

# Hark the Herald Angels Sing

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, good evening. It's wonderful to be back. If you don't know me, my name's Archie. Like Graham said, I'm the pastor down at People's Evangelical Church. I say it's lovely to be back because about a year ago, Katie, my wife and I left this church where I was training to be a pastor.

And so this really does feel a bit like coming home for us. We were actually just reflecting on that on our way up here about how this does feel a bit like coming home. And I think there's something about coming home at this time of year. Maybe you've been there. Maybe you've felt that.

I think that can be quite a difficult thing. And maybe that's hard for you. Maybe you'd love to go home this year and you know that you're not going to be able to. Maybe you'd love to have a home to go to and you don't have one. Or maybe you're really excited about going home this year.

There's something about Christmas, I think, that brings out all these feelings in us about home.

Certainly that's true for me. And we're really going to spend the next 20 minutes thinking about that kind of idea.

But before we do that, let me just pray for us. And before we do that, let me pray. Heavenly Father, I pray so much that as we spend a little bit more time looking at your word together this evening, that you would be causing us to bow before and adore your son, Jesus.

[ 1 : 24 ] For we pray in his precious name. Amen. When I was a student, it was about this time of year. I'm sure lots of you in the room are students.

You can put yourself in my shoes as I describe this. But it was time to go home for Christmas. And I couldn't wait to get home. I was really excited to be sat by the roaring fire in a cozy armchair full of turkey and chocolate.

But I was a student in Glasgow. So I head to the train station and put yourself there. You're in the train station. If you've ever been to Glasgow Central, the weather outside was absolutely mental. And like I said, it was Glasgow Central, which meant that it was also cold and was windy and miserable in the station. And you can kind of hardly hear the rubbish Christmas music that's coming through the speakers.

There are hundreds of people around you in the same boat who just cannot wait to get home for Christmas. But because of the weather, trains are getting cancelled. Left, right and centre.

[ 2 : 23 ] There are announcements coming over the tannoy, interrupting Mariah Carey. It's complete chaos. Picture me. I'm there. I've got my headphones in. I'm in a kind of world of my own. And I can only really just hear what's going on around me.

And that's when I heard it. Like I said, I only just heard it. But there was an announcement and it definitely said something about Fort William. That's where my parents live. That was my train. So I take my headphones out. I'm scanning the departure boards. There's nothing there.

I'm waiting to see if there's going to be another announcement. But just the rubbish Christmas music being piped in through the speakers. And I'm beginning to panic. What if I missed the train home? I wonder if you've ever had an experience like that.

It might not have been a train. But have you ever heard an announcement that really mattered? But in the moment you were so distracted, maybe you weren't paying attention. In the moment, you failed to realize how significant the announcement was.

Might have been a voicemail from the doctor. Or an email from one of your lecturers. Or a warning from someone at your workplace. When you kind of hear the words, but you fail to act straight away.

[ 3 : 31 ] Because you didn't realize how urgent it actually was. And then it's only later you realize it wasn't really background information at all. And it required a response. You know, at Christmas we hear lots of announcements.

We might not realize that. But we get all these snippets of the story. That's been true tonight. We've had lots of Bible readings. We've sung carols. But have you ever stopped to think about what all of those are really announcing?

Like I say, we're going to spend the next few minutes unpacking this idea of home. But we're going to do that by thinking about what I think is one of the most familiar carols. We're going to sing it a little bit later.

It's a carol that takes us right to the heart of the Christmas story. It's a carol that we have all heard and probably sung a hundred times. But we may never really have listened to what it's announcing. And the hope for me is that when we sing it later on this evening, we'll be able to do so with fresh understanding and rapt attention. So it's Hark the Herald Angels Sing. You might have a printed out version of it on the pew in front of you if you want to find that and follow along as we go.

[ 4 : 38 ] And if you look at it, the carol starts with that word, hark. Hark means, listen, this carol literally starts by telling us to pay attention. Pay attention to what the angels are singing.

See, here in church and at this time of year, we're not just inventing this message of Christmas. It's not our message. It's not the church's message. It's a message that we're overhearing.

We're being invited to listen to it. That's what Hark means. It doesn't mean sing louder. It doesn't mean sing, kind of feel more festive. It means listen in. Stop and hear what it is that heaven is saying.

Really, this carol, I think, is a kind of reflection on the announcement to the shepherds that Naomi and Yoann have just read for us. The angels that said that this is good news of great joy for all people because a saviour has been born.

It's glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth. Peace to those on whom his favour rests. The carol puts that in a nutshell for us. It's glory to the newborn king.

[ 5 : 45 ] But actually, this carol, it's not just an invitation to hear what the angels are announcing. It is that. But very quickly in verse 1, we're invited to join in the angels' song.

It says, joyful, all ye nations rise. Join the triumph of the skies. And we'll come back to verse 1 and that invitation to join in. But the rest of the carol tells us what that triumph is.

What we're actually going to be singing about. And the next kind of two verses, like I say, they unpack two really fundamental truths about the Christian faith. So we're going to spend our time just camped out in verse 2 and then verse 3.

