

Isaiah 49:5-6

December 9, 2018

One of my favorite Christmas carols happens to be one that —*Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*—was written by Charles Wesley over 250 years ago. Not many songs are sung so long after they were written, so you know only the classics last that long.

Somehow I doubt people will still be singing “All I want for Christmas is my Two Front Teeth” in the year 2300. Maybe. I could be wrong. But I’ve decided never to sing it again. You heard it here first.

But I do know this, we are still singing “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing,” and the reason we are singing it is because of its brilliant lyrics. Wesley communicates so very much in short bursts of verbal brilliance. Not just verbal brilliance but also biblical truth.

Wesley penned a song that so perfectly communicates the reason Jesus came to earth. If you wonder what Christmas is all about you could do worse than read *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*.

And incidentally this carol—especially the third stanza—is the theme of our passage this morning.

[Verse 1]

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!"

[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 the incarnate Deity
Pleased as man with man to dwell
Jesus, our Emmanuel
Hark! the herald angels sing:
"Glory to the newborn King!"

[Verse 3]

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 man no more may die
Born to raise the sons of earth
Born to give them second birth

*Hark! the herald angels sing:
"Glory to the newborn King!"*

This third verse says echoes the message of Christmas—the light and life of Christ has come to earth.

The light of the world had to come from another world. God has become a man to bring mankind to God. Mankind was stumbling and groping about in the darkness and a light from heaven has dawned.

He sent Jesus the light and the life.

What does this show us?

God has come to rescue men and women. The Light has come and there is a way to escape the eternal darkness of death.

PROP: The light shines; come to the light.

*"And now the LORD says,
he who formed me from the womb to be his
servant,
to bring Jacob back to him;
and that Israel might be gathered to him—
for I am honored in the eyes of the LORD,
and my God has become my strength—
6 he says:*

"It is too light a thing that you should be my
servant
to raise up the tribes of Jacob
and to bring back the preserved of Israel;
I will make you as a light for the nations,
that my salvation may reach to the end of the
earth." Isaiah 49:5-6

PROP: The light shines; come to the light.

PRAY

1. Jesus came to the world
2. Jesus is the light for the nations
3. Do you see the light?

1. Jesus came to the world—

What do I mean?

It sounds obvious—of course Jesus came to the world to be a light for the world. Right?

If you read the OT you find a book nearly entirely about one nation, Israel. We read of Israel's origin, slavery to Egypt, rescue from Egypt, Arrival in the Promised Land, The time of the Judges, Inauguration of Kings, The Evil of her Kings, the desolation of the

Northern part of Israel, the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile to Babylon.

And at every turn, the Prophets are raised up to call Israel back to her God. And Israel refuses. What becomes clear is that Israel was going to need help. And that is what Isaiah talks about when he said,

“For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given;
and the government shall be upon his shoulder,
and his name shall be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
[7] Of the increase of his government and of
peace there will be no end...” Isaiah 9:6-7

If you read the OT, you would assume the ‘us’ that the child is born to is the nation of Israel. Most in Israel thought that. In the mind of most Jews the coming of the Messiah was all about the rescue and restoration of Israel.

So it is a bit surprising that Isaiah expands the mission of the Messiah here.

Look at verse 6 again,

“It is too light a thing that you should be my servant

to raise up the tribes of Jacob
and to bring back the preserved of Israel;
I will make you as a light for the nations,
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

Isaiah is hinting at a much broader mission than most people expected. Jesus was not just going to be a light for Israel but a ‘light for the nations.’

You might not think that is a big deal, but the OT is replete with God’s love for Israel, specifically. Uniquely.

Here are only a couple of examples from the OT.

Their great Prophet (Moses) spoke for God and said—

[6] “For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. [7] It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, [8] but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Deuteronomy 7:6–8

They sang songs about how unique they were—

“For the LORD has chosen Zion; he has desired it for his dwelling place:

[14] “This is my resting place forever; here I will dwell, for I have desired it. Psalm 132:13–14

So it is more than a little surprising that the Jewish Messiah is to be a light to more than just the nation of Israel. In other words, Israel’s Messiah has a worldwide mission. That is unexpected. That is a nice Christmas surprise.

What does that mean?

In Christmas we see the heart of God. It is no small thing that John reports when he says, “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son.” God loved those stuck in the darkness of sin and death.

God is after a people from all over the world. Not people of a specific nationality or background or ethnicity. God’s heart is for the people of the world.

God’s mission is clear and it is unambiguous—

“I will make you as a light for the nations,
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

God means for the salvation of Christ to reach every corner of the globe. This means that God loves all in the world.

That is something we take for granted. But we should not. Christmas shows us the love of God.

His love has compelled him to send his beloved son to come to be a light to all the nations. That means he loves people trapped in darkness.

