

The Blessed Mystery

I Timothy 3:14-16

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*(This was the sermon on the Sunday that the choir sang the Christmas Cantata, “For Unto Us a Child is Born” by Gottfried August Homilius.)*

Great is the blessed mystery:  
God is made manifest in flesh!

We use many different names for God,  
and those who have gone before has have called  
God with many different names

Maker of the stars

Father, Mother

King of the Universe

Savior

Spirit

Yet each of these names in and of themselves is too limiting.  
Each has the potential of solidifying God into a human image and concept, i.e. in becoming an idol.

We would do well, particularly at this time of year  
to speak of God as Mystery, with a capital M.

Not mystery in the sense of an Agatha Christie mystery to be solved.

But mystery in the sense of something that can never be fully known,  
That is always unfolding.

I think that is part of why music is so important to us at this time of year.  
The poetry of verse, and the melody of tune  
draw us beyond the rational explanations of the mind,  
deeper in to the mysteries of the Word made flesh.

But for a moment it might do our hearts and minds good to learn a bit about the  
two Christmas Carols we are singing today.

“Joy to the World” and “Hark the Herald Angels Sing”  
come to us from the 1700s,

from Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley respectively, two prolific writers of Christian hymns.

In Joy to the World, Isaac Watts “Christianized” the closing lines of Psalm 98. Watts didn’t see this as a Christmas hymn, he wrote it as a hymn glorifying the future triumphant return of Christ at the end of the age, the second coming. The composer of the music, Lowell Mason, utilized melodic fragments from Handel’s Messiah, which also was not originally a Christmas piece. Handel composed it for Lent. However, for us, it has become one of the most familiar Christmas carols.

“Hark the Herald Angels Sing,” by Charles Wesley is a condensed course in biblical doctrine, originally in ten stanzas, using a variety of terms for the newborn Christ. Wesley was temperamental about his work and insisted that people not make changes to it. However, most people today are grateful that his friend George Whitfield disregarded his wishes. Originally, Wesley’s opening lines for this hymn were:

*Hark, how all the welkin rings,  
“Glory to the King of kings.”*

Welkin was an old English word meaning, “the vault of heaven.”

The tune we use for this carol was not set to the words until over a hundred years after Wesley wrote the words. The tune was from a piece that Mendelssohn composed commemorating Gutenberg’s invention of the printing press. At the time, Mendelssohn commented that he didn’t believe it would be suitable for a hymn or for use in a church. However, W.H. Cummings, the arranger, did just that matching this tune with Wesley’s words.

As we continue through this Advent and Christmas season, may we give thanks for the people who through the centuries, including today, poets, composers, vocalists and instrumentalists, who have brought us verse and melody to help us rejoice, to help us open our spirits to the blessed mystery

which is the Word made flesh.