

Gloria In Excelsis Deo: The Song of the Angels

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. And tonight's readings are a reading from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 2, verses 2-20, and Paul's letter to Titus, chapter 3, verses 3-6.

A reading from the Gospel according to Luke. In those days, Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world.

This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria. And everyone went to their own towns to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem, the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him, and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son.

[1 : 32] She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them. And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night.

And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, do not be afraid.

I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all people. Today, in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you. He is the Messiah, the Lord.

This will be a sign to you. You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. Suddenly, a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest.

Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth, peace to those on whom his favor rests. When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.

[2 : 47] So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.

But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

This is the gospel of the Lord. Praise to you, Lord Christ. And the New Testament lesson, a reading from Paul's letter to Titus. At one time, we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived, and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures.

We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. But when the kindness and love of God, our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy.

He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ, our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs, having the hope of eternal life.

[4 : 08] This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Isn't it great to have a string quartet here tonight? I'm going to relieve them of feeling like they need to preach with me, though, so thank you for that.

Well, Merry Christmas to you all, and a warm welcome to our Christchurch family, and especially a warm welcome to those of you who come with your family and friends, maybe here from out of town or visiting Christchurch for the first time.

We are so, so glad that you're here tonight. And, you know, Christmas Eve is always a bit of a mixed crowd, spiritually speaking. Typically, about half of our church is out of town, traveling to other places to celebrate with their people, and their seats in the pews are filled with folks who are from all different kind of experiences and backgrounds, religious, non-religious, people who know bits and pieces about the historic Christian faith, and people who know nothing whatsoever.

However, perhaps even some of you here tonight would say, you know, I don't even know if God exists. I'm not even sure if we can have our ultimate questions answered.

And wherever you're coming from tonight, we just want you to know we're delighted that you're here. And I want to begin by just pointing out a very strange detail in that story we just heard read.

[5 : 50] And just to say that if I were writing the Christmas story, I'm not sure I would have written it as it stands. For example, what's up with the shepherds?

You know, could God not have found better characters to write into a story? I mean, why didn't God choose other people to receive the news of the birth of His Son?

Think of how much better the story would have been if God had sent news to the Roman Emperor Augustus, or to Herod the Great, or the high priest in Jerusalem.

Why did God not go to the halls of power, to people sitting on thrones, you know, to celebrities and influencers and elites, the high and mighty people who were rich and famous?

Instead, the glorious presence and power of the Lord appears not only in this vulnerable baby in this lowly manger, but it appears in this field with unlikely and lowly shepherds.

[6 : 55] Think about that. The most stupendous news that the world has ever heard is given to these simple, ordinary people, a bunch of nobodies on the margins of society, people who are just going about their everyday business with no expectation whatsoever that anything out of the ordinary was going to happen that night.

They were taken completely by surprise. It's a strange detail to me. And so, for the next few moments, I want to just invite you into the experience of these shepherds to hear what they heard with their ears and see what they saw with their eyes.

Know what they knew in their minds. Feel what they felt in their hearts. And what I want to invite all of us to do tonight is just to listen to the song of the angels and to go through a process of investigation and to open our hearts to sharing and singing.

Okay, three things. Listen to the song of the angels. Go through a process of investigation. And open our hearts to sharing and singing. So, first of all, let's listen to the song of the angels.

Verse 9 in our story tells us that an angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them and they were terrified. You know, many people seek spiritual experiences, transcendent experiences, in order to get above themselves and beyond themselves.

[8 : 26] And they may not be aware of what might happen when they seek that, right? Because when the Almighty shows up, when the Holy penetrates your life, when the eternal light of God comes into your darkness, the first thing you feel is not a thrill of hope, right?

You feel dread. You feel terrified. Like, am I going to die? Why? And every time in the Bible a messenger from heaven is sent from God to speak, what do they say to human beings?

Fear not. Do not be afraid. And so in our story in verse 10, it says, the angel said to them, Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.