The fact that Jesus came to this dark world shows us the all-surpassing love of God. If you are used to thinking of God having a perpetual frown with a constantly furrowed brow of concern—you do not know him.

He loves you.

How do we know?

Jesus came.

He did not just come for a visit. He came with a mission. What is it? Verse 6 tells us again,

"I will make you as a light for the nations,
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

2. Jesus is the Light for the nations

Jesus is the light and the means to bring salvation to the 'end of the earth.'

Throughout scripture a theme of Light and Darkness is constantly woven together. Where God is—light is also. Where God isn't—darkness is.

"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. [2] The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. [3] And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light." Genesis 1:1–3

When the people were wandering the desert God was a light for them too—

"And the LORD went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night. [22] The pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night did not depart from before the people. Exodus 13:21–22

Darkness is the absence of the presence and work of God.

“The way of the wicked is like deep darkness; they do not know over what they stumble.” Proverbs 4:19

David gives the same idea,

“For you are my lamp, O LORD, and my God lightens my darkness.” 2 Samuel 22:29

Think a little about the nature of light and darkness.

Darkness conceals.

Darkness isolates.

Darkness overwhelms.

Darkness blinds.

Darkness confuses.

Light reveals.

Light unites.

Light illuminates.

Light clarifies.

Light simplifies.

We see the kind of light that Jesus brings—

“I will make you as a light for the nations,
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

The light of salvation.

What does that mean? It means that mankind needs salvation. Without Christmas, without the coming of Jesus there would be no salvation to sing about. No light of life.

But there is.

And there we see the intersection between darkness and salvation. We don't just live in a dark world but mankind is a people infected by darkness.

It is a basic truth about of mankind—if men and women could save themselves—Jesus would not have come. Christmas would be pointless. If there were some answer to everything, some hope that we could find on our own Jesus would not have come.

But the light of Christ has come.

Jesus is the light of salvation sent from God. Jesus himself is the means of mankind's salvation. In Isaiah, God promises that he will make Jesus a light for the nations, and he promised that it would be effective.

The message of the light of Christ would stretch to the end of the earth. And today we can see those who

have seen the light the world over. Though there are many places that have yet to hear of the gospel of Jesus, there are many lands that have.

Just as it is a bit surprising to consider that God's heart would be for more than just one people group—the Jews—it is also surprising God's plan for how the light would shine.

Is it not?

If you are one of Isaiah's original readers, how would you expect the light for the nations to shine? They would expect that the light of God would not be hidden in a corner but attended with great pomp and circumstance.

All of the stories of the presence of the Lord involved, light and smoke and rumbling. Surely, the light of God's salvation would come in an obvious and conspicuous way.

But that is not what happened. When the light of the salvation of God came, few outside of Bethlehem noticed. A few shepherds came only because they saw a heavenly chorus of angels singing.

Other than that, no one took note.

Jesus was born in a backwater Roman hamlet that did not show up on most maps. The light of the salvation of God was born far from the corridors of power. The fact that he was born at all had to take most by surprise.

How could the Ancient of Days become a baby?

“The tremendous revelation of Christianity is not the Fatherhood of God, but the Babyhood of God – God became the weakest thing in His own creation, and in flesh and blood He levered it back to where it was intended to be. No one helped Him; it was done absolutely by God manifest in human flesh. God has undertaken not only to repair the damage, but in Jesus Christ the human race is put in a better condition than when it was originally designed. Beware of posing as a profound person; God became a Baby.” Oswald Chambers

No one thought that night that the baby born in the stable would be the light for the nations of all time.

Jesus did not seem great.

Jesus never occupied an earthly throne. The men of the age never came to seek his wisdom or favor. This man did not conquer any lands. This man did not have great storehouses of gold. This man did not have

attendants waiting on him hand and foot. This man did not have an audience with kings.

The Jesus of the Advent is average and ordinary. How could the light of the salvation of God shine to the end of the earth when Bethlehem barely seemed to notice Jesus' arrival?

No one reading Isaiah would think of how God would shine the light of heaven on earth by being born a helpless baby.

Not only that, but Jesus died the death of a common criminal. He was tried, convicted and strung up to die.

It is no wonder that no one saw this man as the light of salvation. Who had ever heard of a light shining from the grave? What kind of light is this that could be snuffed out?

Who would have guessed that light of the salvation of God would shine precisely because he died such a gruesome death?

Why?

The light of the glory of Christ would not shine if Jesus were still dead. The reason following Jesus makes any

sense is because he died and yet lives. Jesus does not just offer a specific philosophy or set of ideas.

He offers life.

And it would stand to reason that the one who died and yet came back to life knows how to give the gift of life. Think about it this way, there have been many great men and women down through the ages. Many who spun out great ideas, challenged the status quo or inspired a grand following. But they all died.

The great thinkers are gone.

