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Series: *The First Songs of Christmas*

Title: *"The Angels' Song"*

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Scripture: Luke 2:1-20

I don't know about you, but I enjoy the humor of Steve Martin. I've loved his movies; from *Father of the Bride* to *Planes, Trains, and Automobiles*. Martin is a very talented guy. In fact, not only is he a great comedian and actor, he's also a very talented musician. He plays the banjo and sings in a band called, *The Steep Canyon Rangers*.

A few months ago, I heard a song they performed entitled: *"Atheists Don't Got No Songs."* Has anyone heard it? Here's a sampling of the lyrics:

*Christians have their hymns and pages
Hava Nagila's for the Jews.*

*Baptists have the Rock of Ages
Atheists just sing the blues*

*Romantics play Claire de Lune.
Born again's sing He is risen.*

*But no one ever wrote a tune
For godless existentialism.*

*For atheists, there's no good news,
They'll never sing, a song of faith.*

*In their songs, they have a rule,
The "he" is always lowercase.*

It's a funny song---but then again not; I mean, imagine NOT knowing God, not experiencing the GOOD NEWS of His great love and grace. The ironic thing is Martin himself is said to be an agnostic. Let's pray that changes. But his song is correct, one of the unique things about our faith as Christians is its music. As Bruce Thielemann puts it, *"Christianity is the one faith that puts a song in your heart. Confucianism has no chorales. Shintoism has no songs. Islam no glorias...atheism no anthems."*

Of course, the thing that gives us something to sing about is not a thing, but a PERSON--Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God born to save us from our sins. And as you know, this Advent we are studying His birth by looking at the first songs that His coming inspired.

In case you dozed off during one or more of the sermons, here's a quick review. Two weeks ago, we looked at what Bible scholars refer to as the song of Zechariah. Last Sunday we examined Mary's song. Today, we'll be studying the song the angels sang the night of Jesus' birth. But I get ahead of myself. Take your Bibles and turn to Luke 2:1-7. Follow along as we look at these familiar verses that describe the events leading up to the song that was sung the night of our Lord's birth.

It's been almost six months since the day that Mary returned to her home in Nazareth after sharing her song, *The Magnificat*. And as you can see in verse 1, during the final weeks of Mary's pregnancy, the Jews of Nazareth received word from the local Roman garrison that the emperor Caesar August had sent out a decree that a census should be taken of his empire. The law said they were required to return to the city of their "tribe." Perhaps the Romans set it up this way to make the Jews less resentful of this mandated census, you know, by giving it a nationalistic flavor.

Now, as I said last week, Joseph and Mary were BETROTHED when Gabriel told her she would be the mother of Jesus. When Joseph learned his fiancé was with child, Matthew 1 tells us he planned to **“divorce her quietly”** and that was the only way to end a betrothal in those days, through divorce. But after Gabriel visited Joseph in a dream and told him the child was the Son of God and that Mary had not betrayed him, Joseph changed his mind. Verse 24 says, **“When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home AS HIS WIFE.”** This tells us that Mary and Joseph were married shortly after Gabriel’s visit. Okay look at verse 25 where it says, **“But [Joseph] did not consummate their marriage until [Mary] gave birth to a Son. And [Joseph] gave Him the name ‘Jesus.’”** This was to make sure there was no doubt that Jesus was virgin born.

Well, when the order for the census came out, this newlywed couple, both descendants of the tribe of David, journeyed 80 miles to Bethlehem, the birthplace of David. Of course, when they arrived, they looked for housing, an inn in which to stay. And the innkeeper has been pictured as the villain of the Christmas story. Those ominous words, **“There was no room for them in the inn”** make it seem like he was the type of guy who could care less about a young couple needing a place to stay. Sermon after sermon has been preached across the centuries criticizing his turning a pregnant woman and her husband away. But two details in the Scripture help us to see that it COULD have been much different than that.