Today in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you. He is the Messiah, the Lord. And the angel sums up the Christmas message in those three little words.

He's Savior, Messiah, and Lord. The one born to you is the Lord. That's the name of the God of Israel. I am who I am. And that name is Yahweh for short.

[9 : 38] And the angel says, Jesus is the embodiment of Yahweh, the Lord. Secondly, the one born to you is the Messiah or the Christ. And that's not his last name.

It's not Jesus, Mr. Christ. Messiah is his title. It's his office. It means that he's God's chosen and anointed king.

And thirdly, this one born to you is the Lord. He's the Messiah, and he's the Savior, which is good and joyful news. It says that God desires to save the human race from itself.

And, of course, the bad news is that we're the kind of species living in the kind of world that needs saving. Right? A saving that we cannot do for ourselves. A saving that all of our money and technology, all of our technology, our education, our government, just simply cannot affect. When I think about this need for being saved, I think about my favorite fictional Christmas character, which is the Grinch.

[10 : 43] Right? And I have a Grinch mug at home, which has the Grinch quoting. He says, I'm not arguing. I'm just explaining why I'm right. And I love this guy. In fact, you may remember in the original film in the 1960s, there was a great song called, You're a Mean One, Mr. Grinch.

And one of the stanzas in that song says, You're a rotter, Mr. Grinch. You're the king of sinful sots. Your heart's a dead tomato splotted with moldy purple spots, Mr. Grinch. Your soul is an appalling dump heap overflowing with the most disgraceful assortment of deplorable rubbish imaginable mangled up and tangled up knots.

Now, I don't know about you, but Dr. Seuss, to me, is a great theologian. He's an incredible anthropologist. And if we're honest, all of us have hearts tonight that are about two sizes too small, at least.

And we have this inner Grinch, if we're honest with ourselves, we have this inner Grinch that unleashes all sorts of misery on the people around us, maybe even upon, and especially upon ourselves.

[11 : 52] Right? We know better than God how to run our lives. We would be better off if we were just independent from God.

We're in a war not against Whoville. We're in a war against God himself. We're in a war against God. We're in a war against God. We're in a war against God. We're in a war against God. And because of that, we're in the grip of sin and death.

We're living under condemnation and judgment and wrath. And that's like the one doctrine of Christianity that we could almost prove from this morning's newspaper.

But the good news of great joy is that God has sent a Savior. That God won't allow us to be stuck in the misery of our Grinchiness and our Grinchitude.

That God announces to us the best news that's ever been told to planet Earth, that the one born to you is Savior, Messiah, and Lord. And the great irony of this story is that the way God announces this message is he sends a heavenly army of angelic warriors not to destroy humanity, which God would have been right and completely just to do, but he sends this heavenly army of angelic warriors to sing to us the first Christmas carol and to offer us God's terms of peace.

[13 : 21] And here it is in verse 13. Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.

Their message is that we as human beings, our deepest need is not political or sociological or economic to achieve a kind of outward interpersonal peace between individuals or groups of people.

They tell us that our deepest problem is not biological or mental or psychological to achieve a kind of inward intrapersonal peace, though of course we're desperate for both forms of peace, given the deep disharmonies that we find within our own souls and out in the world between people groups. But what they tell us is what we most need is a saving and reconciling peace with God, not peace out in the world or peace in our hearts, but peace up here with God.

Peace between the glorious maker and judge of all and grinchy sinners like me and like you. And this peace, you notice, is offered to all people of every culture, every race, every nation.

[14 : 42] All humanity here is invited to join in heaven's song about this one born Savior Christ and Lord, this one who's given authority to accomplish salvation and to bring peace with God.

But while this is a universal announcement for all peoples at all times and in all places, we also notice that it's only effective for those on whom God's favor rests, on whom God's grace has come to rest.

Will God give peace to everyone? Well, if you're indifferent to God, if you're opposed to God, why would you get the peace that He brings?

