

Glory in the Manger

Luke 2:1-20

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It is the 300th anniversary of the writing of *Joy to the World* by Isaac Watts. Think of all the terrible things that have happened in the last 300 years, yet we still sing "*Joy to the World! the Lord is come:/Let earth receive her king.*"¹ It plays over our heads as we shop in the stores. It is the front of many a Christmas card. Not many songs last three centuries. Here's to another 300.

Our church is in a wonderful teaching series from the book of Romans. Last week, we looked at 11:36 which is a kind of summary statement for all that God has done, is doing, and will do: "*For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.*" (Romans 11:36 ESV)

All things from, through, and to him. God is the creator, sustainer, and endgame for all things, all people, all history, all, all, all. This little verse unveils God's overarching purpose in all that he does, "*to him be glory.*"

What is Glory?

The Bible uses the term in two ways, both of which are prominent in the birth story of Jesus.

Glory as the worth of an infinite God

This is the most common use of the word glory. "*To him be glory*" is to say, to God be all the acclaim, all the praise. He alone is worthy of all the glory. Think of how someone accepts an Oscar award. *I'd like to acknowledge the contribution of my team, my producers, my parents, my wife...* What are they doing? They are acknowledging that getting this honor is really a group effort. A team thing. They are not solely credited for it.

Look at how someone accepts an Oscar versus someone who gives their life for their country in war. To do so is to say that my country is worth so much to me that I will lay my life down. The worth, the glory, the life of my country is my highest goal. All to God's glory is like the posthumous Medal of Honor winner.

God's glory is like that overarching treasure from whom, through whom, and to whom are all things.

Glory light as the visible expression of infinite worth: brilliant

The other use of glory is describing the light of God's presence and the light of God's worth. How would you describe the sun? Huge. Hot. Center of our solar system. The sun is a big deal. The light of the sun emanates and displays the power of the sun; the glory of the sun. Kind of like that, God's worth emanates visibly in glory light. Powerful. Brilliant. Dazzling. And for humans, terrifying. Listen for both as we look at the birth narrative in Luke. Glory in the night. Glory in the song. Glory in the manger.

¹ Isaac Watts, "Joy to the World," 1719.

"In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn." (Luke 2:1-7)

Our focus is the angels and the shepherds and the baby, but this sets the stage. Where do we see glory here? It's man's glory on display—Caesar's attempt at glory by counting and taxing and advancing his kingdom. One of the great ironies in Jesus' birth is that Caesar's census and self-worship creates the very context for a Bethlehem birth, prophetic fulfillment, and Jesus' identity as manger-born. If he had been born in Nazareth he wouldn't have been laid in a manger. He wouldn't have fulfilled Micah's prophecy. Can God use politicians and political theater to accomplish his purposes? He certainly did here. A good thing to keep in mind given the political drama these days. All for him includes flawed government too.

Glory in the Night (Brilliant)

"And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, 'Fear not, for behold, 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 this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.'" (Luke 2:8-12)

This famous part of the story introduces anonymous angels and anonymous shepherds. We are not told if this angel is Gabriel or not; it could be as he is prominent in the story as the primary angel messenger.

Then we have the now famous shepherds. These watchers of sheep are outside Bethlehem, the hometown of the most famous shepherd of all, David. Bethlehem is forever connected to David and the generational son of David—Jesus. But our focus is on glory today, not profiling these characters in the story.

Its nighttime. What do shepherds and sheep do at night? The same thing we do—snooze and sleep. It is a peaceful scene. Then suddenly, the supernatural explodes in the night sky. An angel appears. Note, *"and the glory of the Lord shone around them."* Who is the "them"? We typically envision the angels surrounded in glory light, but it says the glory of the Lord shone around the shepherds. They are suddenly enveloped with the light of the glory of God.

You know what it's like when you are in bed and someone suddenly turns the lights on? Shocking. Only Westinghouse lumens don't compare to the glory light of God. They were terrified. It was shocking to say the least. Even more shocking than the glory light is the glorious news:

"Fear not, for behold, 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." (Luke 2:10-11)

The first gospel missionary is an angel, and his congregation is a few shepherds and sheep. We don't know what the sheep thought, but the shepherds were amazed.

So where is the glory here? Glory light shone around them and a glorious message was given of a Savior born. The angels aren't done. *"And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!'"* (Luke 2:13-14)

Glory in the Song (Adoration)

It doesn't say how many angels. The Greek word is the root of our English word *plethora*. "A large multitude." NIV translates it, "a great company." If one angel is shocking enough, a sky filled with them only added to the sound and light display. What did they do?

They praised God. We assume they sang. The word can mean "sing" but also "speak" or perhaps "chant;" dare I say, rap? We will put that in the unlikely column. We don't know the melody, but we do know the message: *"Glory to God in the highest!"*

This is an interesting Trinitarian moment for such a statement. Why? They are praising God in the highest. Highest is a reference to that loftiest place. Trinitarianly speaking, who isn't in that loftiest place? The second person of the Trinity. We may clarify their statement this way, Glory to God the Father in the highest. Why? Because Jesus is lying in a manger over in Bethlehem.

If they were praising Jesus at this moment, they would have to sing, *Glory to God in the lowest*, for there was no lower place of dignity on earth that Jesus could be than in a stable, in a manger, as a helpless baby.

So, the angels praise God the Father in the highest. Who is charged with praising God in the lowest? The people who, socially speaking, shared Jesus' low estate—shepherds.

Glory in the Shepherds (Amazement)

Because of their reputation for exercising the 5-finger discount, shepherds were generally ostracized. Their duties kept them from temple worship, which only made them more suspect. If God was trying to create an impressive guest list for the birthday party of Jesus, he would never have invited shepherds. You'd want a priest; a Levite. And of course, a senior pastor. You don't invite the guys who make everyone want to hide the silverware. So why shepherds? We actually don't know. Perhaps as a tip of the hat to the legacy of David the shepherd? Jesus fulfills being the shepherd of Psalm 23, so these shepherds came to see The Shepherd.