The Christmas story. Verse 2 tells us about the mystery of the incarnation. And verse 3 tells us about a message of reconciliation. The mystery of incarnation and a message of reconciliation. So look at verse 2 with me for a mystery of incarnation. Read it with me. Christ. I guess that's a familiar word. It's a title for Jesus. That's not his surname.

[ 6 : 51 ] It's a title. It says that he is the promised king. Christ by highest heaven adored. Christ the everlasting Lord. Do you see what that is saying about Jesus?

Familiar words. But it's not just random poetry. It tells us that Jesus is everlasting. He's eternal. In other words, Jesus is properly God.

Jesus was there at the beginning when the world was created. Jesus is no less God than God the Father is God. He is adored and worshipped and praised in heaven as the God of the universe who he is.

Jesus is not alone. And the carol continues. Late in time, behold him come. And that doesn't mean that Jesus came too late. But simply that God had promised that he would come and his people had been waiting for him.

They had been promised that God himself would come to them, the eternal king. He is the offspring of a virgin's womb. And so he came then not only properly God, but properly human.

[ 8 : 00 ] Born of Mary. Sharing real human flesh. Real human experience. Conceived by the Holy Spirit. Yes. So he had no human father. He was properly God.

Not just a great teacher or a prophet or a religious figure. He was God himself in the flesh. Veiled in flesh, the Godhead see.

Hail the incarnate deity. This is God in flesh, incarnate deity. That is deity. That is God taking on physical, bodily, human form.

And so he was pleased as man with man to dwell. Jesus, our Emmanuel. That means God with us. God with us.

That means that God isn't just a distant voice over a speaker making an announcement about the train home. He chose to come and stand among us. The incarnation isn't just God shouting instructions at us.

[ 9 : 01 ] It's his arriving in the chaos. In fact, it's his experiencing the chaos of the world that we live in with us. What we're celebrating in this season, and especially when we get to Christmas Day, we're celebrating a God who didn't stay distant.

A God who has come. A God who is with us. Do you know if you want to know the God who created the world that we live in? If you want to know the God who created you.

Who loves you. Who wants you to know him. If you want to know him, you only need to look to Jesus. Look no further.

For he is God. Veiled in flesh. And that actually is a wonderful picture of this really important truth, which is that we don't climb up to God. We can't.

We aren't capable of reaching God. We don't climb up to him. He has stepped down to us. And that means that whoever you are, wherever you're from, whatever you've done, however you feel about yourself, if you are a human being, then in his humanity, by coming as the baby Jesus, God has drawn near to you.

[ 10 : 18 ] By becoming precisely what you are. It's a remarkable truth. It's the mystery of the incarnation. But that incarnation, Jesus is coming, it had a real purpose.

C.S. Lewis, famous writer, C.S. Lewis put that purpose like this. The son of God became man to enable men to become sons of God.

The son of man became, sorry, the son of God became man to enable men to become sons of God. And that takes us into verse three, which is the message of reconciliation.

So look at verse three. Hail the heaven born prince of peace. Ben and Bethany read that classic Christmas passage from Isaiah chapter nine.

Written hundreds of years before Jesus was born, promising that he would be born. That he would be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

[ 11 : 20 ] And peace here in the Bible is a really rich word. It means so much more than just like the absence of conflict or something like that. It is a wholeness, a harmony, a justice.

At its heart, I think peace is the experience of a restored relationship with the God who created us. In other words, it's being reconciled to him. And this verse proclaims that message, the message of reconciliation.

It's what the angels are announcing in Luke's gospel when they say to the shepherds, peace on earth. That's not a random word of celebration. It's an announcement that the eternal king has come so that humanity might be reconciled to him.

That's good news. It's cause for great joy. And it's for all people. The carol continues, hail the son of righteousness, light and life to all he brings, risen with healing in his wings.

That's another image from one of the prophets, the kind of lesser known, I guess, than Isaiah.

That's from Malachi, also writing hundreds of years earlier where Malachi said, the son of righteousness shall rise with healing in his wings.

[ 12 : 33 ] It's another title for the promised Messiah for Jesus. The one who will come to bring light and life and healing. Again, that's Jesus's purpose in the world.

It's reconciliation. So the carol says, mild he lays his glory by. He stepped down. He came to us. Why? Well, he was born that man no more may die.

Born to raise the sons of earth. Born to give them second birth. That is the heart of it all. Why was Jesus born? To raise us. As C.S. Lewis put it, so that the son of God became man, so that men might become sons of God.

To reconcile us to the God who created us. So that we might be properly adopted into his family. A God whom we've ignored.

A God that we've lived as though he doesn't exist. As though he doesn't matter. We do that in all sorts of ways. Not just in how we think about God or don't think about God, but also in how we treat what he's created.

[ 13 : 40 ] In how we treat one another. I do that. You do that. We all do it. And the Bible is really clear about this. In Romans chapter 6 verse 23, Paul says that the wages of sin is death.

The consequences, and we see this all around us, don't we? The consequences for all of that is ultimately separation from God. It's death. Something that we all face.

