

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 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 above for several minutes just 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 God's unfathomable bigness and the incredible smallness of you and me. I'm quite certain the shepherds near Bethlehem who witnessed countless angels and heard them proclaim Jesus' birth on the night of His birth felt very small indeed. They experienced up close and personal God's immeasurable bigness of that first Christmas night. What those shepherds heard that night is one of four poems found in the first two chapters of the Gospel of Luke. For this Advent season, we're calling them "The Canticles of the Christ Child." At some point in time, all four were probably set to music and sung by the first Christians as part of their worship experience. Years later, each song or poem was given a Latin name.

Today, I want us to meditate on a brief, angelic proclamation called "The Gloria in Excelsis" – Latin for "glory in the highest." Two weeks ago, we considered "The Magnificat" – Latin for "magnify" – which was credited to Mary, Jesus' mother. Last week we reflected on "The Benedictus" – Latin for "blessed" – which was attributed to Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist. Next week, I want us to spend some time thinking about "The Nunc Dimittis" – a Latin phrase translated as "now let you depart" – which came from Simeon, the old man Mary and Joseph met in the Temple in Jerusalem after Jesus' birth. But today let's think about "The Gloria in Excelsis." Let's read it the Bible. I believe that brief statement tells us something important about Christmas in at least two ways. First...

CHRISTMAS REVEALS WHAT GOD IS LIKE.

"Glory." If there was even a quintessential Bible word, it's got to be that one – "glory." "Glory to God in the highest." (Luke 2:13 NIV) What in the world does "glory" mean? As I understand it, the root concept has to do with something having weight or substance. When you think of glory like that, you could say that many of us are being sorely tempted to add some "glory" – some weight or substance – to our waistlines 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 to be wonderful about God, awe-inspiring about God, or magnificent about Him is part and parcel of His glory.

For example, we can experience His glory in and through His attributes. God is omnipotent (all-powerful), omniscient (all-knowing), and omnipresent (everywhere at the

same time). He is eternal meaning He never had a beginning and He will never come to an end. He was never born and He will never die. We can experience God's glory in His character. He is faithful, truthful, loving, and merciful. We can experience God's glory in His creative power. One reason I enjoy nature shows is because they reveal yet another aspect of God's glory to me. The natural world around us is full of a supernatural beauty and complexity that can only be attributed to a glorious Creator. We can even experience God's 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. God's glory is anything and everything that makes God impressive to you.

When the angels proclaimed, "Glory to God in the highest," what did they mean by "in the highest"? "The highest" probably points to a location. It probably means Heaven here. So, it means "glory to God in the greatest place that exists" – Heaven itself. But the phrase "in the highest" can also refer to a specific demonstration of God's glory. So, the angels were also saying that by sending Jesus into the world, God permits you and me to observe the highest or greatest demonstrations of His glory. In other words, Jesus is the most significant demonstration of God's glory. The act of sending Jesus into the world – more than any other – reveals what God is like. 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 great heart. Sending Jesus reveals that God is fundamentally merciful and gracious. He doesn't give us what we deserve (mercy), but instead He gives us what we don't deserve (grace). Sending Jesus to us reveals that God is – today and forever – for you and me and not against us. This is what makes God's glory glorious! There is no more magnificent, marvelous, or impressive aspect of Almighty God than Jesus and the sending of Jesus into this world.

How many of you have played the game "Pictionary"? That's the 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. There's one story of a family gathered around the kitchen table playing a homemade version of "Pictionary." It was Christmas time, so the family had created holiday phrases that everyone would then try to draw clues about to help everyone else guess the right answer. Nine year old Sarah picked the phrase we're considering today – "Glory to God in the highest." How would you illustrate that concept? What would you draw? Pretty tough, yes? How would you draw "glory" or "in the highest"? Sarah decided to focus on the word "God" instead. She drew a human form with a face, arms, and legs. Then she added large hands with nail prints in the palms. She drew Jesus to convey the idea of God. I don't know if that helped anyone come up with "Glory to God in the highest," but Sarah couldn't have been more accurate biblically. The single most impressive thing about God is Jesus! Jesus reveals fully – in the highest, greatest, most profound, and most complete way – the glory of God. At Christmas, you and I are able to see what God is like. But "The Gloria in Excelsis" tells us even more about what Christmas reveals. Second...

