

The Glory of Christmas

by John Vissers

The glory of Christmas is the presence of the living God in our midst, giving weight and meaning to our experience.

Duration: 28:00

Scripture: Isaiah 40:5, Isaiah 60:1-2, Luke 2:8-14, Luke 2:20

Topics: "Christmas"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher shares a story about a family who had lost a loved one and were struggling with the meaning of Christmas. The father, who worked at the post office, was sorting through letters to Santa Claus when he was reminded of the glory of Christmas. The preacher then goes on to explain the glory of the shepherds' experience on the first Christmas, as they heard the good news of Jesus' birth. The preacher emphasizes that the glory of Christmas lies in the gospel of Jesus Christ, which has the power to transform lives.

Transcript

Let's turn to God's Word as we come now to the time of the message and the reading of God's Word. I want to read this morning from the familiar passage of Luke chapter 2 starting at verse 8. A very familiar passage, but let's try to hear it this morning with fresh ears, with alertness to what the Lord may be saying to us as we hear this Word from God. Starting at verse 8, There were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night.

An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.

Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you. He is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you.

You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. Suddenly a great company of the heavenly hosts 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. When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has told us about.

So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph and the baby who was lying in the manger. And 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.

But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told. Amen.

Let's pray together, shall we? Prepare our hearts, O Lord, in these brief moments to receive your word. Silence within us any voice but your own voice, that hearing these familiar words of Christmas, we might indeed be challenged by your gospel, and that we might indeed obey your will for our lives, through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Most of us expect Christmas to be a glorious experience. We hope that it will be a time of joy, a time of happiness, a time of excitement. We work hard at trying to make it so for ourselves, for our families, for our friends, for our loved ones.

We want each Christmas that we experience to be the best Christmas yet. We want it to be great. We want to feel the so-called Christmas spirit.

But, of course, often the great expectations are not realized, and the hopes and the dreams of all the years are not always met for us on Christmas Day or in the Christmas season. And for many people, in fact, Christmas is a big emotional letdown. For many people there is no glory at all to the celebration of Christmas.

It's a time of sadness, a time of loneliness, a time of hopelessness. Now, the Bible talks a lot about glory, and glory, in fact, is a big part of the Christmas story. And we tend to associate glory with joy and with delight and with happiness and with excitement, and those are the kinds of emotions and feelings that well up within us as we seek to celebrate the Christmas season.

Last week, a group from the church attended the Toronto Mendelssohn Choir's presentation of Handel's Messiah at Roy Thompson Hall, and using the texts of Scripture, those of you who know Handel's Messiah will know that again and again the theme of glory emerges. Isaiah 40, verse 5, Or Isaiah 60, verses 1 and 2, And then in Handel's marvelous rendering of our text this morning from Luke 2 and lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them and the glory of the Lord shone round them and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, fear not for behold I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be for all people.

For unto you was born this day in the city of David a Savior which is Christ the Lord. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, and I'm not going to inflict my singing voice on you, but you know the chorus of Handel's Messiah, glory to God in the highest. Goodwill towards men and peace on earth.

But the question of course is simply this, what does glory really mean? What is the glory of Christmas? Is it something which is supposed to make us feel good? Is it intended to give us an emotional and spiritual jumpstart every December? Or is glory something more profound and something more important than that? Last week we looked at the opening verses of John's Gospel in the prologue, verses 1 to 18, and we talked about the incarnation of the Word of God. And there we read in verse 14 that the Word became

flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory of the only begotten Son who came from the Father full of grace and truth. Glory, the glory of the one and only begotten Son of the Father.

And this morning what I want us to do for a few moments is to reflect together on the theme of glory in the account of our Lord's birth in Luke 2. And especially in terms of what was experienced by the shepherds on that first Christmas Eve. In its most basic sense, the word glory means weight. It means substance.

It means presence. And when we think about the glory of God, we are talking about the weight of God, the substance of God, the presence of God, the overwhelming presence of God in our midst. And it's this glory that gave weight and substance and meaning to the experience of the shepherds.

And the question that I want us to think about this morning is, how is it that that same glory can give weight and meaning and substance to our experience of Christmas together as God's people? And so we look together at Luke chapter 2 and verses 8 to 20. And the first thing I want us to notice in this passage, this familiar passage, is that the glory of God is revealed to the shepherds in the midst of the ordinariness of life. Verses 8 and 9, And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night.

An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. The shepherds were out in the fields, living out in the fields, going about their daily work. They were not looking for anything special.

