

After Darkness Light

*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 ESV)*

Hark! The Herald Angels Sing

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Luke 2:1-20

Rev. Paul Carter

Introduction:

Good morning everyone and Merry Christmas! If you have your Bible with you, I'd love for you to open it now to Luke 2:1-20. We've been walking through the pre-nativity narratives in the Gospel of Luke. Luke chapter 1 includes a variety of "hinge" passages – passages where the full light of Old Testament revelation is directed forward toward the birth of Christ. These passages help us ANTICIPATE what God will do through the birth of the child born to Mary. Now here in the nativity narrative itself, we have a light that shines down from heaven – we're going to zoom in this morning on the angelic song of celebration and interpretation found in verse 14. So we've got lights shining in Luke's Gospel from all directions. Great care is being taken to ensure that we understand the earth shaking – the HEAVEN SHAKING – significance of the child born this day in the city of David who is Christ the Lord.

I'll begin reading at verse 1. This is God's Word to us:

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. ² This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³ And all went to be registered, each to his own town. ⁴ 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, ⁵ to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. ⁶ And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. ⁷ 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.

8 And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 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. 10 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. 11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. 12 And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” 13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

14 “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”

15 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.” 16 And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. 17 And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. 18 And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. 19 But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. 20 And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. (Luke 2:1–20 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

As I mentioned, my intention this morning is to zoom in on verse 14. I’m interested in what the Angels say about the significance of this event. What it does it mean that the King of Heaven came down to be born amongst the poorest of people? What it does it mean that he would give up his glory to be laid in a manger by a 14 year old Jewish virgin named Mary?

What is going on here?

Well, thankfully, the Angels tell us. They sing:

“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!” (Luke 2:14 ESV)

Again, just like with the song of Mary and the song of Zechariah, these short bursts of praise are meant to interpret the significance of these events. So for example, I. Howard Marshall says here:

“The angelic song is in effect a proclamation of the results of the birth of Jesus rather than a hymn of praise directly addressed to God.”¹

So this is a song that the angels sing to men – to shepherds actually – as opposed to a song they would normally sing to God. And this song has a very specific purpose. It intends to proclaim the RESULTS of the birth of Jesus. This is a song telling us what Christmas ACHIEVES.

And I am interested in that – and I hope you are too.

According to the angels the birth of Christ DOES SOMETHING in the highest heaven and something else down here among certain people living on the earth. So let’s look at what Christmas achieved in those various realms.

We’re told first of all that the birth of Jesus in the city of David has resulted in glory to God in the highest.

Glory To God (In The Highest Heaven)

Now what in the world does that mean?

Look quickly again at verse 9; the text says:

“And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and **the glory of the Lord shone around them**” (Luke 2:9 ESV)

So LITERALLY, the glory of the Lord refers to his BRIGHTNESS. Everywhere in the Bible we are told that God exists in impenetrable LIGHT. When Moses saw even just the hindmost part of

¹ I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel Of Luke* in *The New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978), 111.

God's glory his face shone in an otherworldly way – so much so that he had to start wearing a veil because it was frightening the people of Israel. The Apostle Paul says that God:

“dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see.” (1 Timothy 6:16 ESV)

So all over the Bible we are told that God dwells in unapproachable light – and obviously, as the Moses story reminds us, those who dwell NEAR TO GOD – reflect that light in some sense. Moses did – and he only saw the hindmost part of God – so these angels who live every day before the face of God – obviously they are shining here like the sun – and the GLORY OF THE LORD nearly paralyzed these poor hapless shepherds.

So, GLORY in a literal sense refers to the BRIGHTNESS and the LUMINOSITY of God.

But just like the word “horn” that we talked about last week, literal things often have a metaphorical meaning. Horn literally means the pointy part of an animal you don't want to have business with. But metaphorically it means POWER, STRENGTH and FORCE. So it is here – in verse 14 the angels aren't saying that God became a little BRIGHTER TODAY because of the birth of the baby Jesus – rather they are saying that his NATURE and his ATTRIBUTES are now more clearly and gloriously displayed.

