

# Glories Stream

The second sermon in the Advent/Christmas series

**“Calm and Bright: 200 Years of ‘Silent Night’”**

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December 9, 2018—Second Sunday of Advent

- Psalm 89:5-8, 13-18 (Good News Translation) <sup>15</sup> How happy are the people who worship you with songs, who live in the light of your kindness!
- Luke 2:8-15 (Good News Translation) <sup>9</sup> An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone over them....
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: God’s incarnation in Jesus calls us to notice and embrace that God’s transformative glory streams into our lives.

Two hundred years old. Not me. Not you. The Christmas carol “Silent Night.” It was written and sung for the first time at Christmas in the year 1818, 200 years ago. Virtually everyone knows the first verse by heart, and most of us would remember the words to the other verses if given a few hints along the way – that’s how beloved that carol has become.

We’re using “Silent Night” as the basis for this year’s Advent theme of “Calm and Bright”, and since this is the Second Sunday of Advent, we’ll look at the second verse of the carol. Its words are printed in the bulletin right below the sermon title, and again this week I invite you not to *sing* them but to *say* them with me, in the voice we’d use if a sleeping baby were in the pew next to us.

*Silent night, holy night! Shepherds quake at the sight,  
Glories stream from heaven afar,  
Heavenly hosts sing "Alleluia!;  
Christ the Savior is born, Christ the Savior is born."*

This verse transports us to the fields on the rolling hills that surround the tiny village of Bethlehem. The bountiful fields of grain probably gave Bethlehem its name, since in Hebrew Bethlehem means “house of bread.” Why were the shepherds and their flocks in the farmers’ fields? Usually the sheep and goats would be led to uncultivated land where they would eat whatever scrub vegetation they could find. “After the harvest, shepherds were welcome to bring their animals into the fields to eat the remaining grain and stubble. In return, the sheep and goats fertilized the fields for the next planting season.”<sup>1</sup>

Religious artwork and our imaginations have romanticized the image of shepherds of antiquity. But shepherds were not held in high regard by society:

...they were usually ranked with... tanners, ...camel drivers, and other despised occupations. Being away from home at night [shepherds] were unable to protect their women and therefore were considered dishonorable. In addition, they often were considered thieves because [frequently] they grazed their flocks on other people’s property [without their permission].<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.drivethruhistory.com/shepherds-fields-near-bethlehem/#> accessed 12/6/2018

<sup>2</sup> Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992, 296.

Surely from time to time you've seen someone at work and thought to yourself, "Oh, I would *hate* to have to do *that* for a living!" Well, in ancient times that's how people felt about shepherds.

Since I'm not aware of any professional shepherds in our midst this morning, we'll have to imagine what it would be like out there on a hillside near Bethlehem.

- It's dark. The few and dim lights of Bethlehem are a half-mile, a mile, maybe three miles in the distance.
- It's calm. Now and then a sheep or goat bleats. But that's about all you hear.
- It's cold. At this time of the year the sun will warm the air to the 60s or 70s or even 80s during the day, but at night the temperature drops to the 40s or 30s.
- Wrapped in coarse wool tunics, the shepherds have a small fire for cooking and warmth, but not so bright that it interferes with their ability to see into the darkness. Their eyes and ears are attentive to any signs of predatory animals threatening their flocks, or for nomads looking to steal an animal for their next meal. And even with a new moon, the canopy of stars overhead provides for a gentle illumination providing silhouettes of animals resting on the ground, or bending down to nibble on stalks, or looking into the distance.

All is calm.

Suddenly, all is also bright. A messenger of God appears. (That's what the Greek word "angel" means: simply "messenger." Nothing about wings or flying; those are the product of artists' imaginations trying to explain how these heavenly messengers convey themselves between heaven and earth.) God's messenger appears out of nowhere and the shepherds are frightened:

- First, how did this messenger sneak up on them without them noticing?
- Second, why did the messenger come to them, of all people? Was he aiming for Bethlehem and simply missed his target?
- Third..., what is this light, this warmth, this sensation of well-being and peace and hope and joy that seems to be emanating from the messenger and enveloping them like a fog?

The angel told them: What they were experiencing was the result of "good news of a great joy."

The lyrics of the Christmas carol use this image: "Glory streams from heaven afar." In our worship life we hear and use words like "glory" and "glorious" and "glorify," but we might not think much about what they mean. "Glory" is a term rich with meaning.

- Glory is worshipful adoration and praise.
- Glory is also God's magnificent blessing.
- Glory is sometimes expressed as individuals or groups overflowing with praise for God.
- Sometimes glory is experienced as being bathed in light – brilliant, stunning, comforting, empowering light.
- Glory is our reaction to the overwhelming, unending goodness of God.
- Glory is also transformative; like light brings illumination to that which it touches, God's glory imparts the blessing of its beauty and wonder on all who perceive and receive it.

But in today's beloved scripture reading from Luke's gospel, God's generous, unmerited blessing... God's unmatched greatness and limitless mercy... God's *glory* was being poured upon the undeserving. The shepherds felt undeserving. Society told them they were. While they were tolerated for their undesirable but necessary function, society held them at arm's length... if not farther. But God's glory streamed into the lives of those humble shepherds nevertheless.

Maybe we feel undeserving. We should. We know we're not perfect—*boy!* do we know that!

- Maybe you hear messages from strangers out in public telling you you're no good, you're undeserving because of the way you look or the causes you believe in.
- Maybe you are told you're not worthy by people who stand to gain by putting you down.
- Maybe people you depend on say demeaning, deeply hurtful things to you in moments of anger.
- Maybe you reinforce those messages by telling yourself you don't deserve God's acceptance, mercy and love.

But by complete grace God's goodness, God's glory streams upon you and me graciously and abundantly, blessing us with calm amid turmoil, blessing us with hope in times of uncertainty, blessing us with courage to face up to unnerving circumstances that threaten us. God's glory streams upon us, blessing us with the ability to trust when we can't be certain, blessing us with the capacity to have faith when there's no solid evidence, blessing us with uplifting forgiveness when we're immobilized by the weight of our failures.

As the carol sang, "Glories stream from heaven afar...." Glories streamed upon those humble shepherds from heaven afar, with countless host of heavenly messengers lifting their praise to Almighty God.

God's glories stream into our world, into our lives all the time... these are gifts of God's unmerited grace.

This is nothing new. You heard this last Christmas, but you need to hear it again, and remember it again, and believe it again so you can live it again.

God's gift to the world at Christmas of Jesus our Master and Savior is God's reminder to notice and welcome God's blessings, God's mercy, God's hope for the world. Glories stream from heaven afar, and we join with heavenly hosts to sing "Alleluia!" For by God's grace, Christ the Savior is born!