

Glory to God in the Highest: Luke 2:8-21
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We've been studying the narratives surrounding Jesus' birth, and we come this morning to the account of the angels announcing Jesus' birth to the shepherds.

This is the third angelic announcement recorded in Luke. First, there was the announcement of the angel to Zechariah that his wife was going to conceive miraculously and have a child, who would be John the Baptist, who would prepare the way for the Messiah. And then later Zechariah would sing and prophecy about the long-expected Messiah.

There was also Gabriel's announcement to Mary, that she would conceive miraculously and bear a son, who would be called Jesus. And Mary sings of this good news in 1:46-55. There is a lot of singing that surrounds the arrival of Jesus, and appropriately so.

We've also studied, in the Gospel of Matthew, where the angel announced to Joseph in a dream concerning Jesus' birth. We come, this morning, to the angels' song, as they announce to the shepherds that the Savior has been born. They sing, "Glory to God in the highest."

I'll use 4 headings to guide our study this morning, and 2 of the headings are the same word (but from different perspectives). First, "proclamation." And here we'll start in the passage that was our Old Testament reading this morning—Isaiah 9. Jesus' birth was proclaimed long beforehand. It was also proclaimed, as we see here in Luke 2, by the angels. The second heading is "peace." In Isaiah 9 He is proclaimed to be the Prince of Peace. And the angels proclaim, "Glory to God in the Highest, and on earth *peace* among those with whom he is pleased!" The third heading is "praise." That is the response of the shepherds. Verse 20 says that they were glorifying and *praising* God for all they had heard and seen. And then, finally, "proclamation" again. This time from the vantage point of the shepherds, whose praise of this newborn Savior is uncontainable. They can't help but proclaim this Good News to others.

Proclamation

Let's start, then, in Isaiah 9 where we find a famous proclamation of Jesus' birth long before it happened—about 700 years beforehand. There are similarities between Isaiah 9 and the announcement of the angels in Luke 2. In both passages there are glorious titles that are piled up, calling attention to the greatness of this individual.

Isaiah 9 is very close to the context of Isaiah 7, where we read the prophecy of the virgin birth. Isaiah 9 continues to prophecy of this great hope, a hope that is found, surprisingly, in a child.

“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” Isaiah 9:6

Let’s think about these titles and descriptions of our Savior. He is called “Wonderful Counselor,” which reminds us that He possesses all wisdom and all knowledge. Isn’t it comforting to hear this in an age of pop-psychology and therapy? Remember that Jesus is our Wonderful Counselor. He is the One who can guide us and direct us in the ways that will bring lasting joy and contentment. Whatever problems you face, whatever concerns you have, whatever anxieties weigh you down, take them to the Wonderful Counselor. And immerse yourself in His wonderful counsel, which is revealed to us in this Book.

Next He is called, “Mighty God.” There is to be no doubt that this child is, Himself, God. He is Immanuel – God with us. He is God in the flesh. He is human, but also divine. As we’ve talked about in recent weeks, Jesus had to become fully human in order to be an appropriate substitute for us on the cross. He also has to be fully divine in order to bear the infinite penalty of sin. So it is crucial that this child is “Mighty God.” Jesus, Himself, said, “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30). And the Gospel of John opens with the words, “In the beginning was the Word (referring to Jesus), and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

Next the child is called, “Everlasting Father,” and this speaks of His authority and protection over His children. He is like a father to us. He deserves our obedience. He loves us. He watches over us and protects us. And His love and care for us will never end. It is everlasting.

Don’t let this be confusing to you that the Son is referred to as Everlasting Father. This isn’t making a statement about the Trinity, but it’s simply a way of referring to Christ’s fatherly attributes in his relationship with us. One of His glorious attributes is His fatherly love.

Finally in verse 6 He is called “Prince of Peace,” and that’s what we’re going to talk about in the next point. But before we move to that, let’s also see the proclamation of the angel in **Luke 2:11**. Jesus is proclaimed here as **Savior and Christ and Lord**. In verses 10-11 of our text, the angel announces, “I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” And, indeed, this is wonderful news that inspires great joy in those

who hear it. The message is that the long-awaited Messiah has arrived. The anointed One in the line of David, born in the city of David, is now here! He is the Savior. He is the One to save His people from their sins, as the angel in Matthew 1 said to Joseph. He is the Christ, which is the Greek word for Messiah, which means anointed One. And He is Christ the Lord. He is Sovereign Master. It's amazing to see all of these titles stacked up together in the same sentence. This is quite a marvelous thing that the angel is saying about a baby. He is a Savior, the One who will deliver His people from their sins. He is Christ, the Messiah, the promised Anointed One of God. And He is Lord, the One with sovereign authority over all.

