



December 24, 2021
Rev. Dr. Thomas Evans
Isaiah 9:2-7, Luke 2:1-14
Christmas Notes:



The Zealous Lord and the Heavenly Host

Many of our favorite carols were inspired by Luke 2: “Silent Night”, “It Came Upon a Midnight Clear”, “Angels From the Realms of Glory”, the “First Nowell”, “Go Tell it on the Mountain”, and more. It simply would not be Christmas without them.

The hymns tell the sacred story, but along with Luke chapter 2, we need the Old Testament texts to give us the proper vantage point. Handel, in his *Messiah*, sets two pieces from Isaiah 9. The first is: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.” It is a methodical piece that drives home its point through deep, penetrating notes that create the feeling of being in that darkness while yearning for the light. It is immediately followed by, “For Unto Us a Child is Born”, an almost breezy piece that brings a sense of relief from its light mood and exultant joy from the chorus. It builds simply creating an anticipation for something more. The climax of this piece delivers in triumphant fashion – a staccato proclamation of our Lord’s titles underscored at times by timpani, “Wonderful!” “Counselor!” One feels the will of God being driven home by the music.

And yet, Handel leaves out perhaps the most critical part of the Isaiah 9 text, or at least the most overlooked, “the zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this” (Isaiah 9:7).

In Luke 2, we often become too sentimental, forgetting that the God of the

manger is a God of powerful emotions and passions. At Christmas, we see the meek baby but we must also beware of the zealous God who brings this to pass.

Qinah, the Hebrew word for zeal, is something of a combination of jealous, loving, and determined. We should think of jealous not as domineering and controlling but rather as actively protecting and keeping watch. The love is akin to the layered meanings of ardor, which is an energetic, passionate love, which magnetically draws people together. God’s determination means that God never gives up.

And for this zeal we should be truly grateful, for without it we would be lost.

Genesis 6:5 offers a stark indictment of humanity and the resulting pain God feels:

The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart.

And yet God did not give up. God’s pain led to redoubled efforts.

Over thousands of years, God called Abraham and shaped a people, sent judges to bring them through trials, established kings to

rule through law, and commissioned prophets to bring justice.

God did all of this to try to restore humanity to paradise, that time of perfect harmony of God and humanity. But no matter how many times God forgave and restored, we only sinned again. Yet, God did not relent.

God's zealous passion would not lead to hand wringing, but a radical solution. We learn from Isaiah 9 that God will do a new thing. In time, God will send not a prophet or a king, but a child. A Son who will heal the rift once and for all. Thus, the glorious phrase, "and there shall be endless peace." That is the mission of the child in the manger – endless peace.

Yet, God will not do it alone. Isaiah 9 tells us, "The zeal of the *Lord of hosts* will do this." And curiously, Luke also carries this same phrase, "with the angel was a *multitude of the heavenly hosts*." The word hosts, in both of these passages refers to an assembly of God's angels, but these are not pink-cheeked cherubs...this is God's army; that is what the term heavenly host means.

An army's purpose is to follow the orders of their commander with passion and determination, in other words with zeal. We see this zeal in Moses when he faced down pharaoh by sending plagues, in Queen Esther in her clever confrontation with Haman, thus rescuing her people, and Elijah, when he battled the 450 prophets of Baal by raining fire down from heaven.

But it is Jesus who truly shows us the nature of our zeal for God.

Though we are the called heavenly host of God, unlike traditional armies, our mission does not come by force. Jesus was meek but not mild, forgiving but not relenting, peaceful but far from passionless. He turned over moneychangers' tables as the Psalms foretold, "Zeal for Your house will consume me", but he told Peter to put down his sword at his arrest. He castigated his disciples for their failure to have faith but calmed the storm when their fear overwhelmed them. He taught the crowds a difficult path to follow, the straight and narrow way, but when they were hungry, he multiplied bread. He railed against manipulative leaders of his time, but when they hung him on a cross he prayed, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do."

Only God in this child is the one who can heal the rift, mend hearts, and bring peace, so our zealous charge is to passionately proclaim this truth to the whole world, standing ready to be called upon at any moment, just like those boys at King's College Cambridge on Christmas Eve at the Service of Lessons and Carols.

Each year at that service, all the boys in the choir are in perhaps abject fear, excitement and hope. No one knows who will be called upon to sing the opening line of the whole service. Then at the last minute, the conductor points to one of them ("Talk about the nightmare before Christmas", one commentator quipped!) and suddenly they have the task of hitting that pure, high, ephemeral note beginning the opening carol, with the solo line, "Once in Royal David's City".

It begins with that one voice, then the choir, and then the whole congregation all join

in to proclaim the Messiah's birth. Those young voices prepare for endless hours and several years with devotion, dedication, bringing their very best, the epitome of Lordly zeal. But why – why do any of it? Simply to sing something beautiful! Nostalgia? No!

To be filled with the zeal of the Lord.

To prepare ourselves for His coming as if at any moment the Lord would point to us to join in and do our part. Because it matters. It matters more now than ever. The healing of the world depends upon it. So we must zealously proclaim His birth, not only with our voice but with our lives. Our country finds itself in this intractable mess of mistrust and division because Christians of many stripes have forgotten our simple Christmas message.

The point of the zealous God of power and might coming as a child in a manger is to underscore God's essential nature: peace, compassion, and lovingkindness. As Maya Angelou wrote, "Into this climate of fear and apprehension, Christmas enters, streaming lights of joy, ringing bells of hope."

The miraculous power of this child is not His ability to calm storms, multiply bread or even heal disease. The true miracle that defies human experience is that God's ultimate victory comes not through might, but sacrificial love, that this child redeems the whole world through changing hearts – first yours and mine.

Then when we go out there – zealously filled with that grace, that forgiveness, that compassion – God will use us, the heavenly host, to change even more. Amen.