

Songs of Christmas

3. Angels and Shepherds

December 18, 2022

I've loved going through this series through Advent, *Songs of Christmas*, because I'm a big fan of well written songs. I have music on almost all the time. Part of the power of music is that it can help set a mood and create memorable moments. Think about it.

Malls everywhere are playing Christmas music to get us in the mood to buy gifts. At the beginning of every TV show is the same theme song each time that sets the stage. (*"You wanna go, where everybody knows your name..."*) In movies, music can create some especially memorable moments. One of my favorites of all time is the epic singalong to "Bohemian Rhapsody" in Wayne's World that's capped off with synchronized headbanging when the guitar solo rips in. The whole scene is literally Wayne, Garth, and their friends in a car just singing along. It's incredibly entertaining.

Songs help us remember important events and ideas, too. Teachers use music to teach things like math or English (*conjunction junction...*). National identity is passed down through national anthems that recount important moments and ideas for their culture.

All across scripture, many important moments are marked by songs. When the Israelites are freed from slavery in Egypt, Moses and Miriam sing a song. When the Jerusalem temple is finished, a song is sung as they enter into God's presence in the holy of holies. There's an entire book of songs known as Psalms that has shaped the imagination of God's people for thousands of years, including Jesus!

So, in the Gospel of Luke, when Luke wants to set the stage for the arrival of God himself in Jesus, we get not just one song, but three at the very opening of the book. These songs help to pass on important understandings of God, his kingdom, and the central role that Jesus plays in bringing it about.

Today, we're focusing on the third song which occurs within one verse of the passage we just heard. Here are the lyrics: **Luke 2:14** "*Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased.*"

The lyrics start with "**Glory to God...**" The word "glory" has rich meaning, and we use it often in the church, but we don't use it much in our everyday language! We might say, "That was a glorious sunset." This give us the idea that "glory" is something that's breathtaking, beautiful, or awe-inspiring. And that is part of it.

Glory = Giving reverence and honor. It starts to get a bit at what the biblical writers mean, but there's more to it. The first place that we see "glory" in scripture is in **Exodus 16:10**, when a cloud forms that represents God's presence. It says, "*There was*

the glory of the Lord appearing in the cloud.” The Israelites follow this cloud through desert because it represented God’s presence. Another place we read about the glory of God is in **Leviticus 9:23-24**. The Israelites had completed their detailed plans to build the tabernacle, they made their first sacrifice to God and he shows up with fire. It says, *“When they came out, they blessed the people; and the glory of the Lord appeared to all the people. Fire came out from the presence of the Lord...”*

This gives us another aspect of the word’s meaning: **Glory = A physical display of one’s importance**. When God shows up, it’s not that they see God fully, but something physically appears that reveals God’s breathtaking significance. In this case, fire and a cloud.

This might sound odd at first, but this is something we see all the time. For example, I love Tim Mackie’s illustration that shows that statues or monuments are an example of glorifying noteworthy people. In the north side of Pittsburgh, there’s a statue of Fred Rogers, one of the most well-known and beloved Pittsburghers. It’s a physical display of his prominence; it glorifies Mr. Rogers!

Glory is a physical way we can see someone’s significance. So the “glory of the Lord” appears in fire and clouds, pointing to God’s greatness. But it gets better. The Old Testament scriptures repeatedly remind us of that, such as in **Isaiah 6:3** *“the whole earth is full of his glory.”* **Psalm 19:1** gives a variation on this, *“The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.”*

When you leave today and you look up at the sky, you should get overwhelmed with God’s greatness because the sky’s very existence points towards that fact! All of creation declares God’s glory. Why? Because the whole earth and everything in it is a physical manifestation of His greatness and goodness.

Now, here’s where it gets really good. **Psalm 8** starts similarly, *“Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory in the heavens.”* Then, a few verses later on **Psalm 8:4-5**, *“what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them? You have made them a little lower than the angels and crowned them with glory and honor.*

You glorify God. You are a physical display of God’s goodness and importance. And what’s more, God gives *you* glory and honor. The rest of **Psalm 8** talks about how he’s entrusted His creation to us. We are to care for the earth that is filled with God’s glory, because we are made to glorify God. What an incredible privilege! Just as we marvel at a glorious sunset, God looks at us and marvels. He crowns us with glory and honor!

Look back at the song we’re reading today, the heavenly hosts appear and what do they sing? *“Glory to God in highest heaven...”* The heavenly hosts are the spiritual beings that God has created. They are created with glory just as we are. What do they do? They take the glory they are given by God, and they give it right back. The heavenly

hosts are saying to God, “I want my very existence to be a display of your beauty and significance.” The best thing you can do with the glory that God has given you is to give it back to Him. When we glorify God, we want to use our whole life to point to his goodness.

If we don't glorify God, we'll glorify something else. Because we are made to glorify God, giving glory is something that is second nature for us. Here is where things can get sticky.

We can give glory to something or someone other than God. Sometimes it is appropriate to show honor. For example, many cultures around the world revere the elderly figures in their society, which is something that we could benefit from. Honoring elders is a way of saying, “there's wisdom you have that I want to learn from and the life I have today was built through you.” That's a good way to show honor.

Where giving glory can go wrong is whenever we order our entire world around that thing or person. One of the ways we've seen this today is in the political realm. When we glorify political parties or figures, we order our worldview more along partisan lines than scripture. Political rallies almost have a religious fervor to them, and we can place our entire hope and trust in political figures.

We can glorify things like having a picture-perfect family or home, wanting those so bad that we'll overlook morals or standards God has to get there. We can glorify money, power, or sex, using whatever means necessary in order to get what we want.