And that's why this is such good news, because this Savior, Messiah, Lord has now invaded history. He has now arrived on this earth. He has taken on flesh and become one of us.

Peace

It's this Savior who is the Prince of Peace, as Isaiah 9 says. Once the multitude of angels arrive along with the angel of the Lord, they proclaim together in Luke 2:14, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth *peace* among those with whom he is pleased." This is the astounding news of the Gospel—that we who are by nature God's enemies can have peace with God through Jesus Christ. We were His enemies, but He reconciled us to himself. He made us His friends. **Romans 5:1** says, "**Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.**" If you are a Christian, then you have much reason to rejoice and much reason to praise the Prince of Peace.

We sing, "**Hark! The herald angels sing, 'Glory to the newborn King; Peace on earth, and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled!'**" Kids, do you know what reconciled means? When two people are reconciled it means that they were enemies, but now they are friends. It means that there was a fight between them, but now they've said sorry and forgiven each other, and there's peace between them. That's what it means to be reconciled. And that's what Jesus coming to earth was all about. Jesus came so that God and sinners can be reconciled. Not that He has done anything wrong for which He needs to say sorry. It's not on Him at all. It's all on us. We are the ones completely in the wrong and needing to say sorry and ask forgiveness. He is the One who graciously forgives, even though we don't deserve it.

James 2:23 says this about Abraham: "**Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness—and he was called a friend of God.**"

Do you want to be a friend of God? Do you want to have peace with God? Do you want to be reconciled to God? Then repent of your sin and trust in Jesus. You must understand that your sin is a very serious problem between you and God, and the only way for that problem to be dealt with is through Jesus Christ.

There's a Christmas story that I like very much—I've shared it before—because it's a powerful illustration of reconciliation. It's a story, a true story, from almost 100 years ago when World War I was being fought in Europe. On Christmas Eve and Christmas Day of 1914 there was what became known as the Christmas Truce. The soldiers were in their trenches—there were German soldiers on one side and British soldiers on the other side. They had been shooting at each other, fighting against one another in this war for months. But on Christmas Eve they began to sing Christmas carols. The British soldiers heard the German soldiers singing “Stille Nacht”—Silent Night. And then the British soldiers sang, and then they ventured out into No Man's Land and greeted each other. One soldier, a Scotsman, who was part of this, wrote about it in his diary. “What a sight—little groups of Germans and British extending almost the length of our front! . . . Where they couldn't talk the language they were making themselves understood by signs, and everyone seemed to be getting on nicely. Here we were laughing and chatting to men whom only a few hours ago we were trying to kill!” And a German soldier wrote this: “The English brought a soccer ball from the trenches, and pretty soon a lively game ensued. How marvelously wonderful, yet how strange it was. The English officers felt the same way about it. Thus Christmas, the celebration of Love, managed to bring mortal enemies together as friends for a time.”¹

What a moving story of enemies who became friends. They were reconciled for those moments in the Christmas Truce. For those who are reconciled to God through Jesus Christ, it is not a momentary reconciliation, but an eternal one. We become His friends forever. And that is something to celebrate this Christmas.

Where there was enmity, there is now peace for all those who are in Christ.

Praise

And because of this, we worship. Because of this Savior, we praise Him. This is what the angels were doing, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest.” And this is what the shepherds did in response to the revelation that was disclosed to them. They were glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen.

¹ Cited in *Christmas in the Trenches*, by John McCutcheon.

Let's trace through this story a bit more and observe the response of praise that erupts from the hearts of these shepherds. One of the very striking features of Jesus' birth is that it was announced in this way to shepherds. The shepherds were the ones blessed to receive this special message from the angels. We have to realize something about shepherds in those days. Shepherds were not well-liked. They were viewed as unclean and even dishonest. They were the outcasts of society. They certainly fit the category of people Mary spoke of in her song (1:52), that the Lord has "exalted those of humble estate." God does not esteem what man esteems. Instead, he turns everything upside down.

