

Christmas is the most musical of holidays, and I don't think there is a close second. No other annual celebration generates nearly as much special music, with songs that reach into every corner of our culture, with every conceivable musical style represented, from chant to rap and all points in between. You may have your own personal rules about when to start listening to Christmas music—I tend to wait until after Thanksgiving, and this year it wasn't until we were well into December that I started—but the fact is, a lot of people are listening. Artists like Elvis, Bing Crosby, Mariah Carey, and the Trans-Siberian Orchestra are heard everywhere you go. And in the Church, we have our own district soundtrack, don't we? Many Lutheran churches like ours very studiously withhold the great Christmas carols until now, with the understanding that December belongs mostly to Advent and its themes of preparation and anticipation. But now it is Christmas Eve. The time has come. Silent Night, O Little Town of Bethlehem, Away in a Manger, Hark the Herald Angels Sing, all of this sacred music lifts our hearts, lights our imaginations, taking us back not only to Christmases of our past, but back to the event that started it all.

And tonight, what I want to share with you, is this: at the event that started it all, the birth of Jesus, a song of praise rang out across the open fields. It's a song I'd like to listen to again, with you. It's the song of the angels. Because it's the song of the angels, it's a heavenly song, but it's a heavenly song that links heaven and earth together.

We're told that after a single angel announced the birth of Jesus, "suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased." And there's the song, sung by an army choir. That's what the phrase "heavenly host" actually means. They're not a multitude of maître des ready to seat you at the dinner; this is a military arrangement. This is an army, thundering a birthday song. Some of you I know have been in situations where thousands of people were singing at once, and you remember how it feels. It's kind of hard to put into words. This was a perfect, heavenly sound, but it was being heard out in a field, carried on the wind, to the ears of dumbstruck shepherds. And what the song said was that, first of all, the birth of this baby in Bethlehem brought glory to God in the highest.

*Glory to God in the highest.* How could this be? Of all things that could give God glory, and cause heaven to erupt in praise, why the birth of a baby? Especially one born in conditions like this? In human terms, glory is usually reserved for grand accomplishments and conquering heroes. To receive glory is to be celebrated for what you have done, a mighty action, some sort of obstacle overcome. How does the birth of a boy in out-of-way Bethlehem glorify God in highest heaven?

The answer breathtaking. The baby in the manger is the Son of God. He is God in the flesh, swaddled in strips of cloth. God with us, entering the world He made; the author of the story writing himself into the tale. In a certain way, the Lord God is simply following his own pattern of doing the least likely thing to accomplish His purposes. The story of the Bible is the

history of this pattern unfolding. The least becomes the greatest. The humble are lifted up. The last, the least likely, the outsider, the powerless, these are the ones God uses over and over again to do things for Him. The birth of Jesus marks the beginning of the most pure expression of this. Simply put, when this baby grows up, He is going to redeem the world. That is what gives glory to God on the holy night the angels sang to the shepherds. It's all starting. The plan is in motion.

And I don't think it is difficult to build a case that the world needs to be redeemed, do you? We could go back to Genesis chapter 3 and examine the decision that was made to doubt God's Word and to disobey Him. That truly is the root of every human problem. The consequences of that decision included (and still include) difficulties in work and relationships and eventually death. We need a solution. We need to be claimed and loved and made right. This is what God has done, but not by giving you a program to go and do. He has done it by giving us a person, who did everything for us. Jesus obeyed God in everything He did, achieved a perfect record, but instead of keeping the gold medal for Himself, He lets it pass to you. Not only that, he paid for everything you've ever done wrong by his suffering and death. In every way, He did what we should have done, so that His Father can treat us like we did do everything right. To top it off, He rose from death on Easter morning—an actual return to physical life, as a sign that He had undone the every last consequence of disobedience. Trusting in this Jesus means you too can expect real life after death, as that trust and faith connects you to Him forever. This is the redemption Jesus brings. This is what glorifies God. This is why the angels sing, and the reason for the peace that is a part of their song.

“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased.” Do you see? The angels are singing about an internal peace. This peace comes from knowing God is pleased with you. He is not warring against you. He is not out to get you. He is not punishing you for your mistakes. This peace comes from knowing God is pleased with you, and the ultimate question is, how do you know if God is pleased with you? How *can* you know? This is how. God gave you His Son. Jesus—and everything He did—is given to you as pure gift. When you receive the gift of Jesus by faith, God the Father regards you as He regards His own Son. He delights in you as He delights in His Son. He sees someone as perfectly right as His own Son. Can you imagine a world in which more and more people understood themselves this way—a world populated with people convinced they are God's redeemed, beloved children because of Jesus? Can you imagine the songs we would sing then?