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**Hymn Stories ~ His-story**

**Celebrating Christmas in July**

**July 25, 2021**

**Opening Hymn: “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing”**

Words: Charles Wesley, 1707-1788 Music: Felix Mendelssohn, 1809-1847

Upon his conversion, Charles Wesley immediately began writing hymns, each one packed with doctrine, all of them exhibiting streangth and sensitivity. He wrote constantly, even composing hymns while on horseback. He often stopped at houses along the road and ran in asking for “pen and ink.”

Wesley wrote more than six thousand hymns during his life, and he didn’t like people tinkering with the words. He wrote, “Many gentlemen have done my brother and me (though without naming us) the honor to reprint many of our hymns. Now they are perfectly welcome to do so, provided they print them just as they are. But I desire they would not attempt to mend them, for they are really not able.”

One man did the church a great favor by polishing up one of Charles’s best loved hymn. When Charles was thirty-two, he wrote a Christmas hymn that began**:** “Hark, how all the welkin rings, ‘Glory to the King of kings…” The word *welkin* was an old English term for “the vault of heaven.” Charles’s friend, evangelist George Whitefield, change the words to the now beloved “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing” when he published this carol in his collection of hymns in 1753.

Morgan, Robert J. (2010) *Then Sings My Soul:150 Christmas, Easter, and All-Time Favorite Hymn Stories*, p. 11.

**Sermon Hymn: “Angels from the Realms of Glory”**

Words: James Montgomery, 1771-1854 Music: Henry T. Smart, 2813-1879

The only Moravian pastor in Scotland, John Montgomery and his wife felt God’s call to be missionaries to the island of Barbados. They placed their six-year-old son, James, in a Moravian settlement in Bracehill near Ballymena, County Antrim, Ireland, and sailed away. James never saw them again, for they perished in Barbados.

With no parental support, James was enrolled in a school in England, but he didn’t do well. He was apprenticed to a baker; however, baking was not for him, and he ran away. He spent his teenage years drifting from one place to another, eventually settling down in Sheffield, England.

In his early twenties, he found his niche writing for a local, politically active newspaper, the *Sheffield Register*. When the owner of the paper fled England to evade persecution and imprisonment, James bought the paper and renamed it the *Sheffield Iris*. On two separate occasions, he was thrown into jail due to his politically-charged editorials, but he managed to emerge a celebrity.

Despite the loss of his parents, James remained a devoted Christian, championing the cause of foreign missions and the British Bible Society. He became a respected leader in Sheffield, and many read what he wrote. Early on Christmas Eve, 1816, 45-year-old James opened his Bible to Luke 2. Verse 13 deeply impressed him, and while pondering the story of the heralding angels, he took his pen and started writing. By the end of the day, his new Christmas poem was being read in the pages of his newspaper. It was later set to music. “Angels from the Realms of Glory” was first sung on Christmas Day 1821, in a Moravian Church in England.

Morgan, Robert J. (2010) *Then Sings My Soul:150 Christmas, Easter, and All-Time Favorite Hymn Stories*, p. 19.

**Closing Hymn: “Away in a Manger” (“Luther’s Cradle Hymn”)**

Words: Anonymous Music: James R. Murray

Although it is commonly known as “Luther’s Cradle Hymn”, it is unknown if Martin Luther actually wrote the words. This is still a great mystery in hymnology.

We do know that in 1887, the hymn appeared a little book entitled *Dainty Songs for Little Lads and Lasses*. The songbook was compiled by James R. Murray and published by the John Church Company of Cincinnati. In the songbook, there was a notation beneath “Away in a Manger” identifying it as “Luther’s Cradle Hymn (composed by Martin Luther for his children and still sung by German mothers to their little ones).” In the songbook, only verses 1 and 2 were printed. The hymn quickly became America’s favorite children’s carol, and the words have been sung to forty-one different tunes.

In 1943, Richard Hill published an article entitled, “Not So Far Away in a Manger.” He announced that he had discovered the first two stanzas of the song in an 1885 songbook entitled *Little Children’s Book*, published by German Lutherans in Pennsylvania. No authorship was given, nor could Hill find any appearance of this carol in German church history or in Luther’s works. The mystery surrounding this hymn deepened when, in a 1892 songbook published by Charles H. Gabriel, an additional verse of the hymn appeared. No one knows who wrote this verse, either. After extensive research, Hill concluded that the legend of Martin Luther’s Cradle Hymn was merely that- a legend. He stated, “Although Luther himself had nothing to do with the carol, the colonies of German Lutherans in Pennsylvania almost certainly did.”

Morgan, Robert J. (2010) *Then Sings My Soul:150 Christmas, Easter, and All-Time Favorite Hymn Stories*, p. 57.