He didn't send a host of angels to Herod or Ceasar Augustus or Quirinius. He sent angels to announce this wonderful news to an obscure group of social outcasts. This reminds us that the Good News is for all the people, as the angel said to the shepherds. This is not just a message for the cultural elite, or for those whom the world thinks are important. It's for all the people. As Mary said in 1:50, "his mercy is for those who fear him." You don't have to be rich to be saved. You don't have to be smart to be saved. You don't have to have a good job to be saved. But God has mercy on those who fear him, who have a reverence and respect for Him and bow the knee to Him.

Just imagine the shock and fear and amazement of these shepherds when the angel appeared to them. Verse 9 says, "the glory of the Lord shone around them." What was that like? Maybe it was like the manifestations of God's glory in Exodus, when Moses and the Israelites were at Mount Sinai. In one instance it says, "**Now the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel**" (Exodus 24:17).

Maybe what the shepherds saw was a bit like that. Whatever it was exactly that they saw, it was definitely awesome and spectacular, and it's no wonder they were filled with fear. But the angel said, "**Fear not**," in verse 10. This is what the angels always have to say to people. This is what the angel said to Zechariah in Luke 1:13. Zechariah was afraid when the angel appeared to him, but the angel said, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son . . ." This is what the angel Gabriel said to Mary in Luke 1:30. Mary, too, was afraid when the angel appeared to her. But Gabriel said, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God."

Also, the women who came to the empty tomb on the third day after Jesus' death on the cross. They didn't know He had risen. They were alarmed at the sight of the angel who was there at the tomb. The angel said to the women, "Do not be alarmed.

You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here” (Mark 16:6). These angels come with unbelievably great news. Those who have the unique privilege of hearing these angelic messages are rightly filled with fear and awe at the sight of heavenly beings. But then the angels are gracious to try to calm their fears and give them assurance that they come bearing good tidings.

That’s what is happening with the shepherds. They just about jump right out of their sandals at this amazing sight. Just imagine it. Imagine the monotony and boredom of being a shepherd. I’m sure it had its moments of excitement, if you had to rescue a sheep from a bear or lion or something like that (like David, in the OT). But I imagine there would be many, many hours of silence and solitude—just sitting there on the hillside watching the sheep graze.

But these shepherds, after years of the same-old, same-old, are totally jolted by this experience. The glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. But then the angel tried to assure them with the words, “Fear not.”

The angel goes on to tell the shepherds where to find this baby, and there seems to be a great deal of tension between the titles of Savior, Christ, Lord, on the one hand, and then the details of His birth, on the other hand. He is in the city of David. He’s a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths. And He’s **lying in a manger!** The shepherds would have wondered if they heard that right. It doesn’t sound odd to us anymore because we’ve heard it so many times. But that doesn’t fit with Savior, Christ, Lord. Someone with such lofty titles shouldn’t be sleeping in the animals’ feeding trough! But this is the mysterious and marvelous plan of God. His ways are not our ways. His kingdom is radically different than the kingdom of man.

Then the first angel was joined by “a multitude of the heavenly host,” host meaning army. But interestingly enough, this army is proclaiming peace, not war. This army of angels praises God and says, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”

The proclamation of the heavenly host emphasizes God’s initiative in bringing this good news of peace “**among those with whom he is pleased.**” In other words, God will bestow this peace however He is pleased to do so, on whomever He wills. Not in the sense that it will come to those who have something within them that pleases God, but in the sense that God does whatever He pleases. And He will bestow this blessing according to His good pleasure.

A helpful parallel verse is Luke 10:21 where the same word is used. The Greek word is *eudokia*, meaning pleasing or good

pleasure. Jesus says in **Luke 10:21**, “**I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will (*eudokia*, good pleasure).**”

So you see that God reveals Himself to whomever He wills. It is according to His good pleasure that He bestows this blessing, and there’s nothing we can do to earn a place in that audience. God reveals Himself in some of the most unlikely ways, to some of the most unlikely individuals (like shepherds!). And it just goes to show that He is absolutely free and sovereign in the salvation of sinners. Which also means that He gets all the glory. “Glory to God in the highest” as He sovereignly reveals Himself and draws sinners (His enemies) into a peaceful relationship with Him, a saving relationship.

So as we think about praise, as we consider the praise and worship that is going on here in this passage, we recognize that **praise happens in response to revelation. Revelation . . .**

Response. God reveals Himself, and the response is that of praise and worship. This is significant in the way we think about worship in our personal lives and as we think about times of corporate worship. In order to truly worship, we need to be exposed to a revelation from God.