Most likely, is that if God had made the invite list of the rich and famous, normal people like us may wonder if Jesus came for common folk, even sinners. So, inviting the bottom of the ladder, it assures us no matter where we are on the ladder, Jesus came for us too.

After the shepherds hear the angelic announcement, they huddle and say, "let's go see this." Off they go, and then a star appears in the sky and they follow the star to the stable where Jesus was. Did I get that right? No? There's no star for the shepherds. How did they

find Jesus in Bethlehem? The answer? They asked around. *Did anyone see a pregnant woman around here? Anyone seen a baby in some manger anywhere?* Someone pointed them to one particular stable and there they arrived about the same time as the wise men. Did I get that right? No. The wise men don't show up for until two years later, so please remove them from your nativity sets or buy an older looking Jesus.

Where do we see glory with the shepherds?

"And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them." (Luke 2:17-20)

Like the angels, the shepherds are filled with wonder that overflows with glorifying and praising God. We don't know if they were singing, praying, dancing, crying, or some combination of all those. What would you be doing if you had just met Jesus?

Christian, do you remember how you responded when you first met Jesus? If you are a Christian, spiritually speaking, you had your own manger moment. You saw Jesus by faith exactly as the angels described him, *"a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."* While celebrating Christmas isn't mandated in Scripture, one blessing with Christmas is that it takes us back to our own manger moment when we, like the shepherds, first encountered the Son of God.

Let's take our cues this year from the shepherds: God help us to once again this year respond to the manger by *glorifying and praising God for all we have heard and seen.*

Glory in the Manger

Like anything that involves a baby, the focus here isn't the angels, the shepherds, even Mary and Joseph; all our attention should be on this baby.

"And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child." (Luke 2:16-17)

We are told surprisingly little. No height or weight given. No color of eyes or hair. We know Mary and Joseph are there. That's to be expected. Parents of newborns, especially firstborns, are very attentive to the child. Other than that, all we have is his crib; a manger. As you may know, this was a feeding trough for animals. It was not exactly the most hygienically clean spot for a baby. For how many years had this feeding trough had the rather gross experience of feeding animals?

When we go to the orchard or petting zoo, my girls want to feed the goats or whatever. One second after they're done, we are slathering on the anti-bacterial soap. We use words like "icky" to describe the licking tongues of goats and cows. There, in that icky place, lay the Creator of the universe. The Lord of glory. In that icky place,

- *"He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. (Hebrews 1:3)*
- *"He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones*

or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” (Colossians 1:15–17)

Did the shepherds adequately realize who he was? They couldn't, and he is far greater than we begin to realize too. But the little they did understand produced praise and glory to God that made its way into Scripture and has been talked about now for 2,000 years.

Isn't this the marvel of Christmas? That one so glorious, powerful—the infinite God—is now in creation, in human flesh, and of all places on earth, in a goat-feeding manger? We humans can't grasp such glory in a normal looking baby. Before Jesus, artists' rendering of Roman or Greek gods would include a halo over their head. This signified glory or deity—wrongly of course—but artists and painters for centuries used that same technique over the head of Jesus even as a baby. At his birth, the only glory light was out in the fields when the angels appeared. Do you know what Jesus looked like in that manger? He looked like a normal baby. There was no glory light filling the stable. There was no halo over his head. And yes, despite what the song says, he cried. He needed a diaper. He was as normal as normal could be.

AND he was simultaneously upholding the galaxies by his power and might.

We are more comfortable with that in the adult Jesus because we see him silencing the storm and raising the dead. But the baby Jesus was every bit as much omnipotent God as the Jesus at Lazarus' tomb.

Here is the true glory in the manger. Not a light show. Not a song. Not angels. Not shepherds. The glory in the manger was WHO he is.

*"Veiled in flesh the Godhead see
Hail the incarnate deity."²*

The One who deserved glory in the highest had taken the position of the lowest. The angels say, *Glory to God in the highest*. When we understand Christmas we sing, *Glory to God in the lowest*.³ And down in that place of humility Jesus brings hope to humanity. Who is lower and weaker than a baby in a feeding trough?

Where are you? What's your place? What's your social standing? We have people across the spectrum, the rich and poor, the influential and the not, the high and mighty and the low and not so mighty. Why did Jesus start in the lowest place? Invite the shepherds? Cry his first cry in such a humble and forgettable place? Place his precious head on the hay of horses? So that none of us need question if Jesus came for me.

There's no light. No angels. No song. No trumpets. No throne. No sea of glass. No seraphim chanting *Holy, Holy, Holy*. None of the accoutrements to Jesus' true identity.

But there was divine glory in that manger. Cloaked in a baby. Hidden from human eyes. *Veiled in flesh the Godhead see*. Friend, today, do you see his glory? Can you believe in his mission? Can you trust in his eventual death on the cross for our sins? Is he your Savior?

² Charles Wesley, "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing," 1739.

³ See Glen Scrivener, "Glory to God in the Highest," www.thegospelcoalition.org, December 11, 2019.

Last Sunday I met a man whose wife had prayed for him for many, many years. God had touched his heart and he came and shared with me that now he is a Christian. I smiled and said, "your first Christmas as a Christian." What a joy. The first Christmas seeing glory in the manger.

For many of us, it's not our first Christmas. What should we do? Take our cues from the first Christmas. The angels? *Adoration*. The Shepherds? *Amazement*. Mary? *Treasured these things*. Adoration. Amazement. And a sense of wonder and glory that treasures Jesus' birth as true glory in the manger.

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