

Bending Low

Luke 13:10-17; Isaiah 40:1-5

Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on November 29, 2020

The founder of Methodism, John Wesley, strongly believed that a large part of our Christian formation came from singing our faith. John's brother Charles wrote about 6,500 hymns, including hymns we know from the Christmas season like *Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus* and *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing!* although his version was called *Hark! How All the Welkin Rings!* What's a welkin? Yeah, that's why they changed it.

With John and Charles Wesley working together, hymn singing (as well as worship outdoors, I might add) has been a part of Methodism from the very beginning. So not being able to sing together during the pandemic has been especially hard for us, because our heritage is so rooted in joining our voices in song.

But even when we can sing together, a lot of times we don't really pay attention to what we're singing. Sometimes the language has become too antiquated for us, the references are too obscure to understand, or it's so familiar that we no longer pay attention to the words leaving our lips and being let loose in the world. This is especially true of Christmas carols, and since we can't sing them together, I want to pay special attention to the words for one of them this morning. You heard it and perhaps sang along earlier in the online service: *It Came Upon the Midnight Clear*.

That carol wasn't one of Wesley's. It was written in 1849 by a Unitarian minister named Edmund Sears while serving the church in Wayland, Massachusetts. In the United States in 1849, the Mexican-American War had just ended—a war which was itself all tied up in issues of slavery and the horrors of Manifest Destiny as the racial divisions in the country continued to worsen. With a nation divided to the extent that it would soon go to war with itself, and Europe still reeling from a series of revolutions in 1848 in no less than 50 countries, Sears despaired over the state of the world and sought to remind all who would listen that, from the first proclamation by angels, once on a midnight clear, the gospel message was about peace.

"It Came Upon the Midnight Clear" came into Methodist hymnals in 1878 with five stanzas.

In 1935 we cut out the third one, but I want you to know what it said because it helps us understand the message of the carol. The stanza they cut in 1935 said, "But 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!"

The truth of that verse is uncomfortable, and I don't wonder that they took it out. For what it's worth, the Lutherans took it out, too. We generally don't like to point out the implications of the gospel in church, even back in 1935. We get all misty-eyed when we sing "Let There Be Peace on earth and let it begin with me," but we can get pretty testy when made to sing "O hush the noise, yet men of strife and hear the angels sing!"

But we Methodists weren't done messing with Rev. Sears' carol. In 1966, we also took out the stanza after that one. It's our current verse 3—we put it back in 1988—which is the only other verse in the hymn that directly speaks to our human condition. Here's the third verse: "And ye, 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!"

The central image in this carol is the image of bending, the word "bend" or "bending" is used in three of the five verses. In the first two verses, it's the angels above who are bending toward the earth. They bend down to touch their harps of gold in the first verse, and in the second verse, as they see the "sad and lowly plains" of earth, they hover over us and bend down on hovering wing to reach us.

But the angels are not the only ones bending. In our current verse three, we see that nobody can appreciate the efforts of the angels above, because humanity on earth is also bent beneath life's crushing load. People are not looking up to see what the heavens have to offer, they are looking down at the ground, bent over with the weight of life. And if the other verse were still there, it would be plain that this is not just the result of the

events in 1849, but in Sears' words it was the result of "two thousand years of wrong," where we have been at war with each other and have continued to disregard "the love-song" brought by the angels.

This is an incredibly sad carol. The word angel in the Bible means "messenger," and the angels in this carol are singing a hopeful message to the earth, because they can see how weary the world is. They make a special effort to bend toward the earth in the hopes that those who are bent beneath life's crushing load, who toil along the climbing way with painful steps and slow, will have a chance to hear the message of God's love as the way to peace. It's a song that is ever being sung above the "Babel" of earth, the noise of the "men of strife" that was referenced back in the missing verse. The final verse proclaims hope for a day when "peace shall over all the earth its ancient splendors fling and the whole world"—the men of strife, the ones bent under life's crushing load, the weary, the toiling, the whole world—will look up and send back the song—a call and response to their message of love and peace; the great "I do!" to the proposal of God's love to the world.

