

“Glory to God in the Highest”

Isaiah 6:1-8 • Luke 2:1-20

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Rev. Dr. Charles S. Blackshear • December 24, 2023

This Advent season we have been looking at the encounters that people had with angels in the account of Jesus’ birth in Luke. The angel Gabriel visited Zechariah, the Father of John the Baptist, in while he was performing his priestly duties of burning incense and praying. The angel told Zechariah that his prayers for a son would finally be answered. Then Gabriel visited Mary to tell her that she would be the mother of the Messiah.

This morning we come to the third angel encounter – the shepherds. For most of us, the Christmas story has become *very* familiar. We’ve grown up hearing about Mary and Joseph. We know all about Caesar’s decree of a census. We’ve heard many times that there was no room in the inn and that they had to stay in the stable and so when Jesus was born they placed him in a manger. And most of us are familiar with the angels and the shepherds.

But perhaps we’re too familiar with the story and so it becomes just that – a story. We’ve reduced it to the children’s pageant. The figures in our nativity sets are so familiar to us and yet so different from our own lives that we miss why this story is so important to us today. So what *does* all of this have to do with us today? The answer is plenty!

Let’s begin with the shepherds. Bethlehem is very close to Jerusalem and so many scholars believe that these shepherds may have been the ones who kept the sheep for the Temple sacrifices. They would stay out in the hill country with their sheep and at night they would take turns sleeping and keeping watch, protecting the sheep from wild animals that would try to kill them. Most of the time the nights were long and boring. And unlike today, it was extremely dark. The sky would have been filled with stars. Then suddenly it was as if one of those stars exploded right above them. The sky turned brighter than daytime as the angel appeared to them, shining with the light of God’s glory. We see the same thing when Jesus

takes Peter, James, and John up to the mountain and he is transfigured before them. We also see this same light of glory when the resurrected Jesus appears to Saul on the road to Damascus.

Naturally, the shepherds are afraid. I love the old King James version that says they were “sore afraid.” In the Greek it says they were filled with “mega” fear. You would be, too. One of the reasons people are so afraid when they encounter an angel is that when you are in the presence of holiness you become much more aware of your own sinfulness. Those shepherds instantly knew that they deserved to be destroyed. But the angel says, “fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy, mega joy, that will be for all the people.”

The word good news is the word for gospel. The angel brings the gospel to those poor shepherds. “For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”

When he says, “unto *you* is born...a savior,” I think God intends for us to think about the promise in Isaiah 9, “For to *us* a child is born, to us a son is given.” That whole passage is about the coming of the Messiah who will sit on the throne of King David. Then the angel says, “And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” Again, we are supposed to think about Isaiah 7:14, “the Lord himself will *give you a sign*. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.”

Then, as if these shepherds weren’t already scared enough from the one divine messenger, “suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God.” This is another place where we hear this term “heavenly host,” or we hear God referred to in the Bible as the Lord of Hosts, that we don’t think much about it. Artists have usually depicted this scene as beautiful angels flying overhead and singing sweetly. But in most places in the Bible the heavenly hosts or hosts of heaven are the army of God. I think a better

way of picturing this scene is that the shepherds were surrounded by an entire army shining brighter than the sun.

What is this army doing? They are doing what they always do, they are praising God, saying, "Glory to God in the highest." I think what's really going on here is that the shepherds are given a glimpse into heaven. The spiritual world is all around us and we just can't see it. But for those few moments those shepherds got to see it. Why do I think this? Because it sounds so much like the description of heaven in Isaiah 6 that we heard earlier, or in Revelation 4 and 5 where everyone and everything in heaven is worshiping God on His throne.

The song the angels sing is one of the most familiar verses in the Bible and also one of the most misunderstood. "On earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!" What do the angels mean by peace? I think most of us think about peace in one of two ways. We either think of peace as the absence of war or violence or conflict, or we think of peace as kind of an inner tranquility. Like peace and quiet. I think you can certainly say that followers of Jesus have experienced both of those at times. But you would also have to admit that if Jesus came primarily to end all war and conflict or to give everyone a serene inner calm, there's still a long way to go.

But that's not what the angels meant by peace. Ephesians 2 tells us that real peace means being in a right relationship with God, and that only comes through Jesus Christ. Paul begins by saying that when we are separated from Christ we have no hope and are "without God in the world." Very early in the Bible we're told how we became enemies of God, separated from Him through sin and shattering the peace of the Garden of Eden. The rest of the Bible is really about God's faithfulness to save us in spite of all the ways we try to screw it up. That's really the source of our anxiety. Often times our busyness is an attempt to distract ourselves from our own sin. John Calvin commented that our "souls are

always uneasy unless they rest in the grace of Christ."

After reminding us of the bad news, Paul then gives us the good news. "But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace." That's what we're really celebrating at Christmas. God came into our world as a human so that we who were far off could be brought near to Him, reconciled to God. When Christ fills us with His Spirit, our lives and our behaviors change. We begin to produce fruit for the Kingdom of God, which implies a process of growth or development that depends on our cooperation.

I think it's helpful here to point out that the word "peace" in the Bible refers to the Hebrew word *shalom*. Shalom is about total wholeness or well-being and it covers every aspect of our lives. There seem to be three main dimensions of meaning for shalom. First, and I think most importantly, it is closely tied to salvation. Shalom involves our relationship with God and with each other. Second, shalom involves a correct ordering of our lives. Whatever blocks God's order for the world is the enemy of shalom. Third, shalom has a relational dimension, standing against oppression, deceit and fraud.

There's something else that we can learn from the shepherds that first Christmas. "When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child."

The shepherds had to respond to the message from the angels. They could have kept quiet about the whole thing, maybe pretending that it didn't happen. But they decided to go, in fact it says they "went with haste." In other words they went as fast as they could. Why? Because this was a life-changing message. These

shepherds, who were considered the outcasts of society, now knew that they were loved by God.

The shepherds experienced God's presence and leading and they responded by glorifying God. You and I have the same opportunity to experience God working in our lives. Rather than coming to us in a choir of angels, we encounter God through reading the Bible, praying, and serving others. We experience the presence of Christ in our worship. By the power of the Holy Spirit, God can guide us and direct our thoughts toward Him.

The Bible doesn't mention those shepherds again but I suspect that after that night their lives were never the same again. I bet that group

of shepherds thought about those events every night for the rest of their lives. Whenever new shepherds were recruited to work with them I'm sure they had to hear the story of the night that the Messiah was born. Every night was filled with expectant waiting.

Your life should be the same. Once you have experienced the presence of Christ in your life, every day after that should be different. You should be excited to glorify and praise God for all that you have seen and heard. And you should be excited to tell others the good news of great joy that is for all people. Because to *us* is born a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

Amen.