

THE SONG OF THE ANGELS
Songs of Christmas
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We've been sharing from the gospel of Luke some of the great songs that are in the third gospel. The song of Zachariah, two weeks ago. Last week, the song of Mary. This Sunday, the song of the angels, found in Luke 2:13-14.

“Suddenly a great company of heavenly host appeared with the angel praising God and saying ‘Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.’” Angels are part of the Christmas landscape. But so are Santa and reindeer and elves and toy makers and friends. Are angels any different than the mythological facets of the Christmas tableau? Or are angels really real?

Obviously if we take the Christmas story at all seriously and if we take God's visiting earth in the person of Jesus seriously then we'll come immediately to the understanding that angels are more than just background scenery or mythological additions attached by early Christians to embellish the Christmas story. Angels are for real.

By having them in the Christmas story it is as though for a moment the curtains of heaven are thrown open and we are given a picture into how heaven feels about Christmas. What God's creations, the angels, are saying about Jesus. We know that angels are ministering spirits and we know that most often they are invisible to our eyes. But when visible, angels frequently come in shining radiance. Such is the case certainly with the Christmas angel who appears to the shepherds where the glory of the Lord shone round about them and they were filled with fear. That same radiance is seen numerous times throughout the scripture. The angels which sing are described as being from the heavenly hosts. “Host” being a word that can also describe the great armies of God in the heavens. From the myriad and myriad of company of angels or from the innumerable multitude of angels, the angels which in the book of Revelation are described as numbering ten thousand times ten thousand. From this company a group has gathered on Christmas evening in the skies over Bethlehem to sing glory to God in the highest.

One is tempted to linger for a moment before looking at the song of the angels to see a little bit more about the angels. Our picture of angels is usually winged beings. We probably gained that perception from one of the order within the angelic ranks, the order of the cherubim and the seraphim which, when found in the prophets or in the law, are described as having wings.

There are also great angels, which are described in scripture. Three in fact that are named. Lucifer – which means “light bearer” – according to Isaiah 14:12 fell.

The great angel Gabriel who was the bringer of good news. Always when he is found in the scripture, whether it's Daniel or Luke, he is bringing good news to God's people.

And the archangel, the only angel so named archangel, the highest of the angels, Michael, who, when he is found in scripture, is always defending God's people or resting control away from the fallen angel Lucifer.

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God's angels are mighty creatures. It doesn't take an army of them to do God's bidding or God's will. In fact the book of Revelation lets us in on the amazing insight that when God wants to dump the devil into the abyss for a period of a thousand years he just sends one mighty angel down. It's not even an angel with a name. Just one mighty angel to throw him in the pit.

Satan's power is not even so great that it would require the sons of God to do away with him in that fashion. It took all of God to forgive our sins and to redeem us. But to take care of Satan personally it only takes a mighty angel.

These angels are especially active in the ministry of Jesus. We see them at his birth making announcements of his birth to Zachariah, to Mary, three times in a dream an angel appears to Joseph. They're active in Jesus' ministry on two significant occasions. Once after his temptation when they came to him and strengthened him. And once again at Gethsemane where an angel came to him once more and strengthened him. And angels are seen at his resurrection as they attend the empty tomb. And they are seen also when Christ returns.

In fact Jesus tells us that when he comes again he will come in great glory with all the angels. If there was a multitude of the heavenly hosts over Bethlehem skies when he himself returns and every eye sees him he will return with all his angels. And Jesus tells us that he will send his angels out to gather the elect. Paul tells us that he is coming in blazing fire with his powerful angels. And if he is sending his angels to the four winds to gather the elect, Jesus also tells us in Matthew 13 that in that day his angels will be sent as well to harvest the tares and cast them into fire.

There appears therefore at the return of the Lord to be a dual activity on the part of the angels – a gathering, and escorting if you will, of God's people to Christ as well as an escorting of the lost to their place of destiny.

