

Hebrews 1:1-6

O Come, All Ye Faithful

Tuning in to what God has to say

The one thing about this time of year is that Christian music is played on all kinds of radio stations and in grocery stores. Christmas movies and specials abound on TV and you can get a 24-hour Christmas fix on the Fireplace channel, For the most part you can freely use Christian greetings like Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays. In other words, you can be overly Christian and people don't seem to mind too much.

It is also a time when people of all kinds are willing to sing music of the centuries and not believe that the church has to update their playlist. So it is that we can talk about a carol like *Adestes Fideles*, or as we know it, *Oh come all ye faithful*. It was first published in the 1700's but the versions we sing today was something that came together over time with a few of different writers putting their stamp on it. The words do such a beautiful job of sharing the message of Christmas. Each of the stanzas hold meaning that when pondered are filled with awe and wonder.

Dr. Michael Hawn, a professor of sacred music at Perkins School of Music has written about the meaning behind these long-standing verses of poetry. I share some of his thoughts mixed with my words,

The invitation to "come, all ye faithful, . . . to Bethlehem" places the singer both among the shepherds who rushed to see the Christ child, and in the long procession of the "faithful" that have journeyed to Bethlehem in their hearts for over 2,000 years.

Of particular note is the second stanza that draws heavily upon the Nicene Creed:

*God of God, Light of light
Born unto Mary, the virgin blest,
Very God, begotten, not created*

This paraphrases the text of the Creed very closely:

*"We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,*

*of one Being with the Father;
through him all things were made.”*

Thus, singing stanza two establishes a link to the church that reaches back to 325 A.D., at the Council of Nicea, where the Creed originates.

Stanza three invites us to model our response on that of the shepherds: “We too will thither / bend our joyful footsteps.”

In the fourth stanza, the “faithful” join their voices with the angels singing “Gloria in excelsis Deo” (Luke 2:14). The refrain then becomes a cosmic chorus uniting heaven and earth.¹

The fifth stanza celebrates the birth of Christ...Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing. This is what is referred to as the incarnation. The Word of God becoming flesh, human.

This hymn along with so many others about the birth of Christ all come out of scripture, much of which is associated with the gospels of Matthew and Luke, as this is where we can find the birth narratives. Luke right at the beginning of his gospel tells us that “after investigating everything carefully from the very first” he decided “to write an orderly account” (Luke 1:3). And so, he begins with Jesus’ birth.

But the gospels are not the only places in the New Testament that we can learn about Jesus’ birth. The scripture read from Hebrews is one such place. “Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, ²but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds” (1:1-2). God speaks to us by a Son. God’s son.

Again, the writer of Hebrews says, “Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets” (1:1). At one time people listened to God through prophets like Moses, Samuel, Elijah, as well as King David. But it would happen over and over again...at some point, the people couldn’t or wouldn’t hear God speaking anymore. A prophet would come and the people would turn away from their sin and pay attention again. Then, over time, it seemed the voice of God would just become part of the din of everyday life. Somehow it wasn’t clear.

Those of you who wear hearing aids can understand better than most what it is like not to hear when someone is speaking. Even with a hearing aid it can be very challenging to hear when there is a group of people in conversation around you. So it was that people stopped listening for the voice of God, or could no longer understand. It is hard to say, but it became clear that God would need to speak in a new way, so that we

¹ Hawn. Dr. C. Michael. <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-o-come-all-ye-faithful>. Accessed December 8, 2018.

could hear in a new way, and so God sent the Son in a way that we might be able to hear.

Jesus the Son who was with God, and was there with God when the worlds were created, was born a helpless baby, grew and lived the life of a human and taught us how to live in right relationship to one another and to God. It is hard for us to realize just how radical Jesus' teaching was. He paid attention, took time for those that most people just walked past. He spent time with children, healed those others would not touch; the leper, the woman who had been bleeding for twelve years. He cared about the blind man at the side of the road, and healed even those who would not be thought worthy of healing because their sickness would be considered punishment for sin. He took time for a woman at a well from another nation and a prostitute who was about to be stoned to death.

Jesus spoke God's love. He demonstrated love through acts of teaching and healing. He lived and died God's love so that each of us might know that love throughout the generations in a way that would not have been possible without the Son of God, as the Nicene Creed states

*We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father;
through him all things were made.*

"The Son is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being" (1:3). Like a stamp that when pressed upon against a paper will transfer the exact imprint of what was on the stamp to the paper, that is what verse 3 is saying...the Son is the exact imprint of God's very being. It is much deeper than just one dimension like a stamp though. Jesus the Son is the imprint of God's very being.

This is truly incredible when you get down to it. When we read about Jesus the man in the stories handed down to us from the scriptures, we often forget that he was also God. Jesus was God come to us in human form. He lived pain and heartache. Jesus was not spared human emotions and experiences. In fact, he died a most horrible death, felt the sting of rejection, the loss of loved ones through betrayal and death. He understood the joy of a meal shared and the fear of being pursued by authorities. There is no human emotion that Jesus did not feel.

Yet, Jesus knew he was on a mission as God and from God. Jesus knew that the cup of death that he was to experience was going to be excruciating and lonely. He understood that he would feel abandoned, but he also understood what was at stake, and what was at stake was each one of us. Jesus went to the cross that we might be

purified. So that when God saw us he did not see just our sin, but love that was so powerful, so encompassing, that love went to the cross to cleanse us, to give us hope, to let us know that we are so loved that even death could not hold God's love captive.

Jesus in his resurrection and ascension is again with God. He sits at the right hand of the God, of Majesty, "having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs" (1:4).

Why would the writer of Hebrews need to say that? It seems clear to us that Jesus is above the angels. To understand why this claim is important we have to understand how ancients thought. For them the only thing higher than the angels was God himself. So, to make the claim that a human could be higher than the angels was a big stretch. It would take convincing and so paraphrases, or takes on what has been told and written about in the gospels, are used, "5For to which of the angels did God ever say, "You are my Son; today I have begotten you"? Or again, "I will be his Father, and he will be my Son"? 6And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says, "Let all God's angels worship him" (1:5-6).

Jesus the Son is God's communication with us, both in his person and in his work. God spoke through Jesus then and still has something to say to us through the exalted Son Jesus today. When we listen, we can hear God speaking to us through scripture, through others, and the work of the Holy Spirit.

Can you hear God's voice or is the din of Christmas music, preparations, work, sickness, loss, grief, and life in general dulling your sense of hearing?

Listen and respond to God speaking to your heart. Come all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant, come to Bethlehem, come and behold him, born the King of angels. Greet Jesus to whom glory has been given, Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing! Amen.