

Christmas Eve, December 24, 2022

LUKE 2:13–14. (EHV, alt.)

And suddenly, there was with the angel a multitude from the heavenly army,
praising God and saying,

Glory to God in the highest
and on earth peace
delight among humans [*variant: among humans of delight*].

In our last two anthems, you've heard allusions to two popular Christmas carols, "Silent Night" and "Angels We Have Heard on High." You'll hear more as we continue, and you'll join with the choir for some of them. Christmas carols are obviously popular this time of year, and you can listen to them in a variety of styles, ranging from haunting chants or a cappella arrangements to instrumental arrangements to orchestra-and-chorus arrangements to pop music arrangements sung by your favorite artist and backed up by a band.

But one Christmas carol that is often overlooked is the very first one, sung by an army of angels to shepherds outside of Bethlehem on the night that Jesus was born. Oh sure, there are some carols, like "Angels We Have Heard on High," that include snippets of it, but usually only snippets. And sometimes when they include snippets, like carols that talk about "peace on earth" and "good will toward men," those snippets are often misunderstood by those who sing them or those who are listening, or both.

So let's pause for a few minutes amidst these Christmas songs and carols to contemplate the message of the first Christmas carol.

The song that the angels sang must have been something to hear. We're told that after a single angel announced Jesus's birth to the shepherds, there was suddenly a multitude from the heavenly army that appeared with him to praise God. Did you ever stop to think: Where did these angels come from? Which adult, which child, was no longer being protected, at least not by angels, because his or her angel had left to join this performance? Who had to struggle that much harder against temptation as the angels sang outside of Bethlehem? Which evil forces in government were less hindered for those few minutes?

There is a lesson in that all by itself, a lesson about priorities. There is a time to let lie even what is good and necessary in order to join others in praising God.

And what was the song that simply had to be sung? It had three stanzas.

The first stanza was: *Gloria in excelsis Deo*, "Glory to God in the highest." This is the sum and substance of all true theology. From ancient times, at all times, the Christian Church and her members have said and sung *solī Deo gloria*, "to God alone be the glory." If your theology gives some of the glory to you or to other humans for your relationship with God and your salvation, then your theology is not the angels' theology. Glory goes to God in the highest. If you imagine God asking you on Judgment Day, "Why do you think I should let you into my heaven?" and the answer you would come up with has anything to do with you, how you've tried your best to be a good person or some other such rubbish, then your theology is not the angels' theology. All glory goes to God in the highest. He is the one who planned our salvation from eternity. He is the one who promised to implement that plan even after we fell into sin and earned nothing but his eternal punishment. He is the one who put that plan into effect in history,

in spite of all our rebellion against him. He did that because, as high as the heavens are above the earth, so much higher are his thoughts than our thoughts. Yes, his thoughts, his plans, his salvation are in the absolute highest place. So glory goes to God in the highest, ever and always.

The second stanza was: “And on earth peace.” Jesus himself explained later, once he had grown up and begun his ministry, that this peace does *not* mean no more shootings, no more bombs or missiles, no more hate crimes or bullying or cancelling, everyone on earth smiling and only clicking the Like button and holding hands and singing Kumbaya. The peace the angels sang about doesn’t mean any of that. The angel who announced Jesus’s birth to the shepherds already told them what this peace consists of: “Do not be afraid. For behold, I bring you good news of great joy, which will be for all people: Today in the town of David, a Savior was born for you. He is Christ the Lord.” This peace consists of not having to be afraid in the presence of holy angels or in the presence of the holy God himself. It consists in knowing that God keeps his gracious promises. It consists in knowing God’s Son in the flesh is our Savior from sin, death, and hell. It consists of knowing that God and humans are reconciled through this Child. It is peace of heart and conscience, peace in the midst of warfare, hatred, and turmoil.

The third stanza is the most problematic, because as I’ve made clear in the bulletin, there are some variants in the ancient Greek manuscripts, so that it could be translated, “delight *or* good will *or* favor among humans,” or, “among humans of delight *or* good will.” No matter which way you translate it, you basically have one of two options: Either the angels were singing about God delighting in humans, or about humans delighting in God and what he has done for us through this child. If the angels sang about God delighting in humans, then they were basically expanding on the second stanza about peace on earth. God delights in us and is well pleased with us through his Son, through the holy life that he would lead and the innocent death he would die in our place. He is delighted with us in Christ he even though he has every right to be with filled with wrath towards us. And we have the seal of his delight in our baptism, just as Jesus received that seal when he was baptized and God the Father said, “This is my Son in whom I delight.”

But if the angels sang about humans delighting in God, then they were basically saying that we only benefit from the peace Christ came to win if we delight in it, which God’s word also says elsewhere. Even though Jesus came for everyone, not everyone benefits from his work and his gifts. Not everyone is going to heaven. Only those are going to heaven who truly delight in this message and in the saving Christ-child whom this message proclaims. Those who do not delight in it forfeit the peace he came to bring. But all who do delight in it—no matter who they are or what they’ve done—do have his peace and the sure hope of eternal life.

Stop to think about the selflessness of this first Christmas carol. It was sung by *angels*. I’ll talk more about this in tomorrow’s sermon, but for now consider: Christ didn’t come for them. He came for humans. He came to bring peace on earth, peace between God and fallen humans, not to bring peace in the spiritual realm, between God and fallen angels. And the good angels don’t benefit from it either. But here they are, selflessly singing their hearts out. They don’t begrudge us the grace God has shown us, even though they’re the ones constantly protecting us and getting us out of the scrapes we’ve gotten ourselves into. If it pleases God, it pleases them. So if they sang their hearts out for that first Christmas carol, how much more shouldn’t we sing our hearts out for our Christmas carols and all our hymns, since we are the ones who actually benefit from this message, from this Christ-child, and benefit eternally?

So sing out the angel's message, the message of glory to God in the highest, the message of peace on earth, the message of God's delight among humans, delight enjoyed by humans who delight in God, and in his Son in the flesh—in his grace, and in his peace. Amen.