One takes from this and does a moment of speculation and wondering. I'm not given to very much speculation but forgive me this one as I realized this escorting activity of angels when the Lord returns. In some of the life after life literature you will have it being described that there appeared to a person, as they died, a being of light. A confusing thing has occurred in regard to that. Confusing from our point as Christians is that this experience seems to be common to both unbelievers and believers. Having a being of light appear to them after death. Given Jesus' words about the escorting activity of angels upon his return one can I think wonder whether or not there's a certain sense of angelic presence at death to escort us to the door of life or to the door of loss. To the door of hope or to the door of despair. There may not be a common kind of thing that happens to every person. I want to be escorted to the door of hope, the door which is Christ.

Angels come at the birth of the Lord and sing. In all the Lord's early ministry there is no other time when a group of angels appears. Otherwise there is simply the most angels are two at a time. This is the only time in all of his advent on earth that a group of angels may be found. They don't come to him directly or to the manger. They come to the shepherds out on the hillsides. They sing this song. Angels singing a song.

How many other times in scripture do the angels as a company sing a song? I find the song of the seraphs in Isaiah 6 where they're crying Holy to the Lord. But the other angels, when do

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they sing? Intriguingly enough I've found that this song at Christmas is really the middle song of the angels. It is not the first song they sang. Nor is it the last song they sing. It is the middle song. Knowing their other songs helps me put this song of Christmas in its context.

Their first song is described by God himself speaking to Job in 38:7. At the creation of the world when God is spelling out to Job the magnificence of when he laid the foundations of the universe in the world. And God says to Job "All the morning stars [another reference to angels, a high rank within the angels] sang together. And all the sons of God [again a term for angels] shouted for joy."

In other words when God was done with his creative work and the universe was made, heaven rejoices with the song of the angels celebrating the creative act of God.

The last song the angels sing is found in Revelation 5. There is that moment when the Lamb is found worthy to open the book. If the first song was at the creation, the last song is at the culmination. The culmination of God's dealings with earth. The 24 elders begin the first verse of praise to God. Then before the third verse starts with all the creation joining in the middle verse in Revelation 5 is sung by the host of angels crying to the Lamb "Power, wisdom, riches, might, honor, glory and blessing."

Power to the Lamb because he is the one who plans and achieves his plans.

Riches because he is the one who had the resources to fulfill every promise.

Wisdom because he knows how to dispense his power and his wealth.

Might because there is no situation with which he cannot cope.

Honor because it is intrinsic to his being and because he has earned it.

Glory because of his radiance.

Blessing because what do you give to one who has everything? The praise and the glory, the blessing.

This is the song, which closes the age. These angels are present from the creation through the culmination. This, their middle song, celebrates his nativity. The angels who had witnessed the creation had witnessed man's being barred from Eden and one of their member had been stationed to forbid man access back to the tree of life. Now with the coming of Christ we have access again to the tree of life. The angels are there to celebrate. Glory to God in the highest is the first direction of their hymn of praise. Directed to him who sets upon the throne. Glory to God!

Glory is a word, which is extremely hard to translate the meaning of. It simply is a term which wraps up all that is involved in worship, adoration, awe, wonder. Puts it all into one word – glory! We join the glory that the angels sang at Christmas time. We have our own way of saying glory to God. Glory to God that he so loved the world. Glory that God is. How many people in this world do not know that God is. Or who live as though God is not. But glory to

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God that he is. Glory to God that he loves. Glory to God that he has given us salvation. Glory to God that every one of us may come to know eternal life. Glory to God that we are not condemned. Glory to God in the highest.

“And on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.” When you’ve used the King James for so long that phrase is a little difficult isn’t it? We would rather say, “Peace on earth, good will toward men.” Like the good King James says it. As beautiful as that phrase is in the King James that particular phrase is not the right translation. The angels have gotten a bad press. Because at Christmas time they’re saying “Peace on earth,” and you look around and you say, “They must have missed! Where is the peace on the earth?”

