

THE GLORIA IN EXCELSIS

LUKE 2:13-14

On one occasion, when Franklin Roosevelt was President of the United States, he and a friend talked late into the night at the White House. The President suggested that they walk out into the Rose Garden and take a look at the stars before retiring for the evening. So, they went out and looked up into the heavens for several minutes taking in the view of thousands upon thousands of stars. Then the President said, "All right, I think we feel small enough now. We can go to bed."

How easy it is to lose a sense of wonder! When was the last time you felt awed beyond words? One of the results of experiencing Christmas every year ought to be the reminder of the incredible bigness of God and the incredible smallness of you and me. I'm quite certain that the shepherds near Bethlehem who witnessed those countless angels and heard them singing felt very small indeed. They experienced up close and personal God's immeasurable bigness on that first Christmas night. That angelic song first heard by the shepherds is one of four poems found in the first two chapters of the Gospel of Luke. All four were probably set to music and sung by the first Christians as part of their worship experience. Years later, each song was given a Latin name. For this Advent season, we're calling them "The Canticles of the Christ Child." We've looked at the *Magnificat* – Latin for "magnify" which is credited to Mary, Jesus' mother. Last week we considered the *Benedictus* – Latin for "blessed" which was composed by Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist. Today, I want to look with you at the next canticle which is a brief, angelic song – the *Gloria in Excelsis* – Latin for "glory in the highest." Let's look at the Bible passage itself. On the basis of this song, may I suggest that, first of all:

CHRISTMAS REVEALS WHAT GOD IS MADE OF.

"Glory." If there was ever a quintessential Bible word, it's got to be that one – "glory." "Glory to God in the highest..." What in the world does "glory" mean? As I understand it, the root concept has to do with something having weight or substance. Used in that way, you might say that many of us are sorely tempted to add some "glory" – some weight or substance – to our physical bodies this Christmas season by eating too much good food! But in a spiritual sense, glory is anything and everything that makes God impressive to you. Whatever you consider wonderful about God, awe-inspiring about God, or magnificent about God is part of His glory. I realize that covers a lot of ground, but it is what it is. We can see and experience God's glory in His attributes. He is eternal, all-powerful and all-knowing. We can see and experience His glory in His character. He is faithful, truthful, loving and merciful. We can see and experience His glory in His creative power – as in the beauty and complexity of the natural world. Have you watched any of those episodes of "Planet Earth" on the Discovery channel? I love nature shows like that because they reveal another aspect of God's glory to me. We can see and experience His glory in all the wonderful things He has done – the record of His accomplishments down through human history as well as in our own lives. Glory is anything and everything that makes God impressive to you.

When the angels sang, “Glory to God in the highest”, what did they mean? In one sense, that phrase – “the highest” – probably points to a kind of location. I think it means heaven here. So, it means “glory to God in the highest place” or “the highest arena.” But, I also think that “the highest” refers here to a kind of demonstration of this glory. The angels were saying that by sending Jesus into this world, God permits you and me to observe His glory in its highest form; in other words, to see the most significant demonstration of God’s glory. That act, more than any other, reveals what God is made of. The single most impressive thing about God is Jesus. Sending Jesus into this sin-stricken world reveals that love is at the core of God’s heart. Sending Jesus reveals that God – above all and in all - is fundamentally gracious and merciful. Sending Jesus reveals that God is – today and forever - for you not against you. This is the most glorious thing about God’s glory! There is no more magnificent and marvelous aspect of Almighty God than when He sent His Son, Jesus, into this world.

There’s a story of a family gathered around the kitchen table playing a homemade version of the game “Pictionary.” That’s a game where you have to draw a picture to illustrate a word or a concept and everyone else tries to guess what you’re illustrating. It was Christmas time, so the family had created different holiday phrases that everyone would try to demonstrate through their drawings. Nine year old Sarah picked the phrase we’re considering – “Glory to God in the highest.” That’s pretty tough, isn’t it? How would you illustrate or draw that concept? How would you draw “glory” or “in the highest”? Little Sarah decided to focus on the word “God” instead. Without a moment’s hesitation, she drew a human form with a face, arms and legs. And then she added large hands with nail prints in the palms. She drew Jesus to convey the idea of God. She couldn’t have been more accurate biblically.