So we're wondering, what specifically does the birth of Jesus reveal or clarify or more powerfully communicate about the praiseworthy attributes of the Lord? The first thing I think we can say with confidence is this:

1. The birth of Jesus reveals that God is faithful

Promises had been made a long time ago that have been surprisingly slow in working out. As we talked about last week, way back in Genesis 3 God had promised that a redeemer would come who would defeat our enemy and return us to our inheritance – though not without cost to himself.

Well that promise was made a long time ago – and the angels have been wondering how and when these things will come to pass.

By the way – did you know that angels wonder? We sometimes think that the angels know everything God knows – but that’s not true. In 1 Peter chapter 1 Peter says that even the Old Testament prophets didn’t really understand how all of this was going to work out. They were used by God to make a bunch of promises they didn’t fully understand – and Peter says that even the angels watching on didn’t fully understand. He says:

“It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, **things into which angels long to look.**” (1 Peter 1:12 ESV)

So Peter says that there have been angels eager to understand how all of this is going to work out in history – and today they know. They see the baby Jesus lying in a manger in the City of David and all of the sudden – they know. All the pieces click into place – and all the moves that God has been making, become OBVIOUS in retrospect. And the angels give glory to God in the heavens.

He wasn’t slow about keeping his promises – he was deliberate. He was careful and painstaking. He was working a bigger plan – a better plan than any of them had imagined.

So they are giving glory to God on this day, for these new things that they have seen. In the birth of Jesus Christ they have seen the faithfulness of God and they have seen the justice of God as well – that’s the second thing.

2. The birth of Jesus reveals that God is just

Now, I’m sure that none of the angels up in the highest heaven was ever doubting the justice of God. And yet, certain aspects of that justice were unclear to them.

Why, for example, should a man like David be allowed into the presence of God? David had done many good things, of course, but he was also an adulterer – many would say he was a rapist – he used his power and authority to bring a young married woman to his bed. And then he murdered her husband. So yes, David loved the Lord, but WOW – David was a serious sinner. So HOW was it just for David to enjoy the presence of God?

The angels were wondering about that – had been wondering about that for like a thousand years - and so some kind of answer – some kind of demonstration - was necessary. The Apostle Paul talked about that. He said, speaking about the redemption that is ours in Jesus:

“This was **to show God’s righteousness**, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. ²⁶ It was **to show his righteousness** at the present time, so **that he might be just** and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.” (Romans 3:25–26 ESV)

That’s what the angels are seeing and celebrating on this first Christmas day!

They were seeing the high price that God was willing to pay to settle the debts of all his people – past, present and future.

That’s why there was singing in heaven on Christmas Day. The Church Father Origen in his sermon on this passage, says here:

“He establishes peace through the blood of the cross, both for those upon the earth and those who are in heaven.”²

The birth of Jesus Christ in the city of David on Christmas Day was good news for an awful lot of people – and they angels see that and they break forth in praise.

² Origen in *Homilies On The Gospel of Luke* as cited in *Ancient Christian Commentary On Scripture Volume III* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 40.

Glory to God in the highest!

And peace on earth among particular people.

Peace On Earth (Among Particular People)

Most of us know Luke 2:14 best in the old KJV which says:

“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.” (Luke 2:14 KJV)

That’s the version we see on the Christmas cards and the one that makes its way into Christmas Carols, but almost all scholars now realize that that was a bad translation. Leon Morris for example says here:

“There is an emphasis on God, not man. It is those whom God chooses, rather than those who choose God, of whom the angels speak.”³

So that’s why all modern translations have it the way the ESV has it or the NIV which says:

“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.” (Luke 2:14 NIV11)

So we’re talking about PEACE on earth for particular people.

The story itself gives us a clue as to what sort of people we are talking about. The most immediate audience for this song is a group of shepherds. That itself is significant. This announcement is not made to the rich and powerful it is made to the humble, the poor and the lowly.

