

## Gloria - The Angels' Song - Luke 2:8-20

### Scripture Reading: Psalm 148:1-14

#### Introduction

Most of you are familiar with the animated movie "A Charlie Brown Christmas" that first aired on December 9, 1965  
I don't know if it still plays each year but when I was a kid it was an annual event at our house

I'm sure you'll remember how Charlie Brown is given the job of finding a Christmas tree suitable for the kids' Christmas pageant and how he came back with a scrawny little tree that was more a branch than an actual tree

And how the other kids got on his case for it causing Charlie Brown to exclaim to Linus

"I guess you were right, Linus. I shouldn't have picked this little tree. Everything I do turns into a disaster. I guess I really don't know what Christmas is all about. Isn't there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?"

And Linus replied, "Sure, Charlie Brown, I can tell you what Christmas is all about."

Walking to center stage Linus then asked for the house lights to be dimmed and the spotlight to be shone on him and he began to recite Luke 2:8-14 from the King James Version of the Bible [Linus]

*And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.*

*And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.*

*And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.*

*For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.*

*And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.*

*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, good will toward men.*

Then Linus picked up his blanket and walked back across the stage to where Charlie Brown was standing and said, "That's what Christmas is all about, Charlie Brown." [linusandcharliebrown]

What you may not be aware of is that the producers argued that Linus' speech was "too religious for television" and might offend the viewers so they tried to convince the creator of Peanuts, Charles Schulz, to cut the scene

Schulz remained adamant, however, and what many people consider the greatest minute in animation history survived

I'm not sure that Linus' speech would survive if the cartoon special were being made today

But that *is* what Christmas is all about - or what Christmas *should* be all about anyway

And what Linus quoted contains our third uncommon Christmas carol - the angels' song from Luke 2:10-14

In liturgical circles, the song is known as *Gloria in Excelsis Deo* which, again are the first words of verse 14 in Latin which, in English, translate to "Glory to God in the highest"

This is the best known of the Christmas songs found in Luke's gospel and the song, which is found in verse 14, is by far the shortest of the songs and it's still the shortest even when we consider the entire message the angel brought

The message and song contain a great many wonderful truths as it really is the message of Christmas

As we look at the song this morning we are first going to consider the **audience** of the song

Then we will take a look at the **message** of the song

And, lastly, we will look at the **reaction** provoked by the song

So let's begin by first looking at the audience of the angels' message and song

## **I. The Audience**

And who God decided to give the message to is somewhat surprising

We readily understand why the angel Gabriel came to Mary and Zechariah with a message from God and we aren't surprised at all that

After all, they were major players in the unfolding drama

But in **Luke 2:8-10** we read -

*And in the same region [the area around Bethlehem] 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."*

We have a rather nostalgic idea of shepherds today as strong loners who got to work outside but who were also tender and loving toward their sheep as they looked after and protected them

And that's a true picture to a point and shepherding wasn't always considered a lowly task in Israel

After all, Abel, Moses, and King David were all shepherds at one time

But by the time of Jesus' birth, shepherding had changed dramatically from being a family business to be proud of to a despised occupation

And being a shepherd was not something anyone would aspire to as shepherds were truly social outcasts

Shepherds generally didn't have much, if any, schooling and were, therefore, considered to be ignorant illiterates

Their work often brought them into contact with the bodies of dead animals and kept them from strict observance of religious practices making them often ceremonially unclean and kept them out of the temple worship

And living outdoors with sheep meant that they could be rather dirty, unkempt, and, shall we say, odorous

Let's just say they weren't on anyone's guest list when it came time to send out party invitations

I worked for one summer on a hog farm when I was laid off and after a time, and, after a while, I took on the smell of the hog farm - especially when I began to sweat

The problem was, I was used to the smell and didn't even notice it, but I knew there was a problem when my friends started looking at me oddly and standing away from me at gatherings

I can only imagine how it was with shepherds who didn't have modern bathing facilities

Shepherds were considered to be a wild bunch and somewhat lawless as they were often accused of grazing their sheep on land they had no rights to

In fact, they were deemed to be so untrustworthy their testimony wasn't even allowed in a court of law

No one in those days thought God would be interested in shepherds or that shepherds would be interested in God

But God chose this group of lowly shepherds, those religious outcasts, to be the first hearers of the gospel of Christmas

And there they were, it was pitch dark and they were doing their job of keeping watch, or guarding their sheep, when all of a sudden, an angel appeared before them and they were engulfed in the light of God's own majesty

When the Lord intercepted Saul on the road to Damascus he later described the experience in **Acts 26:13** -

*At midday, O king, I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, that shone around me and those who journeyed with me.*

Is it any wonder our text describes the shepherds as being "filled with fear"? I mean, who wouldn't be?