(1.) The first is the phrase in verse 6, **“And so it was that WHILE THEY WERE THERE the days were accomplished that she should be delivered.”**

These words suggest that Mary & Joseph did not arrive in Bethlehem the afternoon of Jesus’ birth, but that they had probably been there for some time. Perhaps realizing that the tongues of Nazareth would soon begin to wag, Joseph wisely used the occasion of the Roman census to get Mary out of that provincial setting as soon as he could---maybe as soon as her pregnancy began to show.

After all, he had a trade that could be practiced anywhere so perhaps they took up residence in one of the local inns of Bethlehem and lived there for several weeks or months. And as verse 6 says, **“while they were there,”** Mary’s labor started and it was obvious the baby was coming.

I don’t know about you but to me this perspective really makes more sense than the tradition that says Mary rode bare back on a donkey for 80 miles when she was nine-months pregnant. Ladies can you imagine traveling like that while in that condition?

I remember when Sarah was born. We had an appointment at 42 weeks for Sue to be induced, but before starting the Pitocin drip, the doc had us walk the halls for about an hour in the hopes that this would get labor started without the drug. It didn’t work, but I’m thinking if we had a donkey for her to ride on---you know, a couple laps around the hospital--no IV would have been needed! All kidding aside, it looks like Joseph and Mary had been in Bethlehem some time when the night of Jesus’ birth arrived.

(2.) Another phrase that suggests this scenario is in verse 7 which says, **“and there was no room for them in the inn.”**

The actual translation of the Greek goes like this, **“there was no APPROPRIATE PLACE for them in the inn.”** Now, inns in the first century were not at all what we are accustomed to when we travel. I mean, they were little more than a courtyard of stalls with three walls. All you got for your money was a fire to cook your food on, a place to hitch your animal, some straw where the two of you could lie down and a few walls to break the wind at night, no roof, no privacy. And free continental breakfasts in the lobby were out of the question!

So, one possibility is that when Mary went into labor, the innkeeper realized that the courtyard this young couple had been camping in for several months was not a proper place for their baby to be born. I mean, instead of a heartless villain the innkeeper may in fact have been an empathetic help to Mary and Joseph, taking it on himself to locate a private place with a roof overhead. No small task in a town crowded with people coming for this census.

Later on, Luke tells us that this was the season when shepherds were out in the fields around Bethlehem with their flocks. So, Jesus was probably born in a shepherd’s cave near the inn, a place where sheep were kept during that part of

the year. The hills around Bethlehem are perforated with such caverns. In fact, the famous CHURCH OF THE NATIVITY is built over the cave where tradition says Jesus was born.

Now, Luke seems to infer that no one assisted Mary in the birth of Jesus, not even Joseph, and this would have made sense because husbands didn't play the role of midwives back then. This was women's work and Luke simply states that Mary took care of things. She gave birth to her firstborn Son by herself. And this was not odd because self-delivery was common at the time. In fact, the women of Palestine prided themselves on delivering their babies rather easily and were quite able to take care of themselves in the absence of a midwife.

In any case, the long-awaited MESSIAH, the SON OF GOD, was born in a cave wrapped in strips of rags and laid in a feed trough---born not in a palace or even a house, but in the place where sheep were stabled. This aspect of the Christmas story shows us that God truly HUMBLED Himself for our benefit. It is as Paul said in 2nd Corinthians 8:9, ***"For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for our sakes He became poor---so that through His poverty you might become rich."***

Okay, that brings us to our text for this morning, Luke 2:8-14 but rather than READ it to you, I'd like us to WATCH/HEAR it being read by Linus in [*A Charlie Brown Christmas*](#).

Luke 2:8-14

8 - And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night.

9 - An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

10 - But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people.

11 - Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; He is the Messiah, the Lord.

12 - This will be a sign to you: You will find a Baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

13 - Suddenly, a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

14 "Glory to God in the highest Heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom His favor rests."