No, it's only as we surrender, it's only as we accept God's terms of peace that we come to enjoy the incredible shalom that He offers us both now in this life and in the age to come.

And so tonight I want us to listen very closely to the song that the angels are singing to us and see if we really understand what it is they're saying.

[15:50] But I want us to not only listen to the song of the angels, I'd also like for us to go through a process of investigation, to go through a process of investigation.

These unlikely and lowly shepherds, they hear this first and oldest Christmas carol, the original Hark the Herald Angels Sing. And then what do they do? How do they respond?

Because the angels are gone as quickly and unexpectedly as they came and when the song was over, the shepherds found themselves in the silence and then in the darkness again.

And so what now? What should we do now? They must surely have wondered what they just experienced. And then we pick up in verse 15, it says, when the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has told us about.

They say, let's go through a process of investigation. Let's go and see for ourselves whether or not this thing is true. They neither laughed off the experience as a hallucination or a dream nor did they accept it without investigation.

[17:06] They were not content with mere hearsay but they said, let's go find out the truth for ourselves. And this is important tonight because I think some of you might be skeptical of this Christmas story.

Perhaps you're here and you're inclined not to trust naive, empty-headed, religious credulity. And if that's you, I am with you. And I absolutely respect that.

But the antidote to naive, empty-headed, religious credulity is not cynical, unstudied, secular incredulity. Rather, I want to suggest to you that the most intellectually credible position you could take is to engage in an open-minded, unprejudiced inquiry, to go and gather the adequate primary source evidence and then base your conclusions on that evidence without depending on hearsay or second-hand opinions from other people.

For example, you might be socialized and culturally conditioned to read this supernatural story about angels and a virgin birth and this God born as a human baby.

And when that story hits the plausibility structures in your mind, when it hits the dominant paradigm of your brain, you say, ah, I see what's going on.

[18:30] We're talking about a legend. This is a myth. It's a fable. It's a made-up story with symbolic spiritual meaning. But if you say that, that just means that your plausibility structures and the paradigm in your mind is causing you to misunderstand what you're reading.

It's causing you to misunderstand the genre because when you examine the evidence, Luke does not begin his story like a fairy tale and say, once upon a time.

Right? Nor does he begin his story saying, a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away. Indicating that you are now reading a mythological Jungian hero story about an unending conflict between the dark side and the true force.

Right? This isn't once upon a time. It's not a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away. How does Luke, this meticulous doctor, this scrupulous historian, write his story?

He says in verse 1, in those days, Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.

[19:49] He says, this is history. This is, this happened. It happened under the rule of the grand nephew of Julius Caesar, Caesar Augustus.

And you can go look at all the evidence about it. And what I want to invite some of you to do tonight is just to engage in the primary source material, maybe for the first time in your lives.

And if you do that, if you read the Gospels, you'll find that this one who's born, he makes, he grows up, right?

And he makes some astonishing claims. He says stuff like, only I know God the Father. He says things like, I alone have the authority to forgive sins and to do what only God can do.

He says, I'm going to come back at the end of history and I'm going to sit on my throne in glory and I'm going to gather all the nations before me and I'm going to judge all the earth because I hold your eternal destiny in my hands.

[20:54] What? Who says that? Who in history has ever said these things? And where does he get, where does he get off?

Not to mention all the other things you'll find about eyewitness testimonies that after his ghastly crucifixion to bear the sins of the world that he was seen raised from the dead and alive again. You see, if you engage with this story as it's written, not as legend but as history, you will have to confront the facts that either this one who was born became a dangerous madman or he became a pitiful lunatic or he's the Lord and he's telling us the truest truths of the universe.

And what I want you to do is go on that process of investigation for yourself to say what the shepherds said to themselves. Let's go and let's see this thing and whether or not it really happened.

And I'd encourage you to just read the gospel. Read the gospel of Luke. You can read a chapter a day over the next 24 days and be done in mid-January.

