



Prelude (Advent)

Week 4: Angels from the Realms of Glory

Brian Mattson - 12/21/2024

This is the final Sunday of Advent, the Sunday of love. We are all in the final stages of preparations for Christmas. I'm sure you are checking items off your shopping lists. You've decided on what you are going to eat on Christmas Eve and on Christmas Day. Your travel plans may be set and your packing list is up to date. If you're flying, make sure you have that Real ID or a passport.

Here at the church, we are busy getting everything set out and squared away for a beautiful, wonderful, memorable Christmas Eve service. The songs have been picked. The communion bread has been baked. The computers have been updated.

*'Twas the week before Christmas when all through the church,
The staff's been preparing and beginning to search,
For candles, and cobwebs, and grape juice, and chairs
In hopes that Scuffy the donkey soon would be there.*

Yes, Scuffy the donkey has played an integral part in our Christmas Eve services since 2015, thanks to Pam & Ed Gwin who created and donated him. At this point in his career, he has for more than a decade shouldered the burden of carrying Mary down the aisle every Christmas Eve, and Jesus down

the aisle every Palm Sunday. And when you hear him squeak his little tail off on Wednesday night, you'll wonder how far away retirement is for ol' Scuffy.

But I like to think that every year Scuffy goes on his journey down the aisle to "Bethlehem" he actually gets a little younger each time. He has a front row seat to our no-rehearsal children's Christmas Pageant. And while the chaos and confusion of 50 kids dressed as angels, shepherds, and wisemen causes many of our volunteers and parents to crease a few fresh wrinkles, at the end of the performance, we are all reminded that the story of Jesus's birth is a timeless tale meant for all people—rich & poor, young & old, believers & nonbelievers.

This story about the birth of the Messiah has been told and retold a million times over. Different interpretations and reimaginings to breathe new life into these ancient words. We use pretty much the same script every year, but it's always a little different. There's a great scene in the bad-but-also-good Christmas movie, *Love Actually*, where one of the seemingly endless main characters is interrupted by her daughter to deliver some breaking news—she received her role in the Nativity Story at her school!

LOVE ACTUALLY CLIP

I admit, this was the first version of Jesus's birth I've seen that included sea creatures, but, hey, why not? Because that's the kind of absolute craziness that the story of God coming in flesh is all about. The idea that the divine, the supernatural, would take on the limitations and burdens of humanity is mind blowing. That's one of the things that continues to draw people to this story year after year. This is a story of love breaking into the world to become like us—Emmanuel—God with us.

And that love is without limit or litmus test. There's no barrier to entry. It's just there to reach out and grab, to hold, to take with you. It's meant for everyone, in all times and in all places. Which is exactly what our Advent song

this Sunday is all about. Today, we are looking at the first song we sang this morning—*Angels from the Realms of Glory*.

The author of the hymn, James Montgomery, was a well-respected poet, hymnwriter, and newspaper editor in his time, heavily involved in philanthropy and religious life in Sheffield, England up until his death in 1854. Though not remembered for his poetry as much as his hymns, he was contemporaries and acquaintances with the famous English poets Lord Byron and Percy Shelley.

When he was six years old, his parents traveled to the West Indies as missionaries of the Moravian Church and left young James at a boarding school run by the Moravians. His parents passed away within a year, and he was raised and studied to become a minister at the school until he flunked out at 14 years old. But during his years at the school, he fell in love with the hymns of the Moravian Church and was inspired to begin writing his own poetry at the age of ten.

After he left the school, he apprenticed in several different professions before latching on with Joseph Gales, a newspaper publisher in Sheffield. Gales published a weekly newspaper called the *Sheffield Register* which espoused radical views at the time: religious tolerance, parliamentary reforms, and the abolition of slavery. Due to these more radical viewpoints, Gales fled to America and left the newspaper in Montgomery's hands.

Montgomery changed the name to the *Sheffield Iris*, but continued to advocate for the plight of the working class, child laborers, empowering representative forms of government, and the end of slavery. In fact, he was imprisoned in 1795 for publishing a poem celebrating the fall of the Bastille in Paris. A year later, he criticized the local Sheffield authorities for forcibly dispersing a political protest, and was jailed again.

I give you all this history to help us understand the man more as we dissect his words in the hymn *Angels from the Realms of Glory*. The version we sing in

our hymnal has four verses, but the original contained five. Montgomery published it in the *Sheffield Iris* on Christmas Eve, 1816. Its words help us retell the story of the nativity as found in Luke 2 and Matthew 2. Starting with Luke:

Now in that same region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid, for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them, and Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told them.

