

2010 CHRISTMAS EVE LESSONS & CAROLS (12/24/10 – *Songs of the Savior –
The Angels’ Song: A Song of Glory*)

In the Name of JESUS. [Amen]

As we begin our celebration of the Savior’s birth, we continue with the theme begun in *Advent: Songs of the Savior*. Tonight we hear *The Angels’ Song: A Song of Glory* ... in which the holy messengers of God sing the glory of the Son Who has come to save the world – **us** – from sin and death.

Luke says: *An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear* [LK 2.9]. Such divine manifestations of the glory of the Lord always leave sinners – like us – faint with fear. That is how it was when the angel appeared to Zechariah in the temple – and how it was for Peter, James, and John at Jesus’ *Transfiguration*. The Prophet Isaiah experienced a similar manifestation of the glory of the Lord. He saw the Lord sitting upon a throne surrounded by seraphim saying: *Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory!* [ISA 6.3]. The anthem caused the very foundations of the heavenly temple to shake. Isaiah responded in fear: *Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips* [ISA 6.5]. And so it was, until an angel touched his mouth with a burning coal and said: *Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for* [ISA 6.7].

That night near Bethlehem, the glory of the Lord appeared to humble, sinful men tending their sheep. Like Isaiah, the shepherds were filled with fear ... until they heard the angel’s words: *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* [LK 2.10-11].

In response to the miraculous conception of Jesus Christ, Mary sang the *Magnificat: My soul magnifies the Lord*. In response to the birth of John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus, Zechariah sang the *Benedictus: Blessed be the Lord God of Israel*. In response to Jesus’ presentation in the temple – as we shall hear next Friday – Simeon responded with the *Nunc Dimittis: Lord, now let depart Your servant*. In response to the climactic birth of the

long-awaited Messiah, we are given a hymn of praise that comes not from human lips, but from the lips of angels, the *Gloria in Excelsis: **Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men.*** Martin Luther noted that the *Gloria* “did not grow, nor was it made on earth, but it came down from heaven.” In this song heaven itself explodes in praise, and the song has become one of the greatest hymns of the Christian faith.

Surprisingly, the *Gloria* is a mere 11 words long (in the original Greek). Yet it is a wonderful little song – simple yet profound. There is nothing new here that God did not already say countless times by His Old Testament prophets. What makes everything different is **when** it is sung – namely, in response to something that just happened and something just said. Jesus is born in Bethlehem. Nothing new there – babies were born in Bethlehem all the time. However, the angel announced that this Baby was the long-promised *Savior, Who is Christ the Lord* – **our** Savior and Lord!

It was natural for the early Church to sing this hymn as it gathered to worship the Savior of the world, Who comes to us with His life-giving Body and Blood. The *Gloria* we sing today is much longer than the original 11-word hymn. Over the centuries the hymn has expanded into a “Jubilant anthem of redemption,” and a solemn “outburst of joy and praise to the Holy Trinity.” It begins with praise to the Father Almighty and moves to “a glorious confession of the divinity of Christ, the only-begotten Son ... the Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world” and concludes with a final outburst of praise and worship to Christ and the Holy Spirit. [Reed, *The Lutheran Liturgy*, 258-59].

During the *Advent* season the main characters in all of the narratives we have heard are people of humble estate – Mary and Joseph, Zechariah and Elizabeth, and now the shepherds. As Mary said in the *Magnificat: He has looked on the humble estate of his servant. ... He has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate* [1:48, 52 ESV]. King David was chosen from the shepherd fields of Bethlehem. Similarly, the Lord chose humble shepherds from those same fields as the first witnesses of the newborn Savior.

While the angelic host filled the ears of the awestruck shepherds, mighty King Herod occupied his throne six miles to the north in Jerusalem. Herod's ears were caught up in the sights, sounds, and distractions that fill the world of the mighty, wealthy, and powerful. He would eventually receive word of Jesus' birth. He would also be filled with fear – fear of losing his high earthly estate. Unlike Isaiah, Mary, Zechariah, and the shepherds, his fear would not be calmed by the good news of the Savior Who would save His people from their sins.

Today our world is filled with the hectic sights and sounds of the “holiday season” – and we, like Herod, can become distracted and focused on our own might and wealth (our health and our money). Dear Christians, let not the affairs and fears of this world leave you cowering or callous and unheeding to this *Angels' Song*. ***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.***

The *Angels' Song* is still heard. We sang it earlier – in paraphrase – as part of one of our hymns. It is sung every Sunday in the Church – especially in anticipation of seeing Christ through the eyes of faith in the “manger” of the Bread and Wine of the Lord's Supper. And still today the Savior comes to us – even this night – through His Holy Word ... to bring us the good news of great joy of our salvation. When the shepherds heard, they believed. And so went to see the Baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger to worship Him – then returned to their vocations in the fields, ***glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen*** [2.20]. The shepherds responded to the coming of the Messiah with faith. And the fruit of faith was their worship and praise. We are not told what they actually said – but today we glorify and praise God with them by using the words of the angelic hymn.

Forgiven, spiritually refreshed, and strengthened in faith by the *Angels' Song*, we may now return to our vocations glorifying and praising God until the day we join our Lord, the angels, and all the company of heaven before the throne of God forever.

In the Name of the FATHER and of the ✠ SON and of the HOLY SPIRIT. [Amen]