Jesus reveals fully – in the highest, more profound and most complete way – what is the glory of God. At Christmas – in sending Jesus and in the person of Jesus – you are able to see what God is made of. But there’s an additional truth about Christmas that is highlighted by this song:

CHRISTMAS REVEALS WHAT YOU ARE MADE FOR.

That’s found in the second part of the angel’s song: “... and on earth peace to men on whom His favor rests.” That compact phrase tells us about two awesome things you are made for. First of all, because Jesus came into this world, you are a grace receiver. God’s favor is His grace. Grace is a gift given to people who in no way deserve it or its benefits. The audience for this angelic song underlines this truth. You might know that shepherds in that day and time were considered lower class people. Their jobs made it next to impossible to keep all the meticulous ceremonial laws of the Jewish people so they were looked down upon. They would have been considered a group least likely to have received this kind of angelic visit and message. Isn’t that just like God, however? He has this wonderful tendency to extend grace to the least deserving and to work through the least likely.

Why does God's favor rest upon you today? It's not because you're a good person, because the fact is you're not that good! Neither am I. It's not because you're such a moral person, because the fact is you're not that moral. Neither am I. It's not because you're so deserving, because the fact is you deserve nothing from God except His judgment. Neither do I. There's an old Dennis the Menace cartoon that depicts Dennis and his buddy, Joey, leaving the Wilson's house next door with some cookies in hand. Dennis turns to Joey and says, "Mrs. Wilson gave you a cookie because she's nice, not because you're nice." Dennis the Menace was a great theologian! God's grace – God's favor – is just like that! It's not something you earn. It's not something you deserve. It's not something you're entitled to receive. God gives it to you not because you're nice, but because He's nice! And you receive it, by reaching out and claiming it by something the Bible calls faith. You believe God offers His grace. You believe you need His grace personally and desperately. You reach out by faith, accept His grace and then show your gratitude through your lifestyle. You are a grace receiver. But here's the question: have you, in fact, received God's grace?

When you receive God's grace, you discover the second thing you're made for. Because Jesus came into the world, you are a peace possessor. Before we go any further down that road, let me try to clear up an old misunderstanding. The King James Version of the Bible translates this verse in the following way: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men." (Luke 2:14) Now, it sounds like the angels are promising here some future time of universal peace and brotherhood. Every Christmas season you hear this sentimental, vague sort of connection between Christmas and world peace. It's as if the birth of Jesus is supposed to somehow, in and of itself, get people, armies and governments to stop fighting each other. If that was the prophetic intent of what the angels were saying that first Christmas night, it's turned out to be a miserable failure, hasn't it? I just read this week that the 20th century was the bloodiest in human history. Some 86 million people died in wars fought from 1900 – 1989. That's 2500 people every day or 100 people every hour for 90 years. Another 120 million died from government sponsored genocide and mass murder in the 20th century. So much for the angel's prediction! But is that what they really meant? I don't think so.

The fact of the matter is that the Greek text of the Bible available to scholars back in 1611 when the King James Version was first published was good but not as good as what is available to scholars today. Many more Greek copies of the Bible have been discovered since 1611 which makes it possible to have a much more accurate translation. One example of that is Luke 2:14. Without boring you with all the differences in the Greek words and grammar, let me suggest that more modern versions provide a more accurate translation of what the angels said. For instance the New International Version puts it like this: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests." The New Living Translation renders it like this: "Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased." Now that's a very different idea. The angels never promised peace to people everywhere just because Jesus was born. Instead, peace is offered to people who are

the objects of God's favor – His saving grace. Peace is offered to people with whom God is pleased.