Now, try and imagine what it was like that night of nights. It's the middle of the night. Not a creature is stirring, not even a camel. It's dark---when suddenly an angel appears to these shepherds and says, ***"Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; He is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a Baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."*** Then, if ONE angel wasn't enough to startle these sheep herders, the Bible says, ***"SUDDENLY a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel!"*** A ***"great company"*** is literally a multitude---not fifty or 150 or even 1,500---it was a number beyond counting. I agree with Kent Hughes who says, ***"Every one of God's angels was there because this was the most amazing event that had ever happened in the entire universe. The heavenly host stretched from horizon to horizon---obscuring the winter constellations."*** As Milton puts it, ***"The helmed cherubim and sworded seraphim, in glittering ranks with wings displayed---the stars with deep amaze, stand fixed in steadfast gaze."***

Job tells us that at the creation of the world, ***"the morning stars (angels) sang together and all the angels shouted for joy."*** (Job 38:7) Now, once again the angels joined voices at the greatest creation of all, the birth of the God-man---our Savior. And that ultra-rare glory was presented to whom? SHEPHERDS! Now, remember, shepherds were at the bottom of the Jewish social structure. In fact the only person considered lower than a shepherd was a leper.

You've heard it said, ***"She cusses like a sailor?"*** Well in those days there was a saying, ***"He lies like a shepherd."*** Everyone looked down on shepherds. The work was dirty and dangerous; shepherd were exposed to all the elements in all seasons with little or no chance to bathe, which means no worship in the temple. They were poorly educated and poorly paid. They were like our homeless who work at carwashes, in that shepherds were men who usually had no other work options.

And THESE are the people who heard the angels proclaim, ***"tidings of great joy."*** As you know, we live in a world that is increasingly divided according to ***"us and them."*** Many of us have a long list of "them" --- our enemies; Muslims, immigrants, members of the opposing political party, stores whose employees are trained to say ***"Happy Holidays"***

instead of “*Merry Christmas,*” religious conservatives or religious liberals, people who will wear a face mask and those who won’t.

More and more we think if others don’t see the world the way we do---they are our enemy. *“It’s us against them. It’s me against you.”*

I’m not saying we should not take a stand FOR truth or take a stand AGAINST evil. But we need to remember that every person we consider an enemy, still falls under the *“good tidings of great joy to all people umbrella”* that the angel spoke about that night. Jesus came for *“those people,”* just as much as He came for *“us people.”* He wants us to love our enemies because HE loves our enemies — just as much as He loves us. We live in a broken, divided, and fractured world, an *“us and them”* world, but Jesus doesn’t see it that way. He sees one race of people — the human race. He came to bring joy, and peace, and salvation and life abundant to every person on this planet — no matter how far from Him they may seem to be. The message of the angels, the tidings of great joy is for the neighbor you don’t get along with, the co-worker you hope is transferred out of your department, that family member who you are always at odds with, every person you don’t like. The Christmas story challenges us to look at others with new eyes — to see them as co-habitants under the umbrella of God’s proclamation of good tidings of great joy.

By the way, these shepherds were probably watching very important sheep. You see, in the Temple in Jerusalem each and every morning and evening, an unblemished lamb was offered as a sacrifice to God. In order to ensure that the supply of perfect and unblemished offerings was always available, the Temple authorities had their own private sheep flocks and we know that these flocks were pastured near Bethlehem. So, it is very likely that these particular shepherds were in charge of the flocks from which the Temple offerings were chosen. Think about that. This would mean that these “lowly” shepherds, these “homeless car wash workers” were the first to see the Lamb of God Who had come to shed His blood on the cross *“...as the atoning sacrifice for not only for our sins but also for the sins of the whole world.”*

Okay, at this point I want to borrow the question Charlie Brown asked Linus. The question that prompted him to read our text for this morning, because I think it’s a question that is on the minds of a lot of people. Here it is: *“Isn’t there anyone who can tell us what Christmas is all about?”*

Well, good ole Linus, created by a Christian named Charles Schultz, knew that the angels answered this question with their song of Christmas. So, he read the text from Luke that includes their song. First, they said. . .

1.) Christmas is all about GLORY.