One of the most epic stories, the *Lord of the Rings*, shows how this ring seduces people with its power; they will do anything to get it. The character Smeagol gains possession of the ring. He becomes so obsessed with it that over time his health, appearance, and entire identity wither away. He becomes isolated and fixated only on the ring, to the point that he would die just to have it.

This is a picture of what we become when we glorify something or someone to the extent that they order and define our entire life. This is why worshiping God is such a vital part of our faith.

Entering into worship restores us.

When we glorify something other than God, it disfigures our souls just like Gollum. Every week, we face competing loves that demand our attention and affection and threaten to erode our true identity. Worship helps restore us to how we were created in God's image.

The worship artist Christen Ball notes that when we come to worship services and praise God by singing together, we are never *starting* to worship. Rather, we are *entering into* worship. That's because all of creation is already glorifying God and when we come together to praise God, we enter into that reality. That's what the shepherds were shown. The veil of reality was peeled back, and they were able to see that

gathered all around God's throne was every being in heaven, glorifying and worshiping him!

Right now, that same exact thing is happening. Isn't that amazing to think about? If we fully knew what was happening in heaven's throne room, it would fry our circuits!

When the shepherds caught a glimpse of the reality of God's kingdom and what God was doing in Jesus, worship was their response. **Luke 2:17-18** *When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.*

One of the ways we worship God is by talking about what he's done, just like the shepherds. Let's talk a little bit about how we can glorify God in worship.

To worship, first **glorify God through your daily life**. The shepherds were just going on with their usual business whenever God met them in a life-changing way. These were ordinary, working-class people. While we may desire a transcendent mountaintop experience with God, most of our life with God happens in the mundane, everyday moments. That's one of the themes in the opening of Luke's Gospel- God uses ordinary people and shows up as they're just living their everyday lives! You don't have to make headlines or have a special title to glorify Him. Whatever God has given you in life, use that to glorify him!

If you're a stay-at-home parent, you can serve cheerios and clean up messes to the glory of God! If you're a student, study and do your projects to the glory of God!

Second, you can **glorify God through how you praise Him**. This is what we do each and every Sunday when we gather together for worship; we literally sing God's praises. It's not that God is sitting there with bad self-esteem and needs a pep talk. Praising God fuels our relationship with Him.

My wife regularly tells me things that she likes about me, and I like to tell her things I like about her. There's not many things we tell each other that we haven't heard, but when we say these things, our relationship is strengthened!

Our relationship with God is healthy when we genuinely worship him.

That means when we come to worship services, we come ready to exalt God rather than making it about us or our preferences. If you're not crazy about a song or an aspect of the service, that's fine! I love Francis Chan's story where someone came to him and shared, "I didn't really like worship today." His response was, "That's ok, we weren't worshipping you anyway!"

We do greatly benefit from worship, though. Our hearts and habits are shaped through what our bodies do in worship. God created us as embodied beings, and our tangible expressions in worship shape our habits and hearts. Worship services are like a weekly training session that condition us to glorify God far beyond one hour on Sunday.

Christians have been formed by worship since the beginning of the church. One of the ways that takes place is through liturgy. Liturgy means “the work of the people.” Followers of Jesus over the centuries have crafted prayers and words that train our spirits and anchor us in timeless truths in an age where it feels like we can’t keep up with the dizzying amount of change and information we take in every day.

When we say the Lord’s Prayer or declare the Apostles Creed, we don’t want to just go through the motions. We want to appreciate that these words are shaping and forming us! This connects us to the church across thousands of years and all around the globe. The same words in the Lord’s Prayer that we pray in a suburb of Pittsburgh are the same words prayed this week in a village in Ghana or a house church in Iran.

Many church traditions will have the congregation go through different postures, like kneeling, in their liturgy. The postures that we take are teaching us through our bodies to honor God. This is what is meaningful about raising hands in worship: I’m being taught to surrender to God’s will rather than my will.

Singing is important in worship. Singing itself is a natural response to what we’re passionate about. Right now, the biggest sports event in the world is happening in the World Cup. Fans are known to enthusiastically sing for the entire game while their team plays. This was the scene a couple of days ago in Buenos Aires when Argentina got to the finals. This is just the after party!

I know some will say, “I’m not big into singing,” but if you’d do it for your favorite team, I don’t know how you can’t do that for God for all he’s done! Singing directs our passions and awakens our souls to the beauty of God.

Repetition is an important part of singing, too. Repetition adds emphasis to what we’re saying. When people chant at a sporting event, they say the same few words over and over. Repetition also acts as a form of meditation. As we meditate on the words we are singing, it gives a chance to allow the truths to sink in.

Finally, we can **Worship God through connecting with others**. God brings a lot of different folks together in our scripture today. Angels, one of the most extraordinary heavenly beings are brought together with the humble shepherds. The shepherds join with Mary and Joseph and then word gets out around town about what God is doing.

Worship is meant to be communal. This is why we pray “OUR Father in heaven” not “MY Father.” This is why we are intentional about keeping our lights on in worship- it’s important to see God’s people gathered together. Our love for Him needs to show up in our relationships with each other. This is also why we greet each other each and every week. It’s not because we want to be hospitable or drive all the introverts crazy! When we greet each other, we see a fellow image bearer who glorifies God by their very existence! In the early church, they made a habit of greeting each other with a kiss to reinforce with affection the fact that they were spiritual family. Don’t worry, we’re not going to start doing that!

I want to invite us to respond today in worship. Let's pray the Lord's Prayer, enter into song and worship and take a posture you may not normally take.