- Luke 2:8-20

This scripture passage recounts the angels proclaiming the good news of a baby born in Bethlehem to the shepherds in the fields, that familiar sight we

behold on Christmas Eve. It also links the act of Creation with the birth of Jesus. These same angels who “sang creation’s glory now proclaim Messiah’s birth.” Montgomery connects these two events to speak about the grand implications of the incarnation. This is the background for the first two verses of the hymn.

The third verse is focused on the wisemen or sages or Magi. We get their story in scripture from Matthew 2.

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi from the east came to Jerusalem, asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star in the east and have come to pay him homage.”

- Matthew 2:1-2

Back in Luke 2, we read about Simeon, a “saint” of the church who had been waiting for the Messiah.

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah.

- Luke 2:25-26

All this scripture guides Montgomery’s words to help us retell the Nativity story through song. But the omitted fifth verse tells a different story. It’s your story.

**Sinners, wrung with true repentance,
Doomed for guilt to endless pains,
Justice now revokes the sentence,
Mercy calls you—break your chains:**

Yes, these words seem harsh to our ears now. If I could, perhaps, soften them for our modern ears, they might sound something like this.

**All who ache with real repentance,
Trapped beneath the weight of blame,
Justice sets aside the verdict,
Mercy calls you—leave your chains.**

That slaps, right? I mean, I understand why editors left out the original language, but the fifth verse helps complete the song. The final verse adds you and me to the story. And that's the magic, the compelling reason, of why we retell these stories over and over again. It's not simply to recite the scripture and give the kids something cute to do on Christmas Eve. It's because the stories change us. God's love changes us.

And now that you know a little more about James Montgomery, you can understand why he would be so affected by this story and write an enduring hymn about it, inviting all of us into the story as well. He was raised at a boarding school, orphaned and alone. He grew up understanding the power of words, but was untethered without the stability of family. He worked a myriad of jobs to find his way in life. He used his words to push back against the economic structure and social ills of his day.

Montgomery took it to heart that the story of the manger is one of freedom for all people. Methodist professor, Michael Hawn says, **"As many texts from Isaiah and the prophets remind us, the Incarnation was an event celebrating the liberation of oppressed peoples by a just and merciful God taking on human form."**

I think that Montgomery believed his faith compelled him to speak up for the well-being of poor people, outcasts, the working class, the sick, and even the prosperous. I, too, believe that the story of God's love breaking into the world in human form is for all people.

I'm reminded of the words of one of my mentors, the Rev. Melissa Dodd. We had her preach here last January during a series on the basics of United Methodists and John Wesley. Her assignment in that series was to talk about Wesley's understanding of God's grace—God's unmerited love for humankind. To use her words, she continuously reminded us that God's love, God's grace, is *ridiculously* inclusive.

Have you forgotten just how big God's love is? So big it's hard to even *begin* to understand. So big it includes everyone. Yet, so small it's personalized just for *you*. Another one of those Advent paradoxes—big enough to cover the world and everything in it, yet small enough to be yours. I think we sometimes forget that. We forget that God's love is ridiculously inclusive. And I use the word *ridiculous* in the best way possible.

It's so ridiculous that it's meant for shepherds of this world. The working class, the rough-and-tumble amongst us, the outcasts. We are all like this at times. Dirty, stinky, down-and-outers who aren't always respected, most notably by ourselves.

It's so ridiculous that God's love is meant for the sages. The brainiacs, the elite, the professors, doctors, poets, and philosophers. Whether you feel like that some days or not, we all tend to use our brains to justify our doubts, or we logic-away God, missing the miraculous in the mundane. Life is meant to be experienced, not placed under a microscope to maximize its efficiency.

God's love is so ridiculous that it also has room for the saints amongst us. The pastors and preachers, theologians and teachers. However merciful and just we try to be, we still draw lines about who is right and wrong. Our humanity means we are finite, but God's love and mercy knows no bounds.

It's so ridiculous that it is big enough to include sinners. People who ache. People who long for more. People anxious and depressed, joyless and stressed. God's love is big enough for even the most downtrodden to feel

free. Liberated to consider ourselves included in the story of God in human flesh.

Is it ridiculous enough to include a lobster in the nativity pageant this year? I'm not sure we have that costume, but why not? God's love doesn't mean you have to understand it, but it is there all the same. You don't have to comprehend just how big it is, but you do need to remember that it's small enough to taste and see it. We will all get a glimpse again on Christmas Eve that the story of God is meant for all people. And on Christmas Day, if we take a few minutes of silence in the chaos, we will come and worship, come and worship, worship Christ the newborn king.