Fear is the typical, and perfectly understandable, response when fallen men encounter the glory of God

But the angel immediately commanded them to stop being afraid because he brought a message from God that would bring joy first to all of Israel - the original scope of the message was that God was fulfilling his promise to Abraham

But, as we know, the message was good news for all mankind as God extended salvation to all nations through the Seed of Abraham

Literally what the angel said was, "I evangelize good news to you"

Let's look next at this message of "good news" that brings "great joy" to all mankind

## **II. The Message**

We find the message of good news - the very meaning of Christmas - in verse 11 [Luke 2:11]

*For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.*

Let's break that message apart because it contains great truths that we can easily over look

First, this was a real, historical event that happened, as we read in the opening verses of chapter 2, on the occasion of a census when Caesar Augustus was the Roman emperor and Quirinius was governor of Syria

For centuries, Israel had waited and longed for the Messiah to come and now the wait was over

The angel announced that this day

A real day in history; day planned for all eternity, before the fall of man, even before the creation of the universe

On this day the fullness of time had finally come and [Galatians 4:4-5]

*God had sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.*

This day was the fulfillment of the plan of God as the era of Messianic salvation and reconciliation was ushered in

Next we see the location of this birth was "the city of David" or Bethlehem which is about six miles southwest of Jerusalem

We read in **1Samuel 17:12** that David was the son of Jesse who dwelt in Bethlehem which means that when David was a shepherd he was tending his father's sheep in the same area as these shepherds who the angel appeared to

Most people would have said that Jerusalem was the city of David since he had been king there

But David would have been a hometown hero to the shepherds making the title "the city of David" much more significant to them than if the angel had simply said "Bethlehem"

And in **Micah 5:2** we read the prophecy:

*But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.*

And that leads us to the third truth we want to make note of - the titles given to this just-born baby

First, we see the title **Savior** - one who rescues and delivers

Remember how we saw last week that Zechariah had prophesied that his son, John, would give the people the "knowledge of salvation in the forgiveness of their sins" [Luke 1:77] speaking of this aspect of Mary's Son

And in **Matthew 1:21** we read how the angel of the Lord who visited Joseph told him that he would name Mary's baby Jesus because "he will save his people from their sins"

Everyone who has ever drawn breath has sinned against God and needs a Savior - even if they don't realize it

And on that momentous day, in the town of Bethlehem, the Savior was born

The second title the angel lists is **Christ** which means “one who has been anointed or consecrated to an office”

It would be hard to say that all Israel was looking expectantly for the Messiah to come

Just as it would be something of a stretch to say that all people who call themselves Christians are looking expectantly for the second coming of Christ

Certainly those who were well to do and those who were politically connected were likely at least somewhat content with the way things were - just as it is today

But it would be reasonable to expect that those who weren't so well off, those who made up the lower classes, and those who felt oppression and more keenly were looking for the Deliverer to come

Especially if he were going to get the boot of Rome from off their neck - and the shepherds to who the angel appeared would have been in that class

And the third title the angel used in his announcement was **Lord** or “the Lord”

This title even more than the others speaks to the deity of the baby who has been born

It speaks to the holy, personal name of God and reveals that the baby in the manger was God in the flesh

Peter made a similar proclamation in **Acts 2:36** when he told his Jewish audience

*“Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.”*

And Paul used all three of the titles in **Philippians 3:20** where he wrote:

*But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ*

This baby that the angel announced to the shepherds was the One referred to by Isaiah in **Isaiah 9:6**

*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.*

We are all used to getting announcements when a baby is born to someone we know

And we expect them to contain all the relevant information such as the sex of the baby, the baby's name, and all the relevant measurements

But the angel's announcement of the birth of Jesus was quite a bit different

*For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.*

And it contained a wealth of information that is a whole lot more important than his length and weight at birth

Something that had never happened before and that would never happen again had taken place

I read once how an old pioneer who was traveling westward when he came upon the Grand Canyon exclaimed, “Something must have happened here!”

And when we read the announcement from the angel we too should stop and recognize that something special did indeed happen on that otherwise ordinary day in a relatively unremarkable town

God came to earth as one of us to bring us salvation

An announcement like that should result in some sort of action and it did so let's take a look at the reaction it caused

### **III. The Reaction**

Actually, the announcement resulted in two different reactions and we see the first one in verse 13-14 [**Luke 2:13-14**]

*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!”*

Imagine that!