This combination of joy and sadness is also what the Gospel lesson from this morning is about. It's the Sabbath day...the day that a weary world is given to rest...and people have gathered in the synagogue to learn. On this day, the rabbi teaching in the synagogue is Jesus. He's bringing, as he always does, the good news of God's love. But there's a woman there who's bent over, and she has been that way for 18 years.

We don't know what Jesus thought when he saw her. She didn't make an expression of faith or ask for healing. He simply called her forward and declared her to be healed. She probably had trouble physically looking up to see Jesus from her bent condition, but her heart was not bent. She heard Jesus command to come forward and forward she went...and soon her body was as straight as her heart. She began to praise God.

This is a great story...a joyous story...until the synagogue leader gets involved. He has a straight body, but his heart is bent very low. He has just witnessed the glory of God right there in his synagogue, but all he has are words of condemnation. Jesus broke the rules...he healed on the Sabbath, and the leader actually scolds the people who are there, saying that this is not the place or the time to come for healing.

Imagine how those words must have sounded to the woman who had just stood up straight for the first time in 18 years. Just as she is rejoicing in her new health, tears of joy streaming down her face, here is the leader of the synagogue saying, "Hey, you have no business being healed on the Sabbath...you have displeased God...you have broken the law...it would be better if you were still bent over." Jesus takes the man on and reminds him that even this restrictive Sabbath law makes accommodation for untying an animal to give it water on the Sabbath...and if it is proper to unbind an animal, is it not proper to set loose a daughter of Abraham?" Jesus' opponents are humiliated and the people rejoice, likely standing a bit straighter themselves.

But the story makes plain what perhaps the angels could not see—that the reason that many are too bent over to hear the message of the angels is that there are those who Edmund Sears called "men of strife" who are keeping them that way. Millions would gladly and joyously stand straight and embrace the message of the angels were it not for the intricate and insidious systems we have developed for keeping so many people toiling "along the climbing way with painful steps and slow."

The angels only bent *toward* the earth, and kept singing louder and louder in the hopes that people would look up. In Jesus, God didn't just bend toward the earth. In Jesus, God came all the way down to live among those bent beneath life's crushing load; down where he could hear the content of the Babel—the noise of the men of strife in the words of the carol—and see first-hand how people came to be at war with each other. The stories of Jesus' life show us all the ways that people came to be bent over, and how, when people actually heard the message of God's love that the angels sang from above, they stood up straight, praising God.

The carol is proclaiming that this is the reality of our lives. It wasn't just on a midnight clear that God bent low and sang songs of peace on earth and the glory of God. That is the constant reality of our world. "*Still* through the cloven skies they come with peaceful wings unfurled, and *still* their heavenly music floats o'er all the weary world." God did not come and then vanish. God is still there, still here. The angels still sing, still bend to reach us, still offer the hope for peace.

The difference now is that God's presence all the way down here depends on us. Love may have come down on Christmas, but the only way Love stays here is if we fulfill our calling to be the body of Christ for the world. Angels singing of peace in the sky and proclaiming hope for the world can only bend so low with their message. If their messages of "God loves you" and "Peace on earth" and "Fear not" are ever to be heard in this weary world, we will have to be the ones who bring it. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ's job on earth is now our job. We who claim to have heard the message; we who claim to believe the song of the angels; are now the ones responsible for hushing the noise, the Babel of war and division, and making it possible to proclaim to those bent over, "You are set free. Stand up!"

There will be those with power who object, just as they did when Jesus healed the woman bent over for 18 years. "You did that in the wrong way!" "It's not the right time!" In return, let us simply return to them the words of Edmund Sears: "Hush the noise, ye men of strife, and hear the angels sing." Amen.