

I am a collector of sacred Christmas music, which I have accumulated over many, many years. The vinyl LPs of Tennessee Ernie Ford and Handel's Messiah gave way to cassette tapes featuring Johnny Mathis and the Vienna Boys Choir, only to be replaced by CDs of medieval dances and Spanish carols and Celtic harp melodies and Mahalia Jackson singing "Poor Little Jesus Boy, We Didn't Know Who You Was."

I've got Christmas jazz from Lincoln Center and King's College choirs singing Cathedral hymns. I downloaded from iTunes a rockin' Cajun version of "He is born, the Holy Child" sung by the Veggie Tales French Peas in which Philippe and Jean Claude remind us to respond to the news of the birth of Jesus by playing the oboe and bagpipes merrily.

I am always on the hunt for a new version of an ancient hymn or a fresh take on a familiar carol.

A few years ago I came across a recording of "It Came upon the Midnight Clear" that included a verse I'd never heard before. The version I know, the one in our hymnal, has four verses and is a beautiful carol with a beautiful and always relevant message.

It begins deep in the night, once long ago, when angels came near the earth with their golden harps and the world stopped for a moment of solemn stillness to hear the angels sing the message of peace God sent them to bring to God's people.

The second one tells us that angels still come to fill the sky with unfurled, peaceful wings, still singing heavenly music over the weary and noisy world. The third verse notes that the world has suffered for two thousand years, and humans, who are always at war, are not able anymore to hear the love-song and admonishes us to hush our noise and hear the angels sing.

The last verse looks forward to the time when peace will reign over all the earth and everyone and everything will finally sing back to God the song that the angels sang and still sing to us on Christmas night.

The missing stanza, between the verse about war and the verse about peace, goes like this:
And you, beneath life's crushing load, whose forms are bending low, who toil along the climbing way with painful steps and slow - look now! for glad and golden hours come swiftly on the wing.
O rest beside the weary road and hear the angels sing.

I've always loved this evocative hymn, with its angels and their unfurled wings coming to us through a mysterious door from heaven, who bend toward and hover protectively over us and bring God's news to us in splendid celestial song. I appreciate its recognition of our weariness and the sad fact of the constancy of war and strife that drowns out the angels' love song. It poignantly reminds us just how much we need a savior.

But it speaks to me even more urgently now, now that I know this verse. Those of us who do not soar and sing but are ourselves bent, not curled over in caring but bent out of shape - distorted - beneath life's crushing load of fear or sadness or anxiety or loneliness, or lack of every kind - we are bidden on this night to just rest beside the path of our weary journey and listen God's messengers singing heavenly music.

That's all. Just stop, and rest, and hear the good news that comes even now on whispering wings, good news that sounds like angels singing in the midst of the din of the stock exchange trading floor and domestic disturbances and ear-piercing sirens about this disaster or another, and radios and televisions blaring the voices of angry commentators and advertisements designed to make us feel so bad about ourselves that we need to spend our money on things that we probably don't need and will surely never buy us peace or happiness. The sounds the whole world now proclaims are the sounds of fear-mongering and strife and constant, incessant hype.

But on this night, Jesus, the savior is born in Bethlehem. Nomadic shepherds are taking care of their sheep in the country as they always do, and a huge crowd assembles in the town in obedience to the powers that be, taking up all the available space, as crowds always do. Humble people squeeze into humble quarters, as they always must. All while the Empire moves people around on its political chessboard like pawns, as Empires always do.

And, oh what a great mystery! while people are just going about their business, out of pure love God unobtrusively slips into humanity in a back room somewhere simply to be with us, to be among us as one of us.

And those to whom this message is brought, just some poor guys working the night shift out in a field far away from the glitter of the Emperor's palace and the din of the marketplace, stop what they are doing to listen to the angels sing, which spurs them to go to see for themselves, to confirm what the angels said that God has done.

And then they go back to their regular lives, but they are changed forever; they go back in joyful gladness that God has shown them both the beautiful brilliance of the glorious angels and the simple fact that God is trustworthy.

And so on this night, in the midst of everything, there is good news that can change us forever. That not only do babies (even Baby Jesus!) do what they always do - arrive on their own schedule whether it's convenient or not - and angels do what angels always do - deliver messages from God.

But most wonderfully, that God does what God always does: As God has promised through the prophets of old, God comes to us wherever we are in our lives and abides with us, to be our companion in the way and to give us strength and courage and comfort as we trudge along in ordinary times and extraordinary times, both when life is good and when life seems to be crushing us.

No matter what, God, who has given us life, loves us and cares for us and will not ever, ever abandon us no matter how much or how little we think we deserve that love.

God is not afraid of the Empire or the dark or blaring sirens or shouting people or being born in a stable and sleeping in an animal trough or even dying a humiliating and painful death.

God is with us and God will be with us so that we can be free from fear - fear, which the world uses to exploit and control us, fear that makes us bent and distorted and keeps us from being what God created us to be: caring and loving and kind and just and free.

The Good News is that God is good and true and trustworthy.

On that night, the whole world stopped in solemn stillness to hear the angels sing. And the angels are still singing amid the world's din if we would or could stop to see and hear them.

The Empire may make its demands, but tonight the Gospel invites us to simply lay down our burdens for a while and listen to this incredible, joyful news: As God has promised, God has come to us. And God is with us, now and always.

And so, be changed forever, and do not be afraid any more.

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