The news that the solo angel brought was so tremendous that the angel choir of God appeared and burst forth in song  
The very angels who serve in the presence of Almighty God and know the blessedness of heaven and can see the miserable state of mankind due to sin

And they know very well how wonderful it is that God has opened the door to reconciliation

People today have become used to seeing and experiencing things that would have at one time been unbelievable

For instance, when I was a kid, I remember the teacher rolling a cart that held a TV set into the classroom so that we could watch every time a rocket carrying astronauts was launched into space

But that was in the late 60s and early 70s when we were sending men to the moon and I remember all of us sitting and watching in silent wonder as we imagined so great a feat

Somewhere along the line, though, the wonder of the rocket launches was lost and the TV cart stopped being rolled into the room every time men and women were sent into space

Some people even mock the private entrepreneurs who are successfully launching space flights today

A sense of wonder is only experienced when our expectations are exceeded

So it's all the more amazing to read how the angels spontaneously reacted to the news and came to earth to sing when the Son came to earth to save

And their song began exactly as it should with praise to God as they pronounced "glory to God in the highest"

It's recorded in **Job 38:7** that the angelic host sang God's praise when he created the universe and here we see them do the same when he created the way for sinful man to be able to once again be at peace with God as God always intended

As much as creation speaks to God's glory, the appearance of the God in the flesh brings him the highest degree of glory

Because, by the sinless life of the Son and his death on the cross, God's attributes are truly exemplified and glorified in ways they otherwise could not be

So God gets all the glory for what he is doing but we get the peace as the angels sing about peace on earth for those with whom God is pleased

The root of the word translated here at "peace" means "to join or bind together that which has been separated" which, when you think about it, is a wonderful concept to describe what God is doing here

But we need to notice that, contrary to popular thought, God's peace isn't for everyone but only for those with whom God is pleased

And the one who pleases God is the one who has faith in the promises of God - who trusts God and acts in accordance with that trust as we read in **Romans 15:13** –

*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing*

Again, with the believing resulting in action in accordance with that which is believed

A Christ-follower shouldn't be able to just casually read past this account without being inspired to wonder and action because we know that not everyone has the peace that God offers

And that brings us to the second reaction we see in the passage before us - the reaction of the shepherds

It appears that, though the angels appeared quite suddenly, they visibly retreated back to heaven

The way the account is written, it seems the shepherds were able to follow the progress of the angels as they departed rather than simply disappearing – perhaps so that the shepherds wouldn't think they had hallucinated

Follow along as I read verses 15-20 [Luke 2:15-20]

*When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." 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. 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.*

After the angels returned to heaven, we see the shepherds react by taking action in three steps

First, they immediately left their sheep and went to see what the Lord had revealed to them

From the account, it appears there was no debate, doubt, or disagreement that action was required and what that action should be - they didn't procrastinate they simply proposed going and proceeded on the trip with haste

Compared to the way most of us react when we are confronted by God's Word, the example of those uneducated, unclean shepherds is quite convicting

So they hastened and found things just as the angel had told them they would and, having seen with their own eyes, they proceeded to tell what God had revealed to them through the angel

For whatever reason, these shepherds who were so despised they couldn't even testify in court, were chosen by God to hear the gospel of Christmas first and to be the first witnesses to testify that the Messiah had been born

They didn't hesitate, they didn't muddy up the waters with worry that they were unworthy - they simply told what had been revealed to them by God

Those lowly shepherds met Jesus as he lay in his makeshift crib and, based on their confidence and trust in the word of the angel, they spread the news that he was the long-awaited Savior, Christ, and Lord

And so we see, just as the angels had to break forth in song when the angelic representative proclaimed the good news to the shepherds, now the shepherds, having heard and seen must tell others

And having done so, we see them return to look after their sheep with praise for God on their lips

## **Conclusion**

Those shepherds who heard the angel's announcement and the song of the choir of angels give us an example that we would do well to imitate

They heard the message from God and acted with expediency and obedience

And finding things as they were told they would, they simply had to tell others the good news and give God the praise and glory

Without a doubt Christmas has become something altogether different and deficient for most people today

We lament at the commercialization and secularization of the season but, sadly, we too have allowed ourselves to become overly familiar with the wonderful thing that happened some 2,000 years ago

Like Charlie Brown, we've allowed ourselves to lose the wonder of what God has done and we need to be reminded of what Christmas is all about

Let's remember the meaning of Christmas is:

*For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.*

And hasten to make that the message that we simply must share with others

If those shepherds could do it, so can we

Let's pray

**Psalm 148:1-14 (page 526)**

Praise the Lord!

Praise the Lord from the heavens; praise him in the heights!

Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his hosts!

Praise him, sun and moon, praise him, all you shining stars!

Praise him, you highest heavens, and you waters above the heavens!

Let them praise the name of the Lord!

For he commanded and they were created.

And he established them forever and ever; he gave a decree, and it shall not pass away.

Praise the Lord from the earth, you great sea creatures and all deeps,  
fire and hail, snow and mist, stormy wind fulfilling his word!

Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars!

Beasts and all livestock, creeping things and flying birds!

Kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all rulers of the earth!

Young men and maidens together, old men and children!

Let them praise the name of the Lord, for his name alone is exalted; his majesty is above earth and heaven.

He has raised up a horn for his people, praise for all his saints, for the people of Israel who are near to him.

Praise the Lord!