Plato

Socrates

Seneca

Kant

Nietzsche

Buddha

Some of their ideas live on, but they are dead.

The great conquerors who marched back and forth over the globe are gone.

Alexander the Great

Attila the Hun

Julius Caesar

Hannibal
Napoleon

All conquered by death.

But none of them are like Jesus. He is alive and his light yet shines.

Today, across the globe the church of the Living One has gathered to pray, sing, hear the word and fellowship together. The light of Christ is shining brightly even today.

The light has shone and continues to shine the world over. The center of Christianity is constantly on the move.

What started in Jerusalem migrated all over the Roman empire west. It might seem that the light of Christ is flickering out here in the United States and we might assume that the rest of the world is the same.

It is not.

Think about how the message of Jesus has moved about toward the end of the earth.

- The light began to shine in Jerusalem with the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The movement was dominated by Jews.
- The message overtook the Roman Empire and the Mediterranean world.
- As the Barbarians of Europe invaded they saw the light and took it back to Northern Europe.
- From Europe the light shone across the Atlantic to North America.
- Today most the light of the glory of Christ is spreading the quickest in the global south.

“Two case studies are instructive. In 1900, Christians comprised 9 percent of the African population and were outnumbered by Muslims four to one. Today, Christians comprise 44 percent of the population, and in the 1960s passed Muslims in number. This explosive growth is now beginning in China. Christianity is growing not only among the peasantry, but also among the social and cultural establishment, including the Communist party. At the current rate of growth, within thirty years Christians will constitute 30 percent of the Chinese population of 1.5 billion.” Tim Keller

The light shining to the end of the earth.

According to the data that the Economist the current center of Christianity based on population is Niamey, Niger. That is some 2500 miles from Bethlehem.

A light for the nations indeed.

The light that dawned in Bethlehem continues to shine. And it will continue to shine.

Do you realize that the end of the Bible gives us a glimpse into the future when it says,

“After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, [10] and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” [11] And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, [12] saying, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.” Revelation 7:9–12

A light for the nations indeed.

3. Do you see the light?

God says of Jesus,

*"I will make you as a light for the nations,
that my salvation may reach to the end of the
earth."*

If Jesus needed to be a light for the nations, it must necessarily mean that the nations are a dark place. We know that to be true.

Our world is eclipsed with the darkness of violence, oppression, suppression, anger and injustice. That we can see with our eyes is true.

But why is there so much darkness?

The reason is because the power of the darkness of sin has already reached the end of the earth. All are born into a world of sin and darkness with a nature that is dark and sinful.

How can we know this for sure?

All of us know that we aren't what we should be. All of us know that we don't have to be trained in how to sin or do wrong.

That all comes naturally.

Here is the problem. The world is dark but humanity is too. People need the light of the salvation of Christ. You need the light of the salvation of Christ.

How can someone see the light of Christ?

The light shines and demands a response. It is possible to ignore the light and pretend that Jesus did not come and doesn't matter.

Two ways—

With words and with lives.

First, with words. The message of light through Christ is just this: God sent Jesus into the cursed world of darkness to shine the light of hope on any who admit they sin and have been marked by the curse. Any who ask for his salvation.

The message of the light is simple and yet sublime. Jesus died for sinners. Any who are willing to admit they are sinners, ask forgiveness and follow Jesus receive what God calls, "my salvation."

There are many who cover their eyes to the light of the salvation found in Christ. Many who chose not to see the light. Many who turn away.

If you don't follow Jesus. Don't turn away from the light. The offer of salvation is more comprehensive than you can imagine.

His salvation:

- Saves you from the penalty of sin
- Saves you from the punishment of death
- Saves you from eternal darkness
- Saves you to be his treasured possession
- Saves you to give you new life
- Saves you to give you new purpose
- Saves you to give you new hope

What do you need to bring? Only your need. Only the understanding that you can't save yourself. And that you need his salvation and you can't save yourself.

For those of us here who do follow Jesus the other way the light shines into the darkness is from us.

Not only do we have the opportunity to speak of the light of Christ but we also have the responsibility to live differently as we follow Christ.

Does the light of the salvation of God Shine forth from us?

- God has loved us—do we freely love others?
- God has forgiven us—do we forgive others?
- God has welcomed us—do we welcome others?
- God has sacrificed himself for us—do we sacrifice our time for others?
- God has died for us—are we willing to die to our preferences for others?

The way that the light shines forth today is from the followers of Jesus. Is the light of Christ shining forth from you?

Can others watch your life, your manner of speech, your spending habits and see the light?

Can others see your joy, your kindness, your gentleness and see the light?

Can others see your integrity, your faithfulness, your honesty and see the light?

Can others see that you are different?

The way that the light shines today is through our words and our lives.

The light shines—come to the light.

PRAY