They were not seeking to manufacture anything or trying to create some special experience. They were simple people doing what was part of their normal routine. They were ordinary folk engaged in the ordinary routine of their lives.

And into that situation comes the holy, invasive presence of the living God, breaking into their lives. They weren't expecting it. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and the text says they were terrified.

They were overwhelmed because they were in the very presence of the living God, and they had not expected it. God had come to the place of their lives. The fields where they tended their sheep were suddenly filled with the holy presence of God.

The place of their daily lives had become a dwelling place for God, and they were afraid. And they experienced the glory of God in the midst of life. And I suggest to you that the glory of God which we need to experience is not a joy which we try to manufacture ourselves, but it is being overwhelmed by the presence of the living God in our midst here and now.

And that is precisely what many of us miss at Christmas, the holy presence of God in the midst of our daily and rather routine and rather ordinary lives. We try to manufacture something special rather than being open to what God, through his presence, wants to do in our lives. You know, we're living at a time when the celebration of Christmas has become another example, really, of the superficiality of our culture.

The crass, consumer mentality has really robbed Christmas of any of its meaning anymore. Christmas, if you think of it this way, has no weight anymore. It has no substance.

It has no focus. It has no glory. Christmas will come tomorrow, as it does every December 25th, and it will be gone the day after, and not much will be different.

Because Christmas without Christ is fleeting and ephemeral, and many of us try to experience some kind of a spirit of Christmas without experiencing the presence of God, but a Christmas without God can only ever be a Christmas without glory. The German pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whom I've quoted before from this pulpit, celebrated three Christmases in prison before he was finally executed in 1945 by the Nazis, just weeks before the end of the war. And in a letter to his family, responding to a question of how he was doing, how he could possibly celebrate with any joy or excitement Christmas in a prison cell, this is what he wrote.

He reminded his family and his friends that for a Christian, there is nothing particularly difficult about Christmas in a prison cell. Indeed, he said, Christmas has more meaning and is observed with greater sincerity there than in places where all that survives of the feast is its name. The misery and suffering and poverty and loneliness and helplessness and guilt look very different to the eyes of God from what they do to human beings.

He goes on that God should come down to the very place which we usually abhor, that Christ was born in a stable because there was no room for him in the inn. These are things which a prisoner, which I can understand better than anyone else. Bonhoeffer found the glory of Christmas in that prison cell in Germany in the early 1940s because he knew that the living God was with him.

And the shepherds experienced the glory of God in their midst. They knew that God was with them. And the glory of Christmas, my friends, for you and for me, is Emmanuel, God with us in the midst of our daily routines, in the midst of our troubles, in the midst of our struggles, in the midst of our uncertainties, in the midst of our loneliness, in the midst of our pain, in the midst of our misery, in the midst of the worries of life, God is there.

And his presence may scare us and it may startle us, but it is there. And so I suggest that instead of trying to make Christmas an extraordinary human experience, a sensational time of feeling good, a narcotic to dull the pain of life, let us allow God, the Holy Spirit, to overwhelm us. Let us risk being afraid of the presence of God in our lives.

The glory of Christmas is not the wonderful food or the fellowship of friends and family or the exchanging of gifts as nice and as wonderful as all these things are. It is the glory of the presence, the awesome and overwhelming presence of the living God in our midst in our lives, the invasive presence of God. Do you know that reality this morning? Secondly, as we move on quickly in this text, I want us to notice that in Luke chapter 2, the glory of God is accompanied by an announcement of the good news.

Verses 10 to 12, of the experience of the shepherds on that first Christmas was that they heard the good news of the gospel. They heard the announcement that Jesus Christ is born, that he is the Savior, that he is the Messiah, that he is the Lord of glory born into humble circumstances. And what we have in Luke chapter 2 is really a marvelous summary of the gospel itself.

The account of our Lord's birth in this chapter is one of incongruities and paradoxes. The King of Kings comes in humble circumstances. The Lord of glory is born into a barn, a shelter where animals were housed.

The glory of God is revealed in the most ordinary of circumstances. It's a downward progression. Luke 2 begins with Caesar and works down until we find Jesus in the manger.

And in Jesus Christ, God steps out of eternity into the nitty-gritty of everyday life in the world. And that's the glory of Christmas, the announcement that this has happened, that God has come into the world in the person of Christ to save us. And so I suggest to you on the basis of this text, on the basis of the Word of God, that Christmas is filled with weight and with substance and with meaning and with glory when the gospel is found at its center, that Jesus has come to save us, that Jesus has come to redeem us.

