

Glory to God

Dave Barry wrote in the Miami Herald several years ago about the increase of political correctness we find in our culture surrounding Christmas: “To avoid offending anybody, the schools dropped religion altogether and started singing about the weather. At my son's school, they now hold the winter program in February and sing increasingly non-memorable songs such as "Winter Wonderland," "Frosty the Snowman" and--this is a real song--"Suzy Snowflake," all of which is pretty funny because we live in Miami. A visitor from another planet would assume that the children belonged to the Church of Meteorology.”

I don't know about “Suzy Snowflake,” but I do know that when the angels appeared 2000 years ago to the poor shepherds on a Judean hillside, they weren't there to talk about the weather.

- Luke 2:8-14
- Two great truths stood out to me in this passage this week that I want to share with you today. First, God's glory is revealed to shepherds. Second, God turns great fear to great joy.

1. God's glory is revealed to shepherds.

- The first thing Luke notes about the episode with the shepherds is that they are outside (in the same country, meaning “near Bethlehem”), watching their sheep, and an angel appears to them. Let me ask you something. What would YOU do if an angel showed up at your workplace? And I am NOT talking about your wife, men. And I know what some of you women are thinking, too. I know my wife's first thought was, an angel shows up at my workplace, the house, every day when he gets home from work! (Thanks, darling, I love you too). No, this was an angel from heaven, not a redeemed sinner from earth. And the shepherds did what every one of us would do if Gabriel or Michael showed up right now on this stage, which is fall on our faces. The Bible says they were “greatly afraid.” JB Phillips translates it, “terror-stricken.” Luke was a historian, and was not given to exaggeration. If anything, he understated the case. The words he uses when he says they were greatly afraid are three: phobeo mega phobos. You can translate that, “scared out of their minds.” They were terrified. Part of the reason was that the angel just appeared, out of nowhere, without warning. That's the best way to scare someone, isn't it? You wait for them to walk through a door when they are not expecting anyone to be there. They open the door and you have suddenly appeared. They are scared out of their mind. It's a John Codispoti dream-come-true. If John had been there, he would have been rolling on the ground laughing at the shepherds. They were scared out of their minds. And that's probably why the first thing the angel said, nearly every time he showed up, was: do not be afraid. Fear not. That was his MO. He didn't just appear and say, “Hi, how's it going?” He appeared to Zacharias when Zacharias was burning incense in the temple, as close to the veil that separated him from the holy of holies as he would ever be. Suddenly an angel appeared and Luke tells us Zacharias was troubled and “fear fell upon him.” That can be translated, “scared out of his mind.” The angel said, “Hi, I'm an angel.” No! He said, “Do not be afraid, Zacharias.” Same with the shepherds. The angel suddenly appeared. A creature made by God for His glory alone, who dwelt in the presence of the Lord and had just come from there and the Bible says “the GLORY of the LORD shone around them.” It was night time, more than 2000 years ago, no electric lights around, and this angel, one angel, lit up the countryside with the shekinah glory of God. It was terrifying! It was awesome in the correct sense of that word. It was GLORIOUS!
- Two more observations about this appearance. Much has been made of the fact that God chose to send His angelic herald to shepherds instead of to kings. He chose to reveal this greatest news ever told to the simple, not to the wise. Shepherds were not exactly high up the social ladder. Or the academic ladder. Or the religious ladder. But God showed up and spoke to them. And they heard the voice of God through the angels. Remember when Paul was spoken to by Jesus when he was on the way to Damascus? Paul tells the story in Acts 22 and says that the others who were with him SAW the light, but did not HEAR the voice! I wondered about that and remembered what Jesus said in John 10:27,

“My sheep hear My voice and I know them, and they follow Me.” Paul heard God’s voice because Paul was one of God’s sheep, even though he didn’t know it when he started down the road to Damascus. And on a sleepy night in the fields outside Bethlehem, His sheep happened to be shepherds, and they heard His voice because they too were chosen by God. This is such an encouragement to me, that God’s people WILL hear His voice when He calls. Second observation, when did the shepherds hear the voice of God? When they were simply doing what shepherds do. Not one of them left home that morning and said, “Honey, I think I am going to hear the voice of God today.” “What?” “Oh, yeah, and today, I think I’ll see an angel or two.” NO! Their wives said, “What are doing at work today, dear?” And they replied, “Same thing I’ve done for the past ten years straight: tending sheep.” Then their workday changed in dramatic fashion, didn’t it? This should be a great encouragement to all of us, that God shows up to the least likely people at the least likely times. They weren’t fasting and praying. They were simply doing their jobs. They were going through the routine. Moms changing a diaper. Mechanics bent over an engine. Teachers working on a lesson plan. Salesmen driving from one place to another. God shows up, sometimes when we least expect Him. And when we think we deserve His appearance the least! No one in the world at that time, if given a choice of who God would reveal the Messiah’s arrival to, would have checked the box next to “shepherds.” In fact, there probably wouldn’t have been a box next to shepherds, because they wouldn’t have even made the list! This is good news: God reveals His glory to His people.

- Second point: God turns the GREAT FEAR of the shepherds into the GREAT JOY of the shepherds. How? How do you go from fear to joy? By hearing and believing GOOD NEWS. Think of a person waiting for the doctor to come in with the test results. You have been told that you had advanced-stage cancer and the surgery and the treatments have been done, but there is great fear as you wait to hear whether the surgery and the treatments have been successful. What can make your great fear turn to great joy? Good news! The angel says, “Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings (GOOD NEWS) of GREAT JOY. (vs. 9-10). When the angel says, “Behold, I bring you good tidings,” he is literally saying, behold, I evangelize you. He uses the word euaggelizo, from which we get the word evangelize. How does anyone in the world go from great fear to great joy? By hearing and receiving great news. A small example: your car is repaired! Hannah, this week, after 4 and ½ months of waiting. Better example: God is here! The One you were made for, the One you have been longing for, has come! Paul Tripp writes, “As a rational, purposeful, emotional being, you cry for a deep and abiding sense of well-being. In your quest, what you are actually discovering is that you were hardwired to be connected to Another. . . In this way, every human being is on a quest for God; the problem is we don’t know that, and in our quest for stability, we attempt to stand on an endless catalog of God-replacements that end up sinking with us.” Great news! God is with us. “For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” The great news that the Savior had come produced great joy. These shepherds forgot about their fear when the angel made it clear that he was there with the greatest announcement, the best news the world had ever seen. Heaven had come down, God’s Glory had come to earth! Great Fear has become Great Joy because of GREAT news! Why does the news of Jesus’ birth take away great fear and replace it with great joy? **Because, in Christ, you are not what you used to be. In Christ, you are not what you will become!** If God has opened your eyes to the fact that you are a sinner, then the best news you ever heard is that there is a Savior. John Newton died 200 years ago this week, and near the end of his life he said, "My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things, that I am a great sinner, and that Christ is a great Savior." Can you give glory to God today that though you are a great sinner, Christ is a great Savior? And that He came to give you second birth? And that he is working in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure? Glory to God! Charles Wesley captured it in his most famous hymn:
- Hark the herald angels sing, Glory to the newborn King; peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled! Joyful all ye nations rise, join the triumph of the skies; With th’angelic host proclaim, “Christ is born in Bethlehem!” Hark! the herald angels sing, “Glory to the newborn King.” Hail the heav’nly Prince of Peace! Hail the Sun of Righteousness! Light and life to all He brings, Ris’n with healing in His wings. Mild He lays His glory by, Born that man no more may die....

