

a carol of peace

Isaiah 40:1-11

December 10, 2017

God is coming!

That's the good news. These are the tidings of comfort and joy announced by the prophet Isaiah to people weary and beaten down and tired of suffering: God is coming. What is God coming to do? God is coming to rule and to rescue and to tend.

God is coming to rule, to rule with power and with righteousness, with power that is tempered by justice, and with justice that is empowered to set things right.

God is coming to rescue, to gather his beleaguered people from all the places to which they have been scattered, to set them free from their captivity, to bring an end to their suffering.

God is coming to tend, to tend his people as a shepherd tends his sheep: to keep them together, to protect them from predators, to lead them in safe paths, even to carry them when they are too weak or too young to walk.

God is coming, coming to rule and to rescue and to tend. When? When is God coming?

God has come. God has come to us in Jesus.

In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Savior, you have come to us and shared our common lot, conquering sin and death and reconciling the world to yourself.

God has come. God has come to us in Jesus to rule. Jesus is a king, born a king, but he is an entirely unexpected sort of king. God's power is manifested in Jesus not by asserting dominance but by serving, not by overcoming enemies but by sacrifice, by power that is made righteous by love.

God has come to us in Jesus to rescue, to bring us back from the lonely and lifeless places to which we have been taken or to which we have taken ourselves, to find all of us who are lost or ignored or rejected, to free us from everything that holds us captive, to heal our wounds.

God has come to us in Jesus to tend, to tend us as a shepherd tends his sheep, leading us, walking beside us never abandoning us, keeping us together, making us one flock, doing all in his power to make sure we live and grow and thrive and return home to the place we belong, the place of safety and comfort and well-being and beloved community, the place of shalom, the place of peace.

God has come to us in Jesus, bringing peace. But Jesus is not finished. Peace is not yet complete. Oh, yes, the peace-maker has come to us, but there are many yet needing to be rescued, many yet needing to be tended, and his rule, the rule of peace, is not yet fully established. We still pray for God's kingdom to come. We still wait for the promise of peace to be fulfilled. We still live in a weary and soul-crushing and pain-filled world listening, listening for the angels' song ...

*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 all,
great news of joy we bring."
The world in solemn stillness lay
to hear the angels sing.*

The carol was written in 1849 by Edmund Sears, a Unitarian minister serving a church in Wayland, Massachusetts, a little west of Newton, a little west of Boston. What do you know about America in 1849? What do you think Edmund Sears knew about "life's crushing load" and a world grown weary?

Edmund Sears was a fierce opponent of slavery. In a sermon preached in Wayland in 1856, the year our church was founded, he said of a government that is complicit in sustaining the institution of slavery:

But when vice has so spread its leprosy through the common mind and heart, as to pass into public law and public policy, the state itself becomes the criminal. When the wrong passes into legislation, and goes out into deed through the executive, the commonwealth stands forth as a culprit before God ... When wrong has become so organized as to make the state its permanent body, controlling its functions, and wielding its public men to do its bidding, the commonwealth is an embodied diabolism; humanity dies out of it, and demonism becomes its life and soul.

<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/moa/AAT1148.0001.001?rgn=main;view=fulltext>

And he was a staunch advocate of equality between women and men, in 1849!

He wrote his carol to let the message and the promise of Christmas, the message and the promise of peace, be heard again in his own time and place.

*Peace on the earth, good will to all,
great news of joy we bring.*

Open your hymnals and look at the text of the carol. When do the angels come singing their song? They came "upon a midnight clear," but also they come still: "still through the cloven skies they come." Still their music floats over our weary world.

What is bending? In the carol, what is bending? Angels. Angels are “bending near the earth.” But we are bending, too, we whose “forms are bending low” “beneath life’s crushing load.”

What is gold? The harps of the angels are gold, but so are the “glad and golden hours” that swiftly come. And the new day, the new age of peace, toward which our days are hastening on, is called by Edmund Sears “the age of gold.”

And what comes on wings? What comes to us on wings? Angels. The angels come “with peaceful wings unfurled,” hovering on wings over our sad and lowly plains. But also the glad and golden hours come “on the wing.” They come swiftly on the wing.

Do you see what Sears is doing? The angels’ song may be a “glorious song of old,” but it is not merely an old song and their message is not merely an old message. They bend like we bend. The angels are like us, close to us, and their message of peace is close to us, meant for us. Their gold will be our gold, and the swiftness of their wings is mirrored by the time of peace that swiftly comes to our weary world.

*... when peace shall over all the earth
its ancient splendors fling,
and all the world send back the song
which now the angels sing.*

Why “ancient splendors?” Because peace has been God’s intent from the beginning. We are created in peace. We are created for peace. Peace is where we have come from and peace is where we are going. Peace, which any of our shalom students can tell you, means the fullness of life as it should be: safety, security, fulfillment, well-being, good health, long life, harmonious relationships, freedom from war, delight in God, delight in each other, delight in the earth. And when peace comes, we will be singing, all of us, all the world will be singing the song of the angels, sending back to them, sending back to God, that glorious song of peace and good will and joy.

When? When will this be? When is God coming?

God has come. God has come to us, once, in Jesus, but Jesus said he would come again. Jesus told us he will come back to us. God has come and God is coming. We live between the advents. That’s why each and every time we celebrate the season of Advent, we are not merely looking backwards, remembering the events of Jesus’ birth that occurred on this planet some two thousands years ago now. We are looking forward, eagerly anticipating, expectantly waiting, fervently yearning, for the peace the peace-maker will bring to this planet ... soon.

And meanwhile? We sing. We sing and we pray and we do. We prepare a road! We clear a way! We make rough places smooth. We make the rough places of our lives and the rough places of this world smooth. We prepare for peace by living it, now. The angels are already singing the song, but we are the ones who can bring the music to life.