

To Hear the Angels Sing

by Rev. Ernest Martin

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Bible Reading

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.

But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God with us."

When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus. (*Matthew 1:18–25*)

Reading from Swedenborg

I once heard angelic choirs praising the Lord, and doing so with heartfelt joy. I have sometimes heard their praises as sweet singing, since to one another spirits and angels have melodious voices, and they hear one another just as well as we hear one another. But no human singing, however heavenly its sweetness and harmony may be, can compare with the singing of those angelic choirs. (*Arcana Coelestia* #3893)

Sermon

We come here with a sense of expectancy. Throughout the Advent season, we have been preparing for Christmas Eve and for Christmas Day. Our houses have been decorated; we have listened to Christmas music; we have reached out to long-time friends and relatives through Christmas cards and greetings; and we have rejoiced in receiving expressions of love and concern from people far and near. We have

selected gifts for loved ones, symbols of the gifts the wise men brought to the Christ child. We have hosted parties or have been guests at festive occasions.

All of these preparations and activities reach their climax on Christmas Eve. All our past Christmas traditions and celebrations are part of us as we come here tonight to experience the wonder of the soft light of the candles, the evergreen trees and poinsettias, the grand music of the organ, the awesome account of the Lord's birth in the Gospel of Luke, and the singing of the carols.

On Christmas Eve there is something in the air that we feel more strongly than at any other time of the year. It's not some-thing we can analyze scientifically or understand philosophically. Our celebration on Christmas Eve is felt in the deepest recesses of our souls. We come to hear the angels sing, and to sing with them.

Glory to God in the highest,
And on earth, peace, good will toward men.

The incarnation was a cosmic event, heralded in all the heavens. The angel said, "Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord." As I reflect on the words of the carols this Christmas, I am struck more power-fully than ever before by the presence and witness of the angels.

Silent night, holy night, wondrous star, lend thy light,
With the angels let us sing, Alleluia to our King,
Christ the Savior is born, Christ the Savior is born.
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.
In glory the hosts of the angels
Came singing his song of praise,
And filling the heav'ns with their music,
In those wonderful old days.
Singing "Glory to God in the highest!"
And "Peace upon Earth," and then
The mighty chorus of voices pealed forth
"Good will to men."
We hear the Christmas angels, the great glad tidings tell;
O come to us, abide with us, Our Lord Emmanuel!
With the angels let us sing, Alleluia to our King.

When the angels heralded the birth of the Christ child, they sang to all creation. But it was a group of lowly shepherds, abiding in the field and keeping watch over their flocks by night, who heard their song.

During this Christmas season, do you hear the angels singing? We're often so busy—especially in the weeks before Christmas—rushing around, shopping, preparing for or attending parties, traveling to distant relatives, sending out cards to a great list of names, that the angels could be singing from our rooftop and we wouldn't hear them. Swedenborg tells us that there are angels present with us all the time, messengers of God, to urge, prompt, encourage, inspire. Yet we are seldom conscious of their presence.

Louis Halle, an author and lover of nature, describes a scene in Washington, D.C., when a black sea fowl, the cormorant, flew low over the housetops along Connecticut Avenue. Halle wondered whether anyone else in Washington had seen the bird—an awesome figure of ancient literature. Had anyone else in the city thought to look up, to be aware of this bird? How often do we look up, and within, to the source of light and love, to gaze upon the soaring birds and to hear the angels sing.

Joy to the world, the Lord is come!
Let earth receive her King.
Let every heart prepare him room,
And heaven and nature sing.

Christmas is to be celebrated in heaven and on earth. Many critics moan that the loudest bell at Christmas time is the bell on the cash register. Christmas has become grossly commercialized, feeding on our materialism and worship of consumer goods. Even staunch church members and conscientious worshipers are caught up in the hectic whirl of activities that have become part of our Christmas celebrations.

And yet there are signs that more and more people are becoming aware of the spiritual dimensions to life, and of the need to acknowledge and recognize the Lord's presence in their lives. The Quaker philosopher Rufus Jones predicted almost fifty years ago that some day a new Copernicus in the field of psychology will discover that what we have been calling physical or material or molecular is vastly more penetrated by spirit than we have usually supposed. There is undoubtedly a remarkable fit between the inward and the outward. It is like the fit of the glove to the hand, or like the two blades to a pair of scissors.

This connection is what Swedenborg spoke of as correspondences: the vital and dynamic relationship between the spiritual and the natural dimensions of life—the spiritual realm being the realm of causes, and the natural the realm of effects. The two dimensions are part of one reality, which we experience when we co-respond to the beauty and wonder of the natural world.

In a landmark book entitled *A Rumor of Angels*, sociologist Peter Berger declared that “only through a belief in the existence of the supernatural—that is, a reality that transcends the reality of the natural world of everyday life—can man grasp the true proportions of his experience.”

The veil between the natural and spiritual worlds is very thin; for we are coming to realize that creation is one, and the different realms or dimensions of life and creation are all related. Leading-edge physicists and mathematicians are recognizing that there is no “real” matter—all is energy. Psychology is exploring the common boundary between psychotherapy and spirituality. Many psychotherapists are supporting the integration of spiritual values and psychological growth.

How can we become more aware of the spiritual dimension of life? Be tuned in to the presence of God and the witness of his angelic messengers? How can we hear the song of the angels?

The Scriptures urge us to “be still, and know that I am God” (*Psalms 46:10*). Our television sets won’t bring us the music or drama that we want to see and hear unless we are tuned in to the right channel. We must make conscious choices of how we are going to spend our time and energy, how we are going to plan our days and activities. When we make time for meditation and reflection, paying attention to our dreams and visions, cultivating the intuitive side of our lives, harkening to the testimony of the prophets and the mystics, we become aware of the yearning of our spirits, and of the Lord’s call forward.

As we become more self-aware in our spiritual growth and development, the channels of our inmost being are opened more fully to the divine. As we deepen and strengthen our intimate relationships, and experience growing bonds of love between us and significant people in our lives, we are experiencing the presence of God. As we respond to the stirrings and promptings of our higher nature, and recognize their origin in the world of the spirit, we increasingly open ourselves to the divine inflowing. As we give priority to appreciating the wonders of the world around us and within us, we become more fully alive, and experience what Jesus called the abundant life (*John 10:10*).

As we join in this Service of Lights, and as we go forth from this place to celebrate Christmas with family and loved ones, may we join in the song of the angels:

Sing, choirs of angels,
Sing in exultation!
Sing, all ye citizens of heaven above!
Glory to God in the highest!
O come, let us adore him, O come let us adore him,
O come, let us adore him, Christ the Lord!

Prayer

Lord Jesus, as we approach the wonder of Christmas, we pray that you will make your presence felt through the rush and busyness. Touch us with the infinitely greater reality of your birth into our world, and reveal its soul-changing effects on us as individuals, as a community, as a nation, and as a world. Help us to feel your divine peacefulness coming through the candles, the carols, the greenery, and the sacred gatherings of Christmas. Calm all our nervous tensions and worries, cut through the commercialism, and give us the gift that cannot be wrapped in paper: the gift of your presence coming to us and abiding with us. Amen.

Rev. Ernest Martin