



Christmas Day
December 25, 2013
Pastor Daniel Naumann
Luke 2.8-15

GLORIA IN EXCELSIS— THE SONG OF THE ANGELS



Songs full of emotion. That's what we have looked at in Scripture to prepare us for this day. We have heard Mary's song teach us humility as she was honored to be the virgin mother of the Savior. We have heard Zechariah's song sweep away fear as he showed us the fulfillment of God's Old Testament promises to send a Messiah. We have heard Simeon's song fill us with the same peace that he felt when he was privileged to hold salvation in his arms when he held the baby Jesus. Christmas is certainly an emotional time. We reviewed some of the most moving carols that are so familiar to us at Christmas in our children's service this past Sunday. And last night we had a song service that has been sung for a hundred years at King's College of Cambridge, England. Music is certainly moving, and it is very fitting for us to focus on a song during this moving holiday, this great festival of our Savior's birth.

And oh what an emotional song it is! That emotion in this song of the angels is nothing short of pure joy. But the emotion joy comes in many different forms. Joy can include peace, and you hear the angels sing about that peace. Joy includes happiness over something. The angels were certainly happy. But there is another facet of the emotion joy that we see in the angels: *fascination*. There is a certain longing or fixation that overcomes the angels when it comes to Jesus' birth and God's plan of salvation. Our second lesson this morning hinted at it. The writer to the Hebrews explains that Jesus Christ, God's Son who is fully man, was given far greater glory than any angel because he is also fully God. It was a miracle that is beyond even the celestial reasoning of the angels. They, just like we, could ponder this miracle called the incarnation of Christ as long as time would allow, and still not fully understand it, not truly grasp everything that was happening.

To put it a different way, Peter wrote in his first epistle in chapter 1 verses 10-12: "Concerning this

salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things." You see, when it comes to mysteries of God's plan of salvation, there are miracles that even angels cannot explain. And yet they are overjoyed to proclaim the news of this plan of salvation happening in time.

It is this joyful proclamation that we get hear again this morning and study. After the angel of the Lord had proclaimed this miraculous birth of the Savior, the very Son of God, the great company of the heavenly host couldn't help but burst forth this beautiful song of praise to their God Most High: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests!" Oh the joy, oh the thrill, oh the wonder of this miraculous thing that the Lord has done! God Almighty has become one of his created, and he has done it to save them! How could the earth not burst into song over this miraculous thing that has happened! And the heavenly doesn't disappoint. They brought forth a thrilling song that we still sing Sunday after Sunday today: Glory to God in the Highest!

Oh to have had that same thrill and wonder and joy as the angels had when they sang that song! Isn't that the truth? Don't we wish we could have that same thrill, that same emotion, every time we sing that beautiful song of the church, Glory to God in the Highest? We really do sing it almost every Sunday, or at least a version of it. It's the song in our liturgy that comes right after the confession of sins and the absolution, and I say something like: *The works of the Lord are great and glorious, his name is worthy of praise! Or In the peace of*

forgiveness let us praise the Lord! And no matter how many different settings we have for it, and no matter how many times we've sung it, we all certainly fall into that temptation to sing it without much of a thrill. It's just another symptom that crops up as we fall prey to the temptations of our sinful nature that just doesn't find much joy or wonder or thrill or longing to look into the things that our great and glorious God has done for us. It's just one of many times when we fall into that temptation. And Christmas can certainly turn into one of those times as well. Tomorrow morning the feasting will be over and the presents will be opened and the thrill of the day's festivities will have gone. Will we be left "longing to look into these things" again like the angels look forward to looking into God's plan of salvation, or will we have forgotten that great joy which is for all the people as we move back to our everyday lives?

Or perhaps this attitude that doesn't thrill over the angel's message is yet another symptom of our true problem. Perhaps our less-than-impressed attitude is a cover for that same fear that overwhelmed the shepherds at the sight of the holy angel of the Lord, and the glory of the Lord that had shone around them. It's that very fear that should strike us all when we are faced with the reality that our sins separate us from God. It's this fear that drives our sinful nature to forget about God's plan of salvation and to downplay it as no big deal. Because when his plan is no big deal, then our sin is no big deal. We can easily compare ourselves to other sinners and feel OK with God because I surely am not the worst that's out there. But then we are faced with God's glory, with his true glory, a glory that reflects his perfect holiness. And we are faced with that it is truly terrifying to the sinner. Because to the sinner being in the presence of God's holy glory means death.

That's why the message that the angel came to bring was so infinitely important. It was a message to lowly sinners about just how far our God would go to make us his again. As low as we are before God, he went lower. Born to a poor family, becoming dependent on an undependable race to take care of him through his youth, the Almighty God took on human flesh. Born in a barn and laid in a feeding trough, our Savior became the lowest. And that of course was just the introduction to what our God would go through for us. It was this introduction into the world that the angel of the Lord came to share with the shepherds that first Christmas: "And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. 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 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 Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.'"

This introduction of our Savior into the world was simply a preamble to what he really came to do. Becoming even lower still, he was despised by men, by those whom he came to save. He took on the sentencing and punishment of the worst criminal and became obedient to death, even to death on a cross. He did all of this for us. Our God took this task upon himself all to make us his again. And by doing such lowly things our God proved to us once and for all that there is nothing in all the world that he wouldn't do for you and for me. It's a love that we find nowhere else in the world. It's a love that is undeserved. It's a love that is simply fascinating. And that's why the angels "longed to look into these things," as Peter puts it.



It is truly fascinating news about our Savior, isn't it? It's news that changes our lives, that changes our priorities, that changes our attitudes, and that changes our standing before God. This news about our Savior coming into the world changes everything. There are many hymns that wrestle with fine poetry to explain these things, but

few do it better than Martin Luther's hymn that we sang last night, *To Shepherds as They Watched by Night*. It's hymn 53 in our hymnals if you want to turn to it. Stanzas 3 and 4 say, "Oh, then rejoice that through his Son God is with sinners now at one; Made like yourselves of flesh and blood, Your brother is th'eternal God. What harm can sin and death then do? The true God now abides with you. Let hell and Satan storm and rave, Christ is your brother—you are safe." This is God's thrilling plan of salvation. It is a plan that is incomprehensible to us, how he did it. It's even beyond the angels to grasp and fully understand the mystery of how our God became one of his created to save them. And they are truly thrilled and joyful to behold this plan. And if the angels thrill to look into this plan of God's salvation when they aren't even the ones saved, then how much more shouldn't we marvel at this plan of God saving us every day of our lives. May we always be moved to sing with the angels, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests." Amen.