

“GLORIA IN EXCELSIS DEO”
Christmas Eve 2024
Luke 2:14

There is a legend that says that years after that first Christmas, a group of older shepherds are gathered around a fire, trying to remember the song the angels sang. They'd witnessed the miracle, but now, years later, the melody and lyrics seem to slip away. They strain their memories, frustration growing.

Suddenly, a lamb bleats in the distance. One has wandered off. A moment of hesitation passes. Who will leave the warmth of the fire and brave the cold, dark night to find it? Then, a young boy, too young to have seen the angels that first Christmas, rises from the fire. He heads out into the darkness, determined.

He finds the lost lamb and gently carries it back towards the warmth of the fire. As he walks, a melody begins to hum in his mind – a tune his father had shared, a song his father claimed to have heard on that very first Christmas night. It was the song of the angels, passed down through generations, kept alive by a young boy's courage and a father's memory.

The song? “Gloria in Excelsis Deo!” “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased.”

Tonight, we've stepped outside our familiar lives to seek echoes of the song that first filled the night sky. We long to share in the shepherds' awe, to feel the tremor of fear that must have gripped them, and most importantly, to hear the Good News that transformed their world.

We can't truly grasp the depth of their experience. Their fear, their wonder, their complete unknowing – it's a world away from ours. They faced the unknown, a future shrouded in mystery. We, on the other hand, carry the weight of centuries of understanding. We know the story. We know the ending.

But one truth remains constant, bridging the gap between their time and ours: the 'Good News' itself. The message proclaimed to those shepherds echoes through the ages, reaching us tonight. 'Fear not,' the angel declared, 'for I bring you good tidings of great joy, which will be for all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.'

To grasp the significance of this announcement, consider this: in the Middle East, the birth of a son was cause for great celebration. Friends of the family would often hire musicians to visit the home, filling the air with joyful music to welcome the newborn. The angels, sent by God himself, were the ultimate musicians, their song a celestial serenade announcing the arrival of the most extraordinary child.

Mary and Joseph, however, were far from home when the time for Jesus' birth arrived. No one, not even their closest friends, knew she had given birth, let alone where to find them.

But the angels knew. While the world slumbered, oblivious to the unfolding of eternity, this celestial choir remained vigilant, fulfilling a divine appointment that had been set in motion from the dawn of creation.

Heaven and Earth – two realms typically separated by an unbridgeable chasm. We rarely glimpse beyond the veil. Rarely, someone like Isaiah or John is taken up to heaven and sees what's going on up there.

We may sometimes have a feeling that those in heaven are able to look down and see us, and what we're doing. And we can't help but wonder sometimes what they must think as they watch us go about our daily routines. We can't help but wonder what thoughts pass through their minds as they witness our daily struggles and triumphs. How often do they lament and shake their head and say, 'if they only knew how meaningless and temporary are the things they devote so much time and attention to and how clueless they are of the truly meaningful, eternal things that all around them.'

But here, in this field just outside of Bethlehem, heaven and earth are come together into one. It's a new heaven and a new earth, where the boundary line between the two is momentarily removed. Heaven touches earth and earth is all wrapped up in heaven, and men see angels with their two, earthly eyes and hear them with their two, earthly ears.

And how fitting that heaven and earth should be so closely mingled like this at the birth of Jesus. For this child is none other than "God in the highest." He, who eternally reigns at the Father's right hand in the heavenly realms, has entered our human domain. Heaven has come to dwell among us, clothed in human flesh.

And why is this happening? What cosmic purpose lies behind it? God has come into this world to bring "Peace on earth among those with whom he is pleased."

Ever since the fall out between man and God in the Garden, there's been an atmosphere of hostility between heaven and earth.

Adam, doubting God's intentions, chose disobedience, leading to his expulsion from paradise.

A bitter tension arose, a constant undercurrent of distrust and resentment. God, yearning for humanity's return, pleaded, 'Why do you not live as holy as I, your Creator intended?' But humanity, overwhelmed by the divine standard, cried out in despair, 'Your expectations are impossible! We can never truly please you.' This fractured relationship, this constant state of spiritual warfare, inevitably spilled over into every facet of human existence – marriages, families, communities, and even nations."

He comes to usher in an era of peace, a peace that extends to every human soul, from the first to the last. And here's how he'll reconcile God to man and turn the heart of man to love God. He'll be the whipping boy for you and take all of the wrath and punishment that the Father has towards you for your sins upon Himself. And He will be the perfect man before the Father, the man with whom the Father is "well pleased." He will declare an end to the hostility and warfare between God and man by making peace in his human flesh.

Be careful that you don't get the wrong idea of the Father here. Don't think Him as a grouchy old man who, with back turned and arms crossed gives into the pleading of His Son to cool down and be nice.

No, the Father, in his boundless love for the world, for you, sent his beloved Son. This act of sacrificial love, the cornerstone of the Christian faith, reveals the profound unity of the Trinity. God the Father, so loved the world, He so loved you that He sent His only-begotten Son into this world so that all who believe in Him would not perish but have eternal life. This is the Trinity in Unity at work here.

Jesus is God's great Christmas present was not placed UNDER the tree, but was hung on a tree. He is crucified for a "peace on earth" that is like no peace this world can give. "Peace I give to you. My peace I give to you." (John 14:27) This peace, a gift of divine grace, becomes ours through faith in Christ. "Therefore since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord, Jesus Christ." (Rom.5:1).

This is the glorious message that this angel choir sang for the lowly shepherds on that first Christmas night. And it is the message that's sung to us this night as well. Overwhelmed with joy and faith, the shepherds hastened to worship the newborn king – the God-man who bridged the chasm between heaven and earth.

Martin Luther recounted the Christmas story to his children and offered this bit of reflection: "If I had been one of those shepherds, I wouldn't have believed. If I'd been God and wanted to save the world, I wouldn't have done it that way. I would have just called in the devil and twisted his nose and said, "Let my people go!" But God is amazing. He sends a little baby, as weak as an earthworm, lying in the feedbox of a donkey, and that little baby crunches the devil's back and overcomes all the power of Hell, and sin, and death.

The shepherds went to Bethlehem, and when they found the baby they knelt in worship. Overwhelmed by this divine encounter, they couldn't contain their joy. They spread the Good News far and wide, sharing the miracle with everyone they met.

And then we read, "And the shepherds returned..." ...And where to? Returned to their ordinary lives, to the familiar rhythm of their work – tending their flocks. A seemingly mundane return, yet a profoundly significant one. For in their everyday lives, they carried the radiance of that holy night, their hearts forever changed.

This is the sacred story that fathers and mothers are entrusted to share with their children, lest the echoes of that first Christmas night over 2000 years ago fade into oblivion. We, regardless of our age, remain children in God's eyes, ever in need of this timeless story, a reminder of the divine love that never ceases to amaze.

"Gloria in Excelsis Deo!" "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased." Amen.