

“Glory to God in the highest”

Luke 2:14

Advent Midweek I

December 6, 2023

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text and the focus of our meditation this Advent midweek season, the song of the angels on Christmas night... this evening, the first phrase of the refrain: “Glory to God in the highest”

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

One of the regular Advent sermon series I’ve included throughout the more than fifteen years here with you is a series on the Scripture’s divinely inspired Songs of the Season (and, if you haven’t been here the whole time, I’m sure in years to come we’ll go back and look at the other songs of the season again). The gospels – specifically Luke’s gospel – includes the actual text of a number of songs sung at the news of the finally-fulfilled coming of the Lord’s Christ. From Zechariah’s *Benedictus* to Mary’s *Magnificat* to Simeon’s *Nunc Dimittis* ... all sung by God’s faithful of old and joined in by the faithful throughout all generations and centuries. And, we’ve meditated upon these songs in these Advent midweek preparations for the Christmas proclamation renewed largely because – though commonly used by the Church – these songs’ texts are not commonly deeply meditated upon or understood by the faithful.

But, the last of the Songs of the Season is a song that is known so well that it is largely *misunderstood* or, at least, not meditated upon as it should be – almost breezed right past because of its familiarity! Certainly, the *heavenly hosts’ song* is the subject of many seasonal refrains – in our hymnal alone, two hymns are versifications of it, its phrases are used in at least six Christmas hymns, and the angelic scene is mentioned in *many* more of our 35 seasonal hymns. And, even secularly so, the refrain is popularly sung for the purpose of producing seasonal records and albums by celebrities who perhaps believe the good news, an industry that perhaps formerly believed the good news, or even a society that perhaps largely no longer believes the good news but recalls the words as a part of America’s “seasonal spirit of Christmas” (whatever that ‘Christmas’ means without joy at the historic incarnation of the Lord’s Christ).

But as these words famously ring out in the supposed-angelic voices of Nat King Cole, Bing Crosby, Kelly Clarkson, or Michael Buble... or even in the congregational singing of the liturgy’s *Gloria in Excelsis* on that Christmas morning after having been withheld for Advent... we might do well to ask whether we are properly understanding the divine depth of these words: “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, good will to men.”

That's how we know them, these divine words with which we are so familiar. And, recall, they are *divine* words. Keep in mind, angels are echoers just as much as they are messengers (a messenger does not bring his own words, but echoes the words he's been given); so, the angels eternally sing God's praise, but not with words that somehow originated with them... otherwise, they wouldn't be *messengers* but authors! No, they are messengers, they echo the words God gives them to report, the words He gives them to sing in right praise of His glory. So, if these are not merely words *about* God or *to* God, but also *from* God as authored *by* God, then we do well to meditate upon them more deeply than simply enjoying their familiar ring in the societal season of lights.

It's by far the *shortest* of the seasonal songs recorded in Luke's gospel, being only three phrases, which may actually be more properly understood as two. But, perhaps the brevity is fitting considering the divine weight of each word.

Tonight, we consider the first portion of this brief angelic song: "Glory to God in the highest" or, from the Greek, "Δοξα εν υψιστοις θεω."

The first word – glory, doxa – like "doxology." Doxology is a compilation of words that praise God, but the δοξα *belongs* to God. So, we are not adding to God's glory when we say "Glory be

to God on high” (or “Glory be to the Father...”), but we are acknowledging with right words of praise the glory that is naturally, essentially His. And, if the glory is His as a matter of natural essence, then all creation ought bend the knee and worship and praise Him, simply because He is. He is, and there is none other god. He is. “I AM,” He says of Himself – no descriptor needed. He simply “Is.” He who is, who was, who will be forever... and therefore to Him be the glory forever: “For Thine is the kingdom and the power and the δόξα forever.”

Before such glory, we sinners naturally ought be nothing short of terrified. Do not the shepherds stand stunned, “sore afraid” on behalf of all of us at merely being in the presence of the angels’ mere *reflection* of God’s glory? Same with the three disciples who crumple to nothing on the Mount of Transfiguration when the voice calls from heaven. There’s no misguided hope of the sinner’s self-justification or self-preservation when encountering the glory of God in his very nature and essence.

And yet, the angels sing not simply because God is, but because He has sent them to announce His great action. He is an active God, acting in human time to save the human race. “Glory to God” because God has kept His Word, kept His promise, fulfills his old covenant, sends His Christ to fulfill the vow made in the garden of the Fall. Whatever glory the devil sought to rob from

Him in that paradise lost is still His, His by His divine action – the Christ comes as God has promised.

