**“It Came Upon the Midnight Clear”** (hymn study)

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Introduction: “No Christmas season would be complete without the singing of this beloved Christmas carol hymn” (Kenneth Osbeck, *101 More Hymn Stories*). This particular carol was one of the first to be written by an American. It was first published in 1849, but the tune now associated with the hymn was not written until 1850, by another American. This carol is found today in almost all church hymnals. Let’s consider tonight the song’s messenger, motivation, music, & meaning. See how long it takes you to figure out the hymn before I reveal it.

I. The **messenge**r of the carol - Edmund H. Sears

A. His birth (& life):

1. He was born April 6, 1810, on a farm in Sandisfield, MA.

2. His parents were Joseph & Lucy Sears, & he had 2 older brothers.

3. He died January 14, 1876 (at the age of 65).

B. His beliefs (& leanings):

1. His **theologica**l training >

a. He graduated from Union College, Schenectady, NY, in 1834.

b. He studied law for 9 months under a lawyer in Sandisfield, MA.

c. He graduated from Harvard Divinity School in 1837.

2. His **practical** serving >

a. He preached as a missionary in Toledo, Ohio, for about a year.

b. He served the Greater Boston Unitarian Church in Wayland for a time.

c. He moved to serve in a larger church in Lancaster for 7 years.

d. He suffered a breakdown (illness?) while in Lancaster; then returned to Wayland.

e. He served as a part-time preacher in Wayland for several years.

3. His **Biblical** preaching >

a. He was Unitarian in name, but not by conviction.

b. “Although I was educated in the Unitarian denomination, I believe & preach the Divinity of

Christ” (quoted in Osbeck’s book).

II. The **motivation** for the carol – its setting

A. It was requested by a pastor-friend, William Lunt (Quincy, MA), for his Sunday School:

1. It was first sung in Sears’ home on Christmas Eve, 1849 (?).

2. It was sung to an unknown tune, since today’s tune was not written until 1850.

B. It was reflective of the turbulent times (& reflected Sears’ melancholy mood?):

1. It was written just after the end of the Mexican/American War.

2. It was written during increased tensions between the North & the South.

3. It was the time of the Industrial Revolution in New England.

4. It was during the time of the “gold rush” in California.

5. It was the time of unrest & revolution in Europe.

C. It revealed Sears’ belief that the world, suffering from sin & strife, was not hearing the Christmas

message of Luke 2:14.

III. The **music** of the carol – “Carol”

A. The composer: Richard Storrs Willis

1. He was born in Boston, MA, in 1819 (he died in 1900).

2. He was trained under Felix Mendelssohn (while living in Germany).

3. He was a music critic for the N.Y Tribune & other newspapers.

B. The composition: “Carol”

1. The music was originally used with another hymn text.

2. It was thought that Sears had asked Willis to write music for his poem.

3. It is possible that someone else joined Sears’ poem to Willis’ tune.

IV. The **meaning** of the carol –

A. Stanza 1 > Angelic proclamation (from Luke 2:14):

1. The **setting** of that night -

a. Clear midnight skies.

b. Solemn stillness.

2. The **singing** at that night -

a. *“Peace on the earth.”*

b. *“Good will to men.”*

B. Stanza 2 > Angelic benediction:

1. Blessing upon the **weary** world.

2. Blessing for the **confused** world (“Babel sounds”).

C. Stanza 3 > Angelic consolation:

1. The **need** for comfort (“life’s crushing load… bending low… toil… painful steps…”).

2. The **nature** of comfort (“glad & golden hours come…”) [Millennium Kingdom?].

D. Stanza 4 > Angelic expectation:

1. The **prophets** foretold (“prophet bards foretold”).

2. The **prophecy** fulfilled (”the age of gold… peace over all the earth…”).

Conclusion: Consider again Edmund Sears’ motivation for writing this carol. Osbeck writes, “It is generally considered to be one of the first hymn carols to emphasize the social implications of the angels’ message – that of achieving peace & good will toward our fellowmen in the midst of social difficulty.” The only hope for true peace in that day & in our day today is that found in relationship with the God of heaven through His Son, Jesus Christ. *“Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ”* (Romans 5:1). Christ Himself tells us, *“These things I have spoken unto you, that in Me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world”* (John 16:33). In the words of Charles Wesley’s great carol we sing: “Hark! The herald angels sing, ‘Glory to the new-born King’; Peace on earth, & mercy mild; God & sinners reconciled.” Paul says in Ephesians that for the believer, *“He* (Christ) *is our peace”* (2:14). While peace on earth will not be realized until the Prince of Peace returns to set up His Millennium Kingdom, we can have peace of heart by trusting in Him who died for us. Do you have that peace this evening? If not, why not accept the gift of salvation tonight & find peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ? If you know Him, will you take the opportunity this season to ask others (in the paraphrased words of Phillip – Acts 8:30), “Understandeth thou what thou singest?” In other words, do you know of whom we sing in the beautiful carols of this season? May we be such a messenger at this time!