You shouldn’t define worship in terms of a certain genre of music. You shouldn’t define worship in terms of a particular location (like a church building). You shouldn’t define worship in terms of warm fuzzy feelings you have sometimes. Worship happens as a reflex in response to beholding and delighting in God’s greatness. The angels didn’t have to tell the shepherds to worship. The shepherds worshipped automatically as God graciously disclosed these things in their sight.

Notice a couple other words in this passage that inform our understanding of praise. In verse 18 it says that “all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.” **Wonder / Amazement.** In other translations it says amazed. The Greek word is *thaumazō*, meaning to marvel at or be amazed. Luke uses this word a lot throughout his gospel to describe the amazement that people experienced in the presence of Jesus.

For instance, later in this same chapter, when Mary and Joseph presented Jesus at the temple and Simeon was praising God for the arrival of this Messiah, verse 33 says that “his father and his mother *marveled* at what was said about him.”

And in 4:22, when Jesus was in the synagogue on the Sabbath and read from the scroll and then declared to them, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Luke

then tells us that “all spoke well of him and *marveled* at the gracious words that were coming from his mouth.”

This is what was happening as the shepherds spread the word about what was happening. People “wondered” in the sense of marveling, standing in awe, being amazed.

And there are two words in the next verse that catch my attention as well in connection with praise and worship. Verse 19 says that “Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart.” **Treasure / Ponder.** That, too, is a helpful description of worship. When we studied Mary’s song (1:46-55), we learned some things about biblical worship. Here we get another glimpse into Mary’s personal life of praising God. She watched what God was doing, these amazing things God was doing that she had the privilege of having a front row seat for. And she was on the edge of her seat. She was taking it all in, wide-eyed and attentive. She treasured up the things she was experiencing of God, and she pondered them. She meditated on these things. She thought about it when she lay in bed at night before falling asleep. These things were on her mind when she woke up in the morning.

And that’s what a life of praising God looks like. For us, we behold God primarily in His Word. This is where we have God’s special, saving revelation of Himself. He ordained that these things be written and preserved for us. So we have this immense privilege (don’t take it for granted) to be able to open a Bible and read the very words of God. Like the shepherds and like Mary, we should respond in worship. As we behold the great things God has done, we should marvel, we should be amazed, we should treasure up these things and ponder them.

The way we put it in our church mission statement is that we exist to “delight in the beauty of God’s greatness.” I believe that’s what the shepherds were doing. I believe that’s what Mary was doing. They were delighting in the beauty of God’s greatness and the greatness of His plans as these things were being proclaimed to them.

Proclamation

Finally, we see how the shepherds’ praise turns to proclamation. In verse 15 the angels leave, and the shepherds say, Well, what are we waiting for. Their fear and awe becomes faith and action. And they hurried over to Bethlehem, and they discovered that the bizarre scenario that the angel had told them about was, in fact, true. There was Mary and Joseph, and the baby *lying in a manger*. Counterintuitive as it was, turns out the angel was exactly right.

Again, we should be in awe of how God does things in a way that is so contrary to our world’s ways of doing things. God’s

economy deals in a different currency. He delights in humbling the proud and exalting the humble.

So here we see a young lower-class couple, looking in awe at a newborn baby who was to be the Savior of the world. His crib is a feeding trough. He has animals gathered around him. And his first visitors are a ragtag group of shepherds.

These shepherds become the first evangelists. They are in awe of what they have seen and heard, and they can't wait to share the good news with others. That's what I want us to see in this last point. True worship and praise will spill over in witness to others.

It's kind of like the hilarious video that you can't help but post on Facebook, or the spectacular touchdown that you can't help but talk about the next day at the office. When there's something that truly amazes us, something we delight in, our reflex is to tell somebody about it.

So we've come full circle in a sense, from proclamation to peace to praise and now to proclamation again. When **Good News is proclaimed to us** and we become friends of God, having **peace with Him**, we then **respond in praise (vertically) and proclamation (horizontally)**. We worship God and witness to others. Praise and proclamation. Worship and witness.

This Christmas let's take some cues from these shepherds. Let us attentively watch and listen to God's revelation of Himself to us. And let's respond with an eager desire to know more, to search these things out. And as we give glory to God in the highest, as we glorify and praise God for all that we have heard and seen, let's also share these good tidings with the world around us that is so desperate for truly Good News.