And the unfortunate thing is, of course, that we have turned the account of our Lord's birth and therefore the gospel itself into a nice, nostalgic story which is intended to make us feel warm and fuzzy. The gospel story so powerfully portrayed in the Christmas narratives has been domesticated. We put it on our greeting cards and we put it on our wrapping paper and we smile and we remember our children portraying shepherds and wise men in the Sunday school pageants of years gone by, and they're warm and they're happy memories and they fill us with momentary joy.

But if we're honest with ourselves, the sad thing is that the power of the gospel for the salvation of everyone who believes has too often been harnessed to light our Christmas trees instead of saving our souls. And the announcement that was made to the shepherds is far, far, far more powerful than most of us ever feel or experience. It's far more radical than a message on a Hallmark greeting card.

Do not be afraid. I bring you good news. A Savior has been born.

He is Christ the Lord. That message was intended to startle the shepherds and it's intended to startle us. It was intended to overwhelm them and it's intended to overwhelm us.

It was intended to offend them and it is intended to offend us if we hear what is being said. The Christmas story is about a hasty trip from nowhere Nazareth to backwater Bethlehem made by a Jewish couple named Mary and Joseph during the reign of Augustus. And there in Bethlehem is born this Jewish baby named Jesus who will be nailed to a cross some 33 years later for the sins of the world.

Why? Because he is Christ the Lord. And that my friends is the glory of Christmas. It's the glory of the gospel of God coming into our lives intended to startle us, to overturn our lives, to turn them upside down.

Not a nice domesticated message to support our own ideologies and thinking, but one that is intended to transform our lives to make us conform to the image of Jesus Christ who is the Savior and the Lord. And so on the basis of the Word of God I say to you this morning if you want to experience a glorious Christmas that glory comes with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Have you heard it? Has it startled you? Has it saved you? And then thirdly and finally and I'm not going to have time to develop this point very far this morning, but in Luke chapter 2 the glory of God elicits praise and worship from the shepherds and from the angels.

First the great company of the heavenly host praise God. Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to men and women on whom his favor rests. And then in verse 20 after having seen the Christ child the shepherds glorify and praise God for all the things that they had heard and that they had seen.

The shepherds experienced the holy presence of God through the presence of an angel. They had heard the glorious gospel of God announced to them the good news of salvation. They went and they sought Jesus out and they worshipped him.

And if Christmas means anything to us at all it ought to be for us, for our families, for our children, for our friends a time of worship. May I encourage you tomorrow to come and worship with us but also to worship

with your family, to hear the gospel story again, to pray together, to offer praise to God as you celebrate together with your family and with your friends. It's a time of worship, a time of celebration, a time to offer praise and glory to the Lord Jesus Christ who alone is worthy.

The story is told about a little girl who helped her parents, particularly her father, to rediscover the glory of Christmas. Originally the family had had four members, the father, the mother, a brother, and this little girl. But the brother had died tragically one Christmas and his death had created a continuing crisis in the family.

The father happened to work as a supervisor in the local post office and one morning shortly before Christmas he sat down at his desk sorting through the mail and trying to figure out what he was going to do with all these letters that they were getting at the post office for Santa Claus. And he sat down at his desk and he sorted through those letters and in a moment of surprise he recognized the handwriting on one of the envelopes, the handwriting of his own daughter. He checked the return address and found that in fact it was from his house and that this letter had come from his daughter.

So quickly he opened it and he began to read and this is what he read, Dear Santa, Christmas is a miserable time at our house. The glory of Christmas is gone. Our family was once happy until my brother died.

Mommy and daddy are not like they used to be and when I ask daddy about it he says that only eternity will ever change it. I don't know what eternity is but if you've got any extra eternities would you please leave one at our house this Christmas. The glory of Christmas is of course not something that can be wrapped up and left under a Christmas tree by Santa Claus but it does have to do with eternity.

The presence of the eternal God, the word of the eternal gospel, and the worship and praise of the baby Savior who is Christ the Lord who is the same yesterday, today and forevermore. And so my dear friends, this congregation in Christ I ask you this morning, will you open your life to Christ and experience, really experience the glory of Christmas and with the shepherds will you glorify and will you praise God for all the things that you've seen and that you've heard. Let us pray.

Gracious and eternal God our Father, we confess that so often the Christmas narratives of the Gospels, the Christmas story, the announcement of the good news, the Christmas carols are all so familiar to us that they just pass right by. And we confess also that we seek to find and experience the glory of Christmas in other ways apart from your presence and apart from the gospel. Father speak to us in these moments, fill us with your love and your grace and make for all of us this truly to be a glorious Christmas through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

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