[22 : 11] And I'd encourage you also, I have two books to recommend for your 12 days of Christmas reading. One is from a professor at the University of Cambridge, Richard Baucom. This is a very short book and it's incredibly cheap.

You could probably order it and have it at your house tonight, I bet. It's called Jesus, A Very Short Introduction. It's phenomenal. And this is by Tom Wright, N.T. Wright, the original Jesus, the life and vision of a revolutionary.

He teaches at the University of Oxford and I commend these trustworthy historians to your reading. But as we close, I want us to not only listen to the song of the angels and go through a process of investigation, but I'd also like to encourage us to open our hearts to sharing and singing.

To open our hearts to sharing and singing. Because what did the shepherds find? Did they, did they see what their eyes thought they would see?

Did they, did they see what they heard with their ears? We read in verse 16, so the shepherds hurried off and they found Mary and Joseph and the baby who was lying in the manger.

[23 : 30] They showed up and they found the King of Heaven as a powerless baby in this lowly manger. They showed up and they found the light of the world descended down into the darkness.

They found the giver of life born to die, born to come into the depths of all of our grinchiness and God forsakenness. What they found when they arrived was the Savior, the Messiah, the Lord in the person of Jesus.

And what did they do? What did they do when they saw God in the flesh? When they saw the embodiment of beauty and truth and goodness?

It says in verse 17 that when they had seen Him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherd said to them.

You know, perhaps you've met Christians who are irrepressibly and perhaps even at times annoyingly joyful. You ever met these people?

[24 : 38] And they can't help themselves, right? They can't help but to share their joy with others. Maybe you're even here tonight because a family member or a friend just wouldn't stop pestering you and bothering you to join them for Christmas Eve and your present to them is just to come and also your hope is that they'll stop asking you and stop bothering you.

But I want to encourage you, please don't be too hard on them because they're just doing what the shepherds did. Right? The shepherds, they just can't keep the good news to themselves.

They want other people to know, they want their family, their friends, their neighbors, their co-workers, they want the whole world to know that what they heard and what they saw is such good and such joyful news.

They just can't help but share it. And not only do they want to share it, but they also want to sing about it. It says in verse 20 that the shepherds returned glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen which were just as they had been told.

You see, they shared and they sang. They witnessed and they worshipped. They proclaimed and they praised. They just could not contain themselves.

[25 : 56] Their souls were bursting with joy that had to be shared and had to be sung. Now, I want you to know that those shepherds the very next day had to go back to work.

They had to go back to their ordinary everyday lives. They returned to their fields and their homes. They returned to their vocations and their relationships. But they were different and they were changed.

They went back to their old job but with a new spirit. They went back to their old family, perhaps dysfunctional families like ours, but they went back with a new heart.

Meeting the Savior, the Messiah, the Lord, in the person of Jesus changed them profoundly. And so, for the rest of their lives, they wanted simply to worship God along with that army of angelic warriors making as their own anthem glory to God in the highest heaven.

And so, dear friends, let's follow the shepherds this Christmas. As we enter into this 12-day feast of Christmas, let's also listen to the song of the angels.

[27 : 14] Let's also go through a process of investigation. And upon discovering Jesus, upon encountering this good news of great joy for ourselves, let's also open our hearts to sharing and singing, to witnessing and worshiping, to proclaiming and praising.

Friends, let's praise this Jesus tonight even from a glad and a full heart. Let's celebrate His birth over these next few weeks with everything that we have to give Him.

And let's live as people who have the glory of the Lord shining on us. As people who've been saved, actually, from our grinchiness.

As people who have been saved into peace with God. As people who just can't contain their joy. Because what they realize is that God's favor and God's grace is resting on us.

So friends, Merry Christmas. And I want to invite you now just to take a moment in the quiet of this night to bow your heads and just close your eyes and ask God to draw near to you.

[28 : 38] Ask Him to apply His word to your heart. And we'll sing together in just a moment. Amen. See you next time.

Thank you. Bye.