³Leon Morris, *Luke: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 3 of Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. IVP/ Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 102-103.

Several other details in the story support that analysis. There is a long-standing debate in the church as to where exactly Jesus was born. Was he born in a barn? Was he born in the anteroom of a poor person's house or was he born in a cave – a sort of makeshift stable that was used to house the animals of people living in the village? We don't know – all we know is that he was laid in a manger and mangers can be found in all those places. But it doesn't really matter, because as the Tyndale NT Commentary points out:

“everything points to poverty, obscurity and even rejection.”⁴

The POINT IS CLEAR. This is a narrative way of saying:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 5:3 ESV)

God is putting the blessings of heaven on the very bottom shelf, to ensure, that only a certain type of person will find them.

So peace on earth – for people like that. That's what the angels are singing about. But what do they mean by “peace”?

As I mentioned last week, the word “peace” in both Hebrew and Greek means more than we tend to hear when it is rendered into English. So what sort of peace are we talking about here? Well first of all – and foundationally – we are talking about:

1. Reconciliation with God through the cross of Jesus Christ

The Apostle Paul in his letter to the Colossians says:

⁴Leon Morris, *Luke: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 3 of Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. IVP/ Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 101.

“For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.” (Colossians 1:19–20 ESV)

The Bible says that we human beings have been in active rebellion against God since Genesis 3. We were deceived into attempting a coup. The devil said that we could be gods unto ourselves – deciding right and wrong FOR ourselves, so we betrayed our Master, and reaching up, we fell down, and away from the presence and voice of God. And we became angry at God. Who was he to tell us what to do anyway? And why does he have to be so severe? Why can't he meet us halfway? Why must our relationship always be on his terms?

And so we felt righteous; we felt entitled to our rebellion and we drifted further and further away – and of course, correspondingly, deeper and deeper into trouble.

That was our situation, according to the Bible, prior to the coming of Jesus Christ. In the very next verses in his letter to the Colossians, Paul says:

“And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds,²² he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him,²³ if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister.” (Colossians 1:21–23 ESV)

Paul says that his job is basically the same as the job given to the angels on Christmas Day. His job is to declare:

“Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.” (Luke 2:10 ESV)

All the people who continue in the faith – stable and steadfast – not shifting from the hope of the Gospel that they have heard. So first and foremost “peace on earth” means “peace with God” through faith in Jesus Christ – praise the Lord!

But it means more than that. Because we have peace with God through faith in Jesus Christ, we are able to experience peace with other people through the boundary breaking church of Jesus Christ. That's the second thing we see all over the New Testament.

2. Reconciliation with others through the boundary breaking church of Jesus Christ

In Ephesians 2 Paul says:

“For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility¹⁵ by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace,¹⁶ and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.” (Ephesians 2:14–16 ESV)

That's a great line, isn't it?

“Thereby killing the hostility.”

The church – the one Body – is supposed to be a place where people from every tribe, tongue and nation on planet earth come together without walls, without divisions, and without hostility – because of the common faith they have in the person and work of Christ.

Praise the Lord!

Now, in the first century that was understood most immediately as representing PEACE between Jew and Gentile. To a person like the Apostle Paul there were only two types of people in the world: Jews and Gentiles. These are the people that the blood of Jesus Christ has brought together into the one new Israel of God.

Paul says:

“Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.” (Colossians 3:11 ESV)

You know, the last 2 years have been very difficult for the church of Jesus Christ in North America. This pandemic has caused new barriers and new divisions to arise. We have the vaxxed and the unvaxxed; the masked and the unmasked; the compliant and the non-compliant.

Now it is ok to have disagreements over confusing issues – we’ve been living with that for thousands of years. We the old earth and the young earth creationists; we have the pre and the post millennialists, and many others between and beside –but generally speaking, the devil has not been able to RAISE those differences to the level of “divisions”. He has generally not been able to take those complexities and turn them into HOSTILITIES – but in the last few years that has started to change. Now it is all too common to hear words like “coward” and “liberal” and “apostate” thrown around when we are really just talking about someone who understands these medical and social issues a little bit differently than we do.

