

Day 8: It Came upon the Midnight Clear

Dec. 5

*1 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.*

*4 For lo! the days are hastening on,
by prophet seen of old,
when with the ever-circling years
shall come the time foretold
when peace shall over all the earth
its ancient splendors fling,
and the whole world send back the song
which now the angels sing.*

He shall judge between many peoples, and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. (Micah 4:3)

It Came upon a Midnight Clear was written by Edmund Sears, a Unitarian pastor¹ who had become so ill he had to drop out of the ministry in order to heal. It was while recuperating that Sears penned this great Christmas hymn.

The backdrop to the composition (1849) was a world in conflict. The Mexican-American War had just drawn to a close, yes, but the upshot of the peace treaty was that the annexation of Texas would proceed. This meant that the total territory in which slavery was practiced in the US was now virtually doubled. And slavery was *the* issue driving the constant upheaval in the nation which was headed for a disastrous civil war. The conflict would rip the fabric of peace for generations to come. Edmund Sears was both a pacifist and an abolitionist, and he was justifiably anxious about his nation on both fronts.

It Came upon a Midnight Clear is sung to wholly different tunes in the US and UK. Richard Storrs Willis wrote the familiar American version. (He also composed the music for the hymn *Fairest Lord Jesus*.) The music for the British version of *It Came upon a Midnight Clear* comes from Arthur S Sullivan, perhaps best known as part of the Gilbert and Sullivan duo, who gave the world such comic operas as *Pirates of Penzance* and *H.M.S. Pinafore*.

It Came upon a Midnight Clear begins with angels breaking into a world that “in solemn stillness lay” with a startling announcement: “Peace on the earth, good will to men, from heaven’s all-gracious King.” Verse 2 reiterates that this message of peace from heaven still

¹ Unlike most Unitarian ministers in his era, Sears believed in the divinity of Christ. He said Jesus was not merely a subject for “theological pugilism,” but was to be experienced in daily life as the living Lord.

“floats o’er all the weary world.” Peace was not intended for shepherds in first century Bethlehem alone, but for all people through all time.

The last stanza includes a glimpse of a future time foretold by prophets of old in which the angels’ message of universal peace is realized. Finally we’ll see “the whole world send back the song which now the angels sing.” Indeed, peace will not be a mere wish, nor a promise only – even one from heaven, but a reality known and experienced and celebrated by the whole world. This is, of course, the vision of Isaiah 11 in which the lion and lamb lie down together, of Micah 4 which foresees swords beaten into plowshares, and of Revelation 21 when a whole new heaven and earth shall be filled with peace.

Jesus would grow up to declare: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God” (Matthew 5:9). We too have a role in bringing peace to our much conflicted world.

Questions

1. What are the biggest challenges to peace in our time?
2. Which of your neighbors, family, and friends need a fresh infusion of peace today?
3. What are a couple of concrete ways you can foster peace in your world over the next few days?

Prayer

Jesus, we need peace. Just as the world ached for the angels’ announcement, we too long to hear the message: “Peace on earth, good will to all.” Lord, we don’t want merely the cessation of war, but deep, abiding love among all peoples. We know that will only be truly fulfilled with your second advent, Jesus, and we long for that ultimate reality. In the interim, show us how we may be peacemakers alongside your Holy Spirit who reaches into all the world. Amen.