 years old. What's the wisdom gap between you and your parents? For that matter, what's the wisdom gap between you and anyone who has lived in the past 300 years? There may be little difference between you and Abraham Lincoln, Harriet Tubman, or Mahatma Gandhi.

Run this lifetime out to 2 million years, and what is the difference between you and anyone who has ever lived in recorded history – including Jesus and the Buddha? If God's love and grace have been working on you this whole time, would you expect to be anyone less?

The journey to our Christlike selves may be long, but it has already begun. One day – perhaps even in our lifetime – we'll embody a bit more of Christ's breathtaking

generosity. We'll be extravagantly generous toward others not because Christ asks it of us but because we'll have discovered what Christ himself knew: that generosity brings greater joy than selfishness. One day, perhaps not long from now, we'll choose to love our enemies – not merely because Christ commands it, but because we'll understand, as Martin Luther King Jr. did, that “darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.” And we choose to be Children of Light and Love.

As we await the celebration of Christ's birth, why not plan to do more than exchange gifts, eat more than you should, and attend a Christmas Eve service? Why not celebrate by opening your heart more to Christ's spirit at work within you and reflecting it to others? As the angels proclaim in our carol, he may be your “newborn king” today, but after a few tomorrows, he'll be your age-old friend, and you'll be doing more glorious things together than is possible even for the angels.