And so we really need the reconciliation that this carol announces. Back in verse 1 it was previewed. God and sinners reconciled.

I need that. And you need that too. And it's because of what Jesus came to do. Because he paid the price for that for us.

He was born to die, the carol says. So that you and I, though we will still die, of course we will still die. But if we trust him, then all of our sin can be forgiven.

[14:40] And we can be reconciled to the God who loves us and created us. Paul continues in Romans chapter 6. He says, The wages of sin is death. But the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

And that can be true today. So that one day, like him, like Jesus, our death will simply be the doorway into another life. I want to take you to another train station.

This time it's Harry Potter. If you know the story, this is a massive spoiler, by the way, but it came out 20 years ago. So I guess it's not that big of a spoiler. But in the last Harry Potter book, Harry sort of dies.

And there's this scene which is in something like a train station. Harry meets Dumbledore, who is his headmaster. And Dumbledore is also dead. And Dumbledore presents Harry with a choice. He says, You can go back to the land of the living. He's not really dead yet. Let's call it a near-death experience for Harry. He can go back. Or he can board a train. And Harry asks, Where's the train going?

[15:44] And Dumbledore just says, On. See, for the Christian, this life is a bit like a train station at Christmas time. It's pretty chaotic.

It's windy. It's cold. It's dark. And we're waiting. Really, we're waiting to board the train that's going to take us on to our eternal home. In the first Harry Potter book, Dumbledore has another nugget of wisdom about death when he says to the well-organized mind, Death is but the next great adventure.

And look, Harry Potter is just a piece of fiction. That is not like an accurate picture of death and eternal life. But it is absolutely true that because of what Jesus has done, the Christian can sing about Jesus, that he was born that man no more may die.

Not because we won't die a normal death. Of course we will. But because for us, if we trust him, death is just the next great adventure. Really, death is just boarding the train home.

You know, when I was in Glasgow Central that cold Friday afternoon, I was so sure I'd heard something about the Fort William train. I took my headphones out. What did I miss? Departure boards aren't updating.

[16:56] I had no idea what platform I needed to get to. And my train was due to leave in two minutes' time. That was when I felt a hand on my shoulder. And it was someone that I had known from back home.

I didn't actually know them that well, but they'd recognized me. I think they must have seen me take my headphones out and seen me panicking. And they had heard the announcement. It turned out our platform had changed.

It wasn't canceled. I only made it to that train because someone else was listening. And they pointed me in the right direction to the train home. And, you know, it sounds ridiculous, but that is exactly the same as my story of faith.

It took one man taking me out for a coffee and pointing me to the Christmas story, to Jesus and what he's done, showing me the way to eternal life.

And that changed everything for me. This is just how it works. If you're a Christian here today, then I guess your story is pretty similar to that too. It might have been one person. It might have been a few people over many years.

[17:55] But it was a hand on your shoulder. Someone to tell you, Jesus is the way to eternal life. He's the train home. That's my story. If that's not your story, it could be yours too.

Even now, tonight, this is the most incredible gift that is on offer here tonight, the gift of eternal life. Do you know every year, there are 250 million pounds worth of gift vouchers bought in the UK that go unclaimed.

250 million pounds not claimed, gifts given and not properly received. Don't miss this gift tonight. Don't miss this announcement.

This could be your hand on the shoulder moment. All I'm really doing is standing here and pointing to that train to Jesus and saying, are you going to get the train home? Are you coming with us? Would you board that train?

See, that's what Hark the Herald Angels Sing does. By the end of the carol, the angels, they've done their job. Their message has been delivered. God has come near in the mystery of the incarnation.

[ 19 : 02 ] Peace has begun with the message of reconciliation. And you know, this carol doesn't just ask us if we've understood. It's not an information download. It's asking us if we'll respond.

Do you see how quickly the carol moves from Hark to Hale? Because hearing the announcement is really only the beginning. Praise is what happens when we realize this message is for me.

And it's good news of great joy for all people. So tonight, the invitation isn't just to enjoy this familiar song as we sing it together. But would you move from hearing about Christ to welcoming him to accepting this gift of eternal life?

And that means that however you feel about going home this Christmas, maybe you're excited for it, maybe it's a sad or disappointing thing for you, but the promise of an eternal home will fulfill all of those longings perfectly and completely and forever if you'll just get on this train home.

That's what Jesus will do for you. And then you can join as the angels sing, joyful all ye nations rise, join the triumph of the skies with the angelic host proclaim, Christ is born in Bethlehem.

[ 20 : 13 ] Hark, the herald angels sing, glory to the newborn king. Let me pray for us before we sing together. Heavenly Father, I thank you so much for the wonderful gift of your son to us.

Lord, I thank you that as you came to us in the person of Jesus and as you promised eternal life in him, we might come to you now because you've come to us.

Lord, I pray that you would help us all to bow before Jesus, to adore Jesus now, but above all, to know that he is the way home.

Lord, I pray that you would be fulfilling all the longings of our hearts this Christmas as we look to him and nowhere else for those to be fulfilled. In Jesus' name, Amen.