Glory to God in the Highest

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Luke 2:8-20

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10:00 AM
Have you ever seen a Christmas pageant without shepherds and angels? Jesus, of course, gets the starring role. The best supporting actress and actor, Mary and Joseph. Of course the Lord directs the entire Christmas Eve production; and the end goal in mind: the salvation of the world!

But what about the shepherds and angels? They’re indispensable! Just think about all the hymns dedicated to Shepherds and Angels down through the centuries: *Angels, from the Realms of Glory* (1816); *Angels We Have Heard on High* (1854); in 1700, *While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks*; *It Came Upon the Midnight Clear* (1849); and Charles Wesley’s *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing* (1739).

So earlier, Connie read our morning’s Scripture; she asked us to find Luke’s key words starting with the letter “G”. Luke’s alliteration helps us tell the greatest story the world has ever known.

The four “G” words are: *God, Glory, Good News and Great joy*. *God* reigns in the highest heaven. The *Glory of God* shines around. *Good News* for ALL people is proclaimed. *Great joy* is both immediate and promised.

Luke’s story of the angels and shepherds is the ultimate birth announcement, isn’t it? When our daughters were born—and perhaps your children, as well—we sent out written birth announcements through what we now call “snail” mail. On Julia’s, we put the verse from Psalm 126:3 (for us, after my cancer journey and our infertility): “Yes, the LORD has done amazing things for us!”

On our MaryGrace’s, Psalm 96:1-3: “Sing a new song to the LORD! Let the whole earth sing to the LORD! Sing to the LORD; praise His name. Each day proclaim the good news
that He saves. Tell everyone about the amazing things He does. What joy!”

Nowadays, there seems to be no limit to the creative ways people announce their news both of pregnancies and births! Look at these two on the screens.

Now, Luke’s birth announcement orchestrated by the Lord of the Universe. Unmatched! These intergalactic, six-winged, other-worldly angels. We’re not talking “Precious Moments” angels; not cutesy, chubby Rubenesque-like angels! These fierce-but-radiant angels, they appear to lowly, humble shepherds on a stark chilly hillside outside the village of Bethlehem. Absolutely extra-ordinary!

Imagine the angels—God’s doxa, God’s glory all lit up that Palestine night. We’re talking pre-electricity, pre-satellite, pre-24/7 news coverage. Angels and shepherds—heaven literally meeting earth!

Since we’re so far removed from 1st-century agrarian life, a quick refresher on shepherds. On the pecking order of workers, shepherds were pretty far down on the rung. In fact, because of the very nature of their work, they actually couldn’t worship in the Temple. They were considered unclean because their work precluded them from ceremonial hand-washing.

Don’t miss that irony! These shepherds devoted their lives to caring for the very lambs and sheep which would then be presented as sacrifices in worship in the Temple to atone for the sins of the people. Instead, God meets them precisely where they are.

Through His appointed angel, and then angelic host, the Lord of the universe comes to the shepherds and tells them this never-before-heard word of grace, mercy and hope: …to you is born, this day, in the city of David, a Savior who is the
Messiah, the Christ, the Lord....This good news of great joy is for all people (Luke 2:10-11).

Maybe you are feeling like one of those shepherds this morning. Maybe you wonder whether Christ has come for even you in your uncleanness, your isolation, your dark night. Maybe a loved one is on your heart and mind today, in his brokenness, in her loneliness and weariness. Perhaps you are yearning for the light of Christ to break through. Maybe you feel forgotten or not valued. “Jesus, are You coming for even me?” “Jesus, are you coming for my loved one whose in a place far off, for my prodigal in a distant land?”

Friends, a Savior has been born for you. The One who comes to “make whole” has been born; He is for you, and for your child, for your friend. John 3:17: Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him.

His priceless gift of salvation is for you and for all people. No one is beyond his reach, his touch. No one is excluded or shut out.

Let’s pivot now to the angels. Just who are angels? Angels are God’s messengers. They are spiritual beings created by God to serve God. It’s actually pretty amazing to see how frequently angels appear in the biblical story. If that piques your curiosity, do some digging later today or this week.

For now, I’ll whet your appetite by naming just a handful of men and women who received angelic visitations: Sarah’s handmaid Hagar; Jacob, Gideon; Elijah and Daniel; during Advent we’ve seen Gabriel’s visit to Zechariah, to Mary, and to Joseph. Peter and Paul were visited; they were guarded and helped by angels!
At their core, angels are God’s messengers. But angels also fight and contend on behalf of God’s people. Angels speak truth. Angels comfort. And angels worship. Oh, how they worship!

Consider John’s vision in his Revelation 5:11-12 (NLT): *Then I looked again, and I heard the voices of thousands and millions of angels around the throne and of the living beings and the elders. *\(^{12}\) And they sang in a mighty chorus: “Worthy is the Lamb who was slaughtered – to receive power and riches and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and blessing.”

I’d like to imagine that this “army of angels” in the Christmas story has actually been engaged in the longest-running dress rehearsal the world has ever known. It’s the Christmas pageant of all pageants, if you will! For millennia, these thousands and millions of angels had been practicing, waiting, waiting, waiting to finally be released into awe-struck, ecstatically joyful, we-don’t-have-enough-superlatives praise and worship!

*Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom He favors!* Let’s all say it together, in a true spirit of praise!

And, now, to the final verse of this morning’s Scripture: *The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told* (verse 20). The shepherds return to their work, tending to their sheep, keeping them from harm, huddling together on another bone-cold starry night on the job. The shepherds return to their lives in all of the ordinariness of it. But they are changed. The Savior of the world is born, for them. They now believe, and their
response is one of worship as they now glorify and praise God. They don’t need to be in the Temple to worship God.

God has brought heaven down to earth right where the Shepherds are. These shepherds have now beheld the very Lamb of God, who has been born to take away the sins of the world. He has come for them.

Plus they not only worshiped, but Luke tells us the Shepherds also tell everyone they meet! What about you? Will you worship Jesus in a way you’ve never done before? Will you ponder the highest cost of His Incarnation (Word-becoming-flesh) so that you could be rescued, made whole, redeemed as only a Savior can for you? Will you go out and tell this good glorious news in word and action—telling your friend, or family member, neighbor or complete stranger? Wow, now that would be big!

We sing it every year. May we pray and live it by God’s grace and power, for His Glory. 

*Angels We Have Heard on High.* *Angels we have heard on high, Sweetly singing o’er the plains, And the mountains in reply, Echoing their joyous strains ... Gloria in Excelsis Deo; Gloria in Excelsis Deo!*’’ Which means glory to God in the highest!

Before the Benediction, a little humor: It’s a little known fact, and certainly deliberately omitted from Luke; but after the Shepherds left their flock to run to Bethlehem to see the Babe who was born...well, the wolves sure must have had a field day!

Remember, the Lord is with you and your loved-ones, wherever you are, wherever you go!