What is the first word of their song? It’s in verse 14. Right, ***“GLORY!” “GLORY to God in the highest Heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom His favor rests.”***

Now, *“glory”* isn’t a word we use a lot because it’s like me, behind the times a bit. So let’s look at its meaning: Basically, GLORY refers to the particular excellence of a thing that makes it praiseworthy. For example:

- The glory of those people back there who are making it possible for you guys HERE to hear me and you guys out there in CYBERLAND to hear and SEE me; the glory of our AV/IT/Tech team is seen in their technical skills.
- The glory of Cathie Burke is her administrative talents that help make it possible for refugee women in Kenya to have a job and provide for their families.
- The glory of Linda Rowe is her amazing decorating abilities. And they are especially glorious---I mean, not only does Linda know where all the decorations are stored, not only is she able to make our Sanctuary and lower and upper foyers look BEAUTIFUL for Christmas, she is somehow able to get in here and do it without anyone seeing her. She must sneak at night like the elves did in the home of the cobbler.

And speaking of Christmas, let me tell you about a time recently when I did something glorious. Last week when we brought our Christmas tree home, I was able to get it to stand up straight in the Christmas stand---THE FIRST TRY! It was glorious and praiseworthy, because that almost NEVER happens!

Those are mere human illustrations of GLORY, but of God's glory is on an entirely different level. In fact, He is the sole Source of all TRUE glory; every good and PERFECT gift, as James reminds us. And there are SO MANY examples of HIS GLORY---so many things that manifest God's glory.

For example, Psalm 19:1 says, **"The heavens declare the glory of God."** And they certainly do. In fact, even in its fallen state all creation reflects God's glory; from the intricacy of the tiniest cell, to the grandeur of the Blue whale!

We also see God's glory in His limitless power and knowledge, not to mention the fact that He is literally everywhere all the time. But the most GLORIOUS thing about God is found in God's reply to that time Moses asked to see God's glory in Exodus 33. God said, **"[I will show you My glory—and here's how] I will cause My GOODNESS to pass in front of you."** Moses learned that God's glory is best seen not in His power or majesty or strength. No, the most glorious, praiseworthy thing about God is how GOOD He is.

This prince of Egypt learned that the ESSENCE of ALL God's glory is His goodness, kindness, love, mercy, and compassion. And that GOODNESS, that ESSENCE, is what the angels sang about that night, the fact that **"While we were yet sinners Christ died for us..."** They rejoiced because God is SO good He sent His only Son to save BAD people like you and me. No wonder they sang, **"GLORY TO GOD!"**

But that's not all Christmas is all about. The angels song reminds us also that. . .

2.) Christmas is all about FEAR.

I know that doesn't seem to make sense amid all the joyous celebrations of this season, but remember, the Christmas story itself is couched in the context of fear. How did Zechariah respond when the angel Gabriel appeared to him in the temple? Luke tells us he was **"gripped with fear."**

Then this same angel appeared to Mary and her response was to be **"very troubled."** She was so troubled the angel had to calm her and assure her there was nothing to be troubled about, afraid of.

And here in Luke chapter 2, we see that the shepherds were out in the field tending their flocks when, suddenly, an angel appeared and the glory of God blazed around them. How did they respond? Luke says they TOO were terrified and the angels once again had to say, **"Don't be afraid!"**

The experiences of these participants in the Christmas story remind us that God's glory often causes us fear. Remember, God's original design for human beings like you and me was to reflect or manifest His glory, but sin changed that. As Romans 3:23: **"For all have sinned and"**---because we do what happens? Right, we, **"fall short of the glory of God."**

And falling short is a scary thing. This is why Adam and Eve HID from God after their sin. Like Zechariah and Mary and the shepherds they were afraid. Their sin has been passed down to all of us, so neither we nor the world we live in fully reflects God's glory.

Why does it scare us when we are young and don't know what to do with our lives? I remember that fear---it's why I changed my major THREE TIMES and squeezed a four-year degree into five years. I was afraid of messing up my career choice, afraid of NOT doing that good work that God had prepared in advance for me to do, not reflecting God's glory in my work.