CHRISTMAS REVEALS WHAT I HAVE BEEN GIVEN.

“And on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.” (Luke 2:14 NIV) That’s the second part of the angels’ proclamation. That compact phrase actually tells us about two awesome things you and I have been given. First of all, because Jesus came into the world, it’s now clear 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 original audience for the angelic proclamation underlines this truth. You might know that shepherds back 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 considered kind of dirty, unacceptable, and look down upon. No one would have thought shepherds were a likely group to receive a visit and a message from a bunch of angels! But isn’t that just like God? He has this wonderful tendency to extend grace – His favor - to the people and to the groups out there who seem least deserving and even to work through folk we would never select or think of as being worthy.

Why does God’s favor rest on you and me today? It’s not because you’re a good person, because the fact is you’re just not that good. Neither am I. It’s not because you’re such a moral person, because the fact is you’re just 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 eternal judgment. It’s the same for me. There’s an old Dennis the Menace cartoon that depicts Dennis and his little buddy, Joey, leaving the Wilsons’ house next door with some delicious 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 would have made a great theologian!

God’s grace – His favor – is just like that. It’s not something you earn. It’s not something you deserve. It’s never something you’re entitled to receive. God gives it you not because you’re nice, but because He’s nice. God gives you His grace not because you’re good, but because He’s good. And you receive it – you get it – but reaching out and claiming by something the Bible calls faith. You believe God offers you His grace. You believe you desperately need His grace personally. You believe His grace is provided to you through His Son, Jesus, when you put your faith in what Jesus did for you. You then reach out by faith, accept His grace, and show your gratitude for His favor by letting the Holy Spirit transform your attitudes and actions as you live out your life before Him. You are a grace receiver. Has that happened to you?

Now when you receive God’s grace, you discover the second thing you’ve been given. Because Jesus came into the world, you are a peace possessor. Let me try and clear up an old misunderstanding right here. 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 KJV) It sounds there like the angels are promising some future time of universal peace and brotherhood. That’s likely why every Christmas season you hear people make this sentimental, vague sort of connection between Christmas and world peace. It’s as if Jesus’ birth is supposed to somehow – in and of itself – get people, armies, and governments to stop fighting each other magically. If that was the real intent behind what the angels said that first Christmas night, it’s turned out to be a prophetic failure. The century we’re in now is still on the young side, but the

previous century – the 20th century – was the bloodiest in human history. At least 86 million people died in 20th century conflicts. Another 120 million died from government sponsored genocide and mass murder the 20th century. I don't see much reason to be more optimistic about "world peace" after living through the first 21 years of this century.

But was that really what the angels were predicting? 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 a good one, but not as good as what's available to scholars today. Many more ancient Greek copies of the Bible have been discovered since 1611 which makes it possible to have a much more accurate translation of the Bible today. One example of that is Luke 2:14. Without boring you with all the subtle differences found in Greek words and grammar, I suggest that more modern versions provide a more accurate translation of what in fact the angels said that first Christmas night. For example, the New International Version puts it like this, "And on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests." (Luke 2:14 NIV) The New Living Translation renders it like this, "And peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased." (Luke 2:14 NLT) Now, that's a very different idea than associating Jesus' birth with universal world peace. The angels never promised peace to people everywhere just because Jesus was born. Instead, peace is offered to people who are object of God's favor – His saving grace. Peace is offered to people who now have a restored relationship with God – people with whom God is pleased.