Center for Defense Information study this year revealed that 45 nations of the world – over a quarter of the nations of this world are currently in one form or the other at war. Five million soldiers from those 45 nations are currently serving for combative purposes. Between one and five million people have been killed as a result of those 45 nations wars. What about places of hot wars today? How can there be peace on earth?

But the angels never said that. They said peace to men on whom his favor rests. The peace on the earth will not be until the Son of God returns and breaks men’s swords and disarms their nuclear bombs and breaks their swords into plowshares. The peace on the earth will not come until he who is the ruler of the whole universe comes and imposes his rule. But in his Bethlehem coming his is a peace to men upon whom God’s favor rests. The only people that truly know peace are the people upon whom God’s favor rests. Or that is to those who know the grace of God. Peace. Shalom.

Somehow the word “peace” does not in itself adequately fulfill and fill up all that is meant in that word “shalom.” Shalom not only means the cessation of hostility. But it stands for the state of blessedness. The idealized life. The ability to be all that you ever wanted to be. To be the – a psychologist would say – the self actualized person. To be what you knew you were truly capable of being. To be free. To have wings on the inside of you. Peace. The state of blessedness.

This to persons upon whom God’s favor rests. God’s peace will never come to those who strive. Through man made, self made efforts to be at peace. God’s peace can only come as a result of the gift. That’s why Jesus came – to give us God’s grace. To let us know that all of our efforts to find fulfillment on our own would turn up emptiness. That only he could give us fulfillment and meaning and shalom. Peace to men upon whom God’s favor rests.

Do you have peace this Christmas? Peace within yourself? Peace within your family? Peace between you and God?

The angels are saying know God’s grace and you will experience God’s peace. Kind of surprising isn’t it where the angels sang their song. They sang that song to shepherds. Not even a musically inclined audience to hear the first great anthem of Christmas. At least you would have thought the angels would have been sent to the Roman philharmonic audience. To a group who could appreciate heavenly music. But shepherds?

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Jewish tradition tells us that there were no sheep that were kept grazing between Jerusalem and Bethlehem except those sheep that were being used in temple sacrifice. Some have wondered if Christ could have been born in the winter. We do not know the exact date of his birth. But it's conceivable that he could have been born in the wintertime. Had these been the shepherds of traditionally the keeping of the lambs that were offered in temple sacrifices. It would be striking if they were indeed those kind of shepherds because the Lamb of God would have made his appearance in the presence of shepherds who kept the lambs of sacrifice.

Shepherds were a no-account class in those days. They were not from your exalted levels of society. They existed in a state of almost perpetual ritual uncleanness. Excluded from temple observances and from holy people.

Isn't it wonderful how God turns topsy-turvy the standards of the world? God in sending the angels to the shepherds is letting us know that he is aware of the name and location of the most ordinary and the most common. If he knows where shepherds are he knows where you are as well. Glory to God in the highest. Glory to God that he has come to us. He has born our likeness, that we might bear his likeness.

Christmas is not complete unless you sing the song of the angels in your own heart and say Glory to God and say Peace.

Our Father, how delighted we are with your gift to us. We open Christmas and find Jesus. From our heart accept our thanksgiving and bring to us the grace of your peace. There may be those here in this service this morning who in their own life have anything but peace. Lord, for them may this Christmas day be an opening of their life to you who is the prince of peace. Come in and speak your word of presence to heal the divisions within us and the division which has separated us from you. We're keenly conscious also, Father, of the fact that some within our church family are having their first Christmas around your throne. While is Christmas is different for us because of their absence we know that it is different for them because of their presence with you. It is in moments like this of remembering that we again treasure Christmas because it is open to us to forever be in your presence. For some of us this might be our last Christmas here on earth. But we're glad that Christmas never ends. That we will always celebrate your coming. That it's glory to God in the highest and peace to us because of your grace. In the Lord's name. Amen.