

The Angels' Song: Gloria

*A sermon preached by Emily Hull McGee on Luke 2:8-15
on December 3, 2017 at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC*

For many of us who grew up in church, having a role to play in your church's annual Christmas play was as ubiquitous an experience as anything. Some of us with fourth quarter birthdays proclaim with pride how we played the role of baby Jesus as a kid! Others of us with summer birthdays raided the church costume closet to find musty yards of fabric or hand-me-down bathrobes to drape over our heads or around our bodies and become shepherds or wise men. I remember standing in a pillowcase-turned-angel costume, and helping my mama take a wire clothes hanger and a stretch of tinsel to construct my halo. In a similar way in one of my favorite Christmas movies, a young mother and daughter make a costume together for the Christmas play, as the little girl was the even the nativity's Lead Lobster! But no matter the costume or the character, what remains underneath it all is a deep and timeless desire to understand, to capture just a glimpse of that holy night, to tap into the mystery of the incarnation that filled the skies with angel song.

Not even the very best Christmas pageant can give us a hint of the symphony of divine glory those angels proclaimed. Pastor Tom Long told about the year he saw the Radio City Music Hall's Christmas Spectacular, a show that built each minute to its grand finale of a live reenactment of Luke 2's nativity scene. As you might imagine, those shepherds were **not**

clad in bathrobes, but rather the best that Broadway's dollars could provide. Real sheep and cows gave a realistic chorus of Christmas carols for the babe. Mary and Joseph were magazine-ready, and that baby Jesus should have been on a Gerber ad. At just the right moment, a flashing electric star lit up the auditorium, and a host of choral angels began to fill the space with a full-throated rendition of the Hallelujah chorus. You could say it was spectacular!

But even though the audience hardly knew where to focus in the midst of such a spectacle, it lacked the very heart of the thing itself — the glory of the Lord. Long said, "the very attempt to look directly at this moment, to replicate its majestic size, had, ironically, drained it of all mystery. Everyone's eyes were filled, but no one pondered anything in her heart."¹

You and I may not be trying to ring in the Christmas season with bathrobed shepherds or even with live sheep, but we do try and access that glory of the Lord in our own ways, don't we? Amidst the drone of bad news and the hum of division that becomes so deafening and threatens to drown everything else out, don't we long to hear even the faintest song of good news and peace, especially this time of year?

But no matter how many twinkle lights fill our Christmas trees and front porches, no matter how many nativity scenes fill our halls and

¹ Story and quote from Tom Long's sermon, "Shepherds and Bathrobes," *Something Is About To Happen*, p44.

homes, or even no matter how many amazing brass players fill our Sanctuary, we can't replicate the triumph of the skies that night when God tore open the heavens to bring good news to a bunch of dirty shepherds working the night shift.²

No matter how numerous the cheery carols are we sing or how many times we bid folks a "Merry Christmas" or "Happy Holidays" this time of year, we can't replace those glad tidings and goodwill for all people on this earth, real news that came first to the poorest and most marginalized.

No matter how earnest our pleas for the Christmas spirit, no matter how many ways we try and numb the pain and grief and suffering we feel this time of year, we can't substitute the pure promise of peace that comes only from God in the manger, peace that reaches the darkest nights, the farthest-flung places, the unlikeliest of people, in the least-expected way.

No, the glory of God, that *gloria* on the lips of the angels, comes straight from the source, straight from the messengers of God sent to proclaim peace — peace not just in heaven, but on earth; peace, and God's goodwill to all people.³ It's no wonder that the shepherds response shifted from abject fear to sheer astonishment! And it's no surprise then

² There's a wonderful sermon called "God and the Night Shift" about the good news to the shepherds, found in *Preaching on the Brink: The Future of Homiletics*, ed. Martha J. Simmons, p112.

³ Raymond Brown's words on this canticle were most helpful! Found in *The Birth of the Messiah*, p425-427.

that unlike that Christmas Spectacular at Radio City Music Hall, Luke doesn't even try to describe the glory of God. There's no angel head count, no detailed notes on how the multitude actually shows up, no word about a nosy neighbor just down the field from the shepherds who heard a ruckus and peeked out his window to see what was going on. No, instead the story shifts to capture the reflections of that glory in people who caught a glimpse.⁴

For when the glory of the Lord shone that night, when angels proclaimed that glory right back to the God from whom it came, shepherds ran to Bethlehem, Mary treasured this good news and pondered it in her heart, and all who heard the story were amazed. Darkness gave way to light; fear gave way to peace. Glory was given through and to God, and peace fell — if just but for a moment — across all the earth.

So how then might that glory on the lips of the angels reflect into your life and our common life together this year? What dark corners of your life will you let Christ's light into? What words of anger or fear, diminishment or disgust towards others might you shift into a melody of goodwill? What places in your relationships or your own mind that make you sore afraid could instead with God leave you astonished? How might this life of following Emmanuel, God-with-us, be more than just a costume

⁴ Tom Long made this profound point in "Shepherds and Bathrobes," p43.

you throw on at the appropriate moments but rather a cloak of hope, peace, joy, and love that remains throughout all the changing seasons of life? Like all the characters in the Christmas story who caught a glimpse of the glory of God, how might even you be transformed?

The old classic movie *A Charlie Brown Christmas* is a favorite in my house, especially this time of year. And as many times as I have seen it — and maybe you too — the most climactic moment of the movie is one you may have missed all these years. You see, things were not going well for Charlie Brown. His friends - the actors in their Christmas play - weren't listening to his directorial leadership. The simple little tree he had picked out didn't please all the others, who were longing for the showiest, glitziest one on the lot. Even Snoopy was making fun of him! "Isn't there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?", Charlie Brown cried.

To which sweet Linus stepped forward, his trusted security blanket firmly in