And that needs to stop.

If there is no Greek or Jew, if there is no circumcised or uncircumcised – if there is no barbarian, Scythian, slave or free – because of the life and death of Jesus Christ – then neither must we allow these petty pandemic differences to divide the one true Body in our day.

Paul allowed Jewish people to circumcise their children and he allowed Greeks to convert without circumcising their children – but he insisted that they both sit side by side in church under the blood of Jesus Christ – and so too must we insist that COVID sceptics and COVID compliers sit side by side under the blood of Jesus Christ. Now – that will mean making accommodations. The early church told the Greek believers not to eat food with blood in it – why? Because that would negatively affect their Jewish brethren. So, we must all do with a little less liberty than we feel we are entitled to so as to make this project work.

Brothers and sisters PEACE is our birth-right - not independence or autonomy.

Jesus came to make PEACE through the blood of the cross. Thanks be to God!

But there is even more to this PEACE than just that. If we can “just that” peace between God and human beings – and yet there is more. There is also the perfect restoration and renewal of all things through the age-ending, cosmos transforming return and Judgment of Jesus Christ.

3. Renewal of all things through the age-ending return and judgment of Jesus Christ

That’s the third and final thing I want you to see. I. Howard Marshall says here, in his commentary on this passage:

“He brings a new situation of peace between God and men in which his blessings can be communicated to them”.⁵

We’ve spoken a few times over the last couple of weeks about this particular aspect of the Christmas story. You see, in the Old Testament the promises of God were bottled up in heaven because there was no obedient Son of David through whom they could flow down to men and women on the earth. The plan of God was always to release the blessings of heaven THROUGH an obedient human intermediary. It was supposed to happen through Adam and Eve. They were supposed to be under God and over everything else. They were supposed to be the Vice Regents – the channels of blessing, bringing life, renewal and flourishing to all creation.

But they rebelled.

They didn’t want to be under God – they just wanted to be over everything else – and so instead of blessing they spread the curse as far and wide as their influence travelled.

⁵ I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel Of Luke* in *The New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978), 112.

But God was not deterred. He merely deferred. He waited – and then he chose the family of Abraham as the family that would eventually serve in this position. He later narrowed his selection to one particular line within the family of Abraham – the line and the house of David.

That’s why Jesus had to be born in Bethlehem:

“because he was of the house and lineage of David” (Luke 2:4 ESV)

So this is God putting the plan back on track! And this is what the Angels are celebrating:

“For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” (Luke 2:11 ESV)

This is one who will clear the log jam and unlock all the blessings and promises of God. These will flow now into the world through Jesus Christ. And that is why all of these blessings are exclusive to a particular group of people. It is not “peace on earth to all people” but rather peace on earth:

“among those with whom he is pleased!” (Luke 2:14 ESV)

And who is that? Who is it that pleases the God Almighty? It is the one who does the will of the Father. And Jesus said:

“For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.” (John 6:40 ESV)

Brothers and sisters – the last day is going to be a really good day. Jesus said:

“Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. ⁴¹ The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, ⁴² and throw them into the fiery furnace. In

that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. ⁴³ Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.” (Matthew 13:40–43 ESV)

Do you hear that? On the last day, all those who have not put their faith in Christ – will be weeded out. All causes of sin and all law-breakers will be removed. The earth will be renewed by fire. And then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father forever.

That’s peace.

That is life as it was always meant to be!

And we’re going to have that – we are going to be ushered into that on the last day!

On that day the glories of heaven will become the glories of the earth. We will SHINE LIKE THE SUN – we will reflect the glory of God – because like the angels of heaven we will live before the Face of our Heavenly Father – FOREVER.

That’s what the angels are singing about in this story - and that’s what Christmas is really all about: Glory to God in the highest heaven – and PEACE on earth among particular people: the people who have placed their trust in the person and work of Jesus Christ. May that be true of each and every person in this room.

Thanks be to God! Let’s pray together.