The meaning of the word "peace" in the angel's song points to salvation. They could have just as easily sang, "Glory to God in the highest and on earth salvation to men on whom His favor rests" or "Glory to God in the highest and salvation on earth to those with whom God is pleased." When it comes to understanding the concept of peace and how it relates to God, it's always been helpful to me to think about it in two distinct but related ways. First, there is peace with God. Every person is born with a basic, indwelling hostility towards God. By nature, you don't want to acknowledge God or accept His reign and rule over your life. From birth, you inherit a broken relationship with God. You may not even be aware of this antagonism towards God consciously, but it's there nonetheless. Any and every act of sin is an expression of that hostility. But when you confess this hostility towards God, when you ask His forgiveness, when you accept Jesus' payment of your sins by His death and when you place your faith in Jesus and what He did for you at the cross and as a result of the empty tomb, you then experience peace with God. The Bible says, "Therefore, since we have been made right in God's sight by faith, we have peace with God because of what Jesus Christ our Lord has done for us." (Romans 5:1 NLT) You are a peace possessor when you experience peace with God.

But, secondly, there is also the peace of God. As wonderful as peace with God happens to be, there is a deeper dimension of peace that God wants you to experience: the peace of God. Here's the vital connection between these two kinds of peace. On the one hand, you can only ever have the peace of God when you have first experienced peace with God. That's why when a new person comes to me filled with anxieties and worries of one kind or another, I want to find out, first of all, if he or she has ever truly become a follower of Jesus. If Jesus isn't your Savior and Lord yet, you have every good reason to be anxious and worried! Your inner turmoil is God's way of letting you know something is desperately wrong. The peace of God is contingent upon you first having peace with God. But, on the other hand, just because you have peace with God doesn't automatically mean that you possess the peace of God. You can be born again spiritually, have faith in Jesus and love Him sincerely, but still be enslaved to anxiety, worry and fear. God wants you to have His peace as a daily experience. The Bible says, "Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:6-7 NLT) You are a peace possessor when you experience the peace of God.

So how do you keep God's peace? On the one hand, I can't give a complete answer to that important question today. On the other hand, I don't think the answer is terribly complicated. It involves things like thanking God every day that He loved you enough to make peace with you through Jesus. Confess your sins to Him daily. Soak yourself in His Word and learn how to pray. Resist anxiety and refuse to let it be your master. Surrender your future to the Lord. Release your past with all of its hurts to the healing

power of the indwelling Holy Spirit. Quit focusing on yourself and reach out to someone else in Jesus' Name. Count your blessings. Keep on giving as much of what you know about yourself to as much as you know about God. When you start living like that and keep on living like that, you will be a peace possessor.

Anne, along with her two small sons, went to live with her parents in Texas for the duration of World War 2. Her Air Force husband was serving in Europe. It was Christmas time. Anne and her parents were doing every thing to make it a memorable Christmas for those two boys. The tree was up and decorated. Gifts were bought and hidden away. The excitement, the thrill, and the beauty of the season seemed to push aside the anxiety and the pain of war for a time. But only for a short time. Just a week before Christmas Day, word came that the two boys' daddy would not be there that Christmas or for any Christmas that was to come. He'd been killed in action.

Anne went to her room and closed the door. Her mother and father talked quietly and wondered what to do. Finally they decided to take down the decorations and get rid of the Christmas tree. Sorrow had replaced their joy. Anne came out of her room after awhile and saw the empty space where the tree had been, "Why, Mother? What have you done with the tree?" Her mother said, "Your dad and I threw it out. It seemed out of place with you so broken-hearted." And Anne said, "Oh, but, Mom, let's bring it back in. Christmas was made for such times as this!" Indeed it was.

If the deepest meaning of Christmas is a shallow kind of nameless happiness – just happiness for happiness sake – then you can take it or leave it. But if Christmas reveals what God is made of and if Christmas reveals what you are made for, then let's celebrate it again this year! And the deeper the hurts of life, the deeper the reasons to rejoice this Christmas. Shall we keep Christmas this year? Yes, we must keep Christmas this year, because Jesus was born for such a time as this.