

Let me be very clear: Charles and the choir had nothing to do with choosing to sing our sequence hymn to that tune rather than the more familiar one! In fact, they counseled me not to mess with tradition—and they were probably right. The Christmas season is rich with tradition and I really am very deeply appreciative of that. Usually we don't change by choice. Every year since our kids were born, for example, we have cut our own Christmas tree. Every year that we've been in Holden we have driven out to Sterling to the same farm—usually we make the same wrong turn before we can find it—and then we cut the tree and bring it home. Tradition. We also usually wait until about mid-Advent, however, to cut our tree. This year, after finding our place, we arrived to find it "closed for the season." Apparently people are adding this tradition to their own families faster than the trees can grow. So for us a new tradition was born this year at the Blue Plate, and I stand before you testifying to the fact that people can survive such traumatic change! Moreover I personally feel we have the best Christmas tree ever...

When I stumbled across Hymn 90, quite by accident, I really liked it. I asked some of my colleagues if they'd ever sung it before and they just laughed! "On Christmas...what are you kidding?" they said. I began to imagine the debate that must have taken place about whether or not to include it in *The Hymnal* in the first place, and someone arguing that even if it was included no one anywhere would ever sing it. Mostly though I actually started to like the tune better than the more familiar one, and began to feel like with the choir leading us through it we might be able to hear the poem itself with new ears, and in so doing maybe even to hear the songs of angels this night. Or so I have hoped in any case.

The poet, Edmund Hamilton Sears, was born in the Berkshires on April 6, 1810. He was an ordained Unitarian pastor who served congregations in Barnstable, Wayland and just up the road in Lancaster during the middle years of the nineteenth century. He wrote "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear" in 1849.

It came upon the midnight clear,
That glorious song of old;
From angels bending near the earth
To touch their harps of gold.
"Peace on the earth good will to men,
From heaven's all gracious King!"
The world in solemn stillness lay
To hear the angels sing.

Sears suffered from depression—or as it was called in the middle of the nineteenth-century, "melancholy." At the time he wrote this hymn (in 1849) the world was a mess: Europe was at war and the United States was at war with Mexico. Of course that was nothing compared to the deep national divide over slavery and the Civil War lurking on the horizon. Sears was feeling that the world was "dark and full of sin and strife" and that as such the world was unable to hear the songs of the angels. The way he wrote the poem makes more sense to me than the Hymnal version which for some inexplicable reason inverts the second and third verses. He wrote it like this:

Yet 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.

Still thro' the cloven skies they come,
With peaceful wings unfurled;
And still their heavenly music floats,
O'er all the weary world.
Above its sad and lowly plains,
They bend on hovering wing
And ever o'er its Babel sounds
The blessed angels sing.

And then perhaps the most poignant and pastoral stanza—one omitted in the Hymnal. It is addressed to all who feel personally exhausted and worn out at this time of year—all who feel just plain tired and lost. But you get the sense that like most preachers Sears is talking first and foremost to himself.

All 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.

Yet even in the midst of gloomy times, the poet is able to keep the larger vision of Christ's second Advent in his sights. The mystery of our faith is not only that Christ has died and has risen but will come again. Even now—even on this holy night when we celebrate our Lord's nativity—we remember that promise. Our hope as Christians is not limited to this night or even to the year ahead but to a larger and more cosmic vision and purpose.

For lo, the days are hastening on,
By prophet bards foretold;
When with the ever circling years,
Comes round the age of gold.
When peace shall over all the earth,
Its ancient splendors fling;
And the whole world give back the song
Which now the angels sing.

Some have criticized Sears' poem as being too unscriptural. Others have criticized it for not being Christ-centered enough, pointing out that the Christ-child is not even mentioned. Fair enough. But we should note that in his personal life Sears was very intensely Christ-centered. While nineteenth-century Unitarians challenged the doctrine of the Trinity they still saw themselves as deeply loyal to Jesus and to the Incarnation. "The word of Jesus opens the heart," Sears told his congregations, "and touches the place of tears."

As for scripture, the story as Luke tells it features angels from beginning to end. Literally angels are God's messengers: they deliver a word between from heaven to earth. And so an angel comes to Elizabeth and Zechariah to announce that she will bear a son in her old age. So, too, the angel Gabriel comes in the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy to Nazareth to a virgin betrothed to man named Joseph, announcing to Mary that she is pregnant. And of course as we heard tonight, the angel speaks to the shepherds, announcing the birth of the Savior and sending them to Bethlehem to see for themselves. And then there is a multitude of angels praising God and singing: "*Gloria in excelsis deo...*"

Now I confess to you that I don't tend to see angels in my mind's eye like they are portrayed on the cover of tonight's bulletin by the seventeenth-century French painter whose "Nativity" hangs in the Louvre. I tend to be much more of the Frank Capra (Clarence-in-"It's-a-Wonderful-Life") school. But however you see God's messengers, Sears is claiming that it is their song that we must listen for. That the angels' song goes on and on throughout the ages but mostly that it goes unnoticed. It goes unnoticed because the drumbeat of war and strife drowns out the song of peace on earth and good will to all. *Hush the noise*, the poet says: *hush the noise ye men of strife and hear the angels sing.*

Our job—perhaps the first work of Christmas—is to be still enough to hear the angels singing so that we do not lose hope, so that we know that God is still at work in the world and in our lives. From there we can take it one day at a time. The poem is addressed to the Church—to you and me as people of faith: challenging us to listen, and in so doing enter into the mystery of the Incarnation in decidedly new ways. We are here tonight to celebrate "the dear Savior's birth." But what difference will that make in our lives tomorrow, or the day after that. If the angels' songs are confined to this night only then the honest answer is: not much at all.

It's far too easy to be living at this moment in human history and to feel the same kind of melancholy and even despair that Sears felt at this time of the year. It's easy to feel that we don't quite measure up, or that the world is falling apart. It's easy to feel discouraged and then in response to try to numb it all. But the word from heaven is that a child is born, a Son is given. The good news—the gospel—that the angels sing is of Emmanuel—God with us—right in the midst of all that other stuff.

The angels sing "Gloria" and then invite us to join the song. The Church's mission is to keep singing Gloria because that word truly does have the power to heal and transform us, a word that can sustain and equip us for the work of ministry in the year ahead. The prince of peace is born; but the angels' song calls us to be peacemakers and agents of God's healing and reconciling love in the world. Until when? Until all creation joins the song. Until all creation *becomes* the song. Until all the world gives glory to God in the highest heaven. Until there is peace on earth. Amen.