And because this good news of the Christ's incarnation is what God glories in (it's what he planned as the breathtakingly tangible breaking into human time to save us... and so this good news is to God's glory, the glory to be praised by all the earth), therefore we hear this concept of "glory" attached to all that the Christ undertakes to fulfill the promise. Of his birth: "glory be to God on high." Of his active obedience and righteousness, "I have come down from heaven not to do my own will, but the will (the desire, the glory) of My Father." Of his suffering and death, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified" – and then he goes on to speak of his death – "What shall I say, 'Father, save me from this hour?' For this purpose I came to this hour. Father, glorify Thy name!"

And, if it is God's glory to fulfill his promise of the cross, then the victorious and risen and ascended Christ is "The King of glory": How does St Paul describe it of the victorious Christ, "He was believed on in the world, taken up into glory." Or, how does the hymnody confess it?: "risen, ascended, glorified." Or, how does Jesus himself say it as being the natural state of His rightful place upon the throne: "Father, glorify Me with the glory I had with you before the world existed."

And, thus, the One who was sent, the One who sent him, and the One who worked the miraculous virgin conception to effect the sending – the Triune God is to be praised as the owner of all glory. “Glory to God”, the angels sing.

But, woodenly in the Greek, the word order is slightly different, “Δοξα εν υψιστοις θεω” ... “Glory in the highest to God.”

To capture its true meaning, you must hear the following phrase, “and on earth peace.” If the incarnation of the Christ brings peace upon earth, it simultaneously bring glory to the highest places, where God reigns. As our liturgy paraphrases it, “Glory be to God on high” ... or, as on of Luther’s Christmas hymns says it, “Glory to God in highest heav’n.”

Yes, this is how marvelous the birth of Christ is. That even in the highest places of God’s reign, the birth of Christ (in a sense) adds to the glory. That’s saying something, when you consider that this same root word υψιστος is used by the angel Gabriel to tell the virgin Mary that the child will be the Son of the *Most High* God. “The highest” can refer to the rank of none other than God himself, as even the demons bends the knee, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?” So, if “the Most High” God is the one whose radiance brings glory to the highest places, how historically central – not only to *human* history – but

also the history of the everlasting throne room of God that the incarnation and birth of Christ would bring “Glory in the highest to God”! Glory because the incarnation and birth of Christ enacts God’s promise to save.

But, you are not saved simply by the Christ’s birth. The promise was, “The Seed of the woman will crush the serpent’s head; the serpent will crush his heel.” Victory not through birth, but through death. Therefore, by divine inspiration, the same refrain rises again when this same Jesus “conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary” also goes to suffer under Pontius Pilate, be crucified, and die. As Jesus rides into Jerusalem, this same gospel account of St Luke records the same refrain wafting to the heavens, “Blessed [be] the Coming One... glory in the highest.” – δοξα εν υψιστοις.

May we never again consider these two heavenly hymns to be independent of one another – as if the one on Christmas night long forgotten by the time Jesus gets to the gates of Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. No, never again consider them independent of one another. In order for God’s promises to be fulfilled and for all glory to be His as the Savior of His creation, the Christ must be incarnate and born, and the Christ must process to die. And in that earthly life of Christ, “glory in the highest to God.”

And yet, if – in our meditation upon such wondrous mysteries – we wanted to meditate upon how God treats the co-dependent bookends (Christmas and Holy Week) of the Christ’s mission *differently*, perhaps we do well to consider that in Christ’s Palm Sunday procession the angels are nowhere to be found. As our hymn says it, “While weeping angels hid their eyes, this Priest became a sacrifice.” Christ alone is the sin-bearer who goes to the cross to be forsaken by His Father and be the substitute sacrifice for you and for me. What a veiled and solemn glory belongs to the cross.

But to the birth, unveiled glory... so much so that, even beyond Isaiah’s or Jacob’s vision of the angels of heaven, this is the only occasion – none like it before, none like it after – where the whole hosts of heaven are revealed to the men of earth.

And yet, we know – from this moment in human history – that the angels are there singing, continually singing to the One they will accompany when He returns upon the clouds to judge the living and the dead. Yes, they are even now singing his glories, singing his praises, alongside you and me as each Sunday the incarnation of Christ is celebrated – not merely as a distant historical night – but is celebrated as the purpose of the Divine Service... for the incarnate Christ to again come among His people and give them all the benefits that God purposed to give you



when He sent His Son into the virgin's womb, sent Him in procession to the cross, sent Him as that Chosen One for the Chosen mission of saving His people from their sins and thus bringing 'glory to God in the highest.'

In the Name of the Father  
And of the Son  
And of the Holy Spirit.  
+ AMEN +

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