The meaning of the word "peace" in what the angels said points to salvation. They could have just as easily have said, "Glory to God in the highest and on earth salvation (peace) to those on whom His favor rests" (Luke 2:14 NIV) or "Glory to God in the highest heaven and salvation (peace) on earth to those with whom God is pleased." (Luke 2:14 NLT) It's always been helpful to me to think about God's peace in two distinct but related ways. First, there is peace with God. The Bible makes it clear every person is born with a sin nature which means we come into the world with a kind of hostility toward God. We don't automatically acknowledge God or accept His reign and rule over our lives. From birth, we inherit a complex but broken relationship with God. You may not even be aware of this antagonism towards God consciously, but it's definitely there, nonetheless. Any and every act of sin is an expression of that hostility towards God. But when you accept the fact of your sinfulness, ask for His forgiveness, and accept by faith Jesus' gracious payment of the debt of your sins through His death and resurrection, that's when you begin to 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." (Rom. 5:1 NLT). The first part of being a peace possessor is experiencing peace with God.

But, secondly, there's also the peace of God. This is a deeper dimension of God's peace He wants all of His children to experience. There's a vital connection between peace with God and the peace of God. On the one hand, you can only ever experience the peace of God when you have first experienced peace with God. When a new person I've only just met tells me that he or she is filled with anxiety and worry, I want to find out if they're truly a follower of Jesus. If Jesus isn't yet your Savior and Lord, it's

not really surprising you struggle with chronic anxiety and worry. Your inner turmoil might be God's way of letting you know something is desperately wrong. The peace of God is contingent on you first experiencing peace with God. But, on the other hand, just because you have peace with God doesn't automatically mean you possess the peace of God, does it? You can be born again spiritually, have faith in Jesus, and love Him sincerely, but still be enslaved to anxiety, worry, and all kinds of fear. God wants you to have His peace – the peace of God – as a daily experience. One of my favorite Bible verses tells me it is God's will that I experience His peace day in and day out. "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." (Ph. 4:6-7 NLT) Being a peace possessor also means I'm invited to experience the peace of God every day and all day.

Sometimes keeping a hold of the peace of God can be elusive. How can you and I do it? I believe it involves doing some things on a regular – maybe even on a daily – basis. Sometimes they're called spiritual disciplines. Thank God consciously every day that He loved you enough to make peace with you through Jesus. Confess your sins to Him every day. Soak yourself in His Word and practice prayer every day. Worship Him with His people often and regularly. Resist anxiety and refuse to let it become your master. Surrender your future to the Lord. Share your struggles with people who love God, too. Release your past with all of its hurts and its failures to the healing power of the Holy Spirit who now lives within you. Quit focusing on yourself and reach out to someone else in the name of Jesus. Count your blessing. Keep on giving as much of what you know about yourself to as much as you know about God. When you live like that day in and day out, you will become - and stay - a peace possessor.

During World War 2, a woman by the name of Anne went to live with her parents in Texas along with her two small sons. Her Air Force husband was serving over in Europe. It was Christmas time. Anne and her parents were doing everything possible to make it a memorable, joyful Christmas for those two boys. They got a tree, put it up and decorated it. Gifts were bought and hidden away until the big day. The excitement, the thrill, and the beauty of the season seemed to push aside the anxiety and the pain of war for a little while. But, sadly, not for very long. Just a week before Christmas Day, word arrived that Anne's husband and the father of those two small boys would not be home for Christmas that year or any Christmas 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. Eventually, Anne came out of her bedroom and saw the empty place where the Christmas tree had been. She asked, "Why, Mom and Dad? What have you done with the tree?" Her mother said, "Your dad and I threw it out. It seemed so out of place with you being so broken-hearted." But Anne said, "Oh, but, Mom, let's bring it back in. Christmas was made for such times as this!" Indeed it was and it still is.

If the deepest meaning of Christmas is some kind of shallow, nameless happiness – a vague hope that universal peace will just break out magically – then you can take it or leave it. But if Christmas reveals what God is like and if Christmas reveals what you and I have been given, then let's celebrate it again with great joy this year! Yes, there is much that is wrong in our world today. A pandemic rages on. There are wars and rumors of wars. There is much hatred and evil. And there may well be some deep hurts in your own life today. Well, the greater the wrongs in this world and the deeper the hurt in your life, the more reason exists to rejoice in Jesus this Christmas season. Shall we celebrate Christmas this year? Yes, of course we should celebrate Christmas because Jesus was born for such a time as this.