Why do we fear illness---this virus that makes so many people so sick? It's because we know we were designed to reflect God's highest created being, a human of health and vigor, falling short of that is a painful, uncomfortable, often scary thing.

Why are people lonely---even when they are with others? We do they experience that TROUBLING feeling? Because we were made to fellowship with God and going through life without Him is terrifying. As Paschal put it, we all have a God-shaped hole that nothing can fill and that emptiness, facing life as a fallen being in a fallen world without God can be terrifying.

Why do we fear death? It's because God designed us to reflect His eternal glory, reflect it by living forever, so the fact that we all have this terminal disease called sin-sickness---well, causes us a deep fear---a fear that all people struggle with.

This is why medical shows are so popular; it's why people are always coming out with a new healthier diet, from Atkins to Paleo, it's because we are afraid of an Inglorious thing called death.

All these things I mentioned are evidences of the gap that sin has caused between what we were designed to be, reflectors of God's glory and what we are, fallen, depraved, sinners.

Well, GLORY TO GOD---CHRIST HAS COME! He came to conquer our fears! The angel's words were not just for those shepherds, they were for us: ***"Do not be afraid, for I bring to you good news of great joy which shall be for all of the people. Today in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you. He is Christ the Lord."***

And that leads to a third thing Christmas is all about. It's all about GLORY. It's all about FEAR. And. . .

3.) Christmas is all about PEACE.

When we accept God's indescribable Christmas Gift, when we confess our sin, admit our fallen-ness and ask for God's forgiveness through Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, we are forgiven!

We are at peace with God, we experience the love, the FAVOR that God longs for all people to experience as the Prince of Peace Himself comes to live in our hearts and lives. His coming; IMMANUEL, GOD WITH US, gives us peace no matter what we face because He empowers us to be the kind of people He wants us to be. People who reflect the glory of God even in the way we face death. We do so without fear because Jesus has taken the sting out of it.

As Paul puts it in Colossians 2:7, ***"It is CHRIST IN YOU, the hope of glory!"***

Did you ever read Bret Harte's story *The Luck of Roaring Camp*?

Roaring Camp was the meanest, toughest mining town in the West. There were murders and assaults and thefts---it was a terrible place inhabited entirely by men, except for one woman who tried to serve them all. Her name was Cherokee Sal. She died while giving birth to a baby---a little girl.

Well, the men took the baby, and they put her in a box with some old rags under her. When they looked at her, they decided that didn't look right, so they sent one of the men 80 miles away to buy a rosewood cradle. He brought it back, and they put the rags and the baby in the rosewood cradle. And the rags didn't look right there. So they sent another of their number to Sacramento, and he came back with some beautiful silk and lace blankets. And they put the baby, wrapped around with those blankets, in the rosewood cradle. It looked fine until someone happened to notice that the floor was so filthy. So, these hardened, tough men got down on their hands and knees, and with their hardened and horny hands, and they scrubbed that floor until it was clean. Of course, what that did was to make the walls and the ceiling and the dirty windows without curtains look absolutely terrible. So, they washed down the walls and the ceiling, and they put curtains at the windows. And now things were beginning to look as they thought they should look. But of course, they had to give up a lot of their fighting, because the baby slept a lot, and babies can't sleep during a brawl. So the entire character of the town improved. The men used to take her out and set her by the entrance to the mine in her rosewood cradle so they could see her when they came up. Then somebody noticed what a dirty place that was, so they planted flowers, and they made a very nice garden there. It looked quite beautiful. They would bring her shiny little stones and things that they would find in the mine. But when they would put their hands down next to hers, their hands looked so dirty. Pretty soon the general store was all sold out of soap and shaving gear and perfume. In short, the baby's coming changed everything.

That's just a story, but Christmas is the true story of a Baby Whose coming CAN change everything. When we invite Jesus into our hearts and lives. He helps us so that, whatever we do, eat or drink or whatever, we do it in a way that reflects

the glory of God. As 2nd Corinthians 3:18 says, we, ***“are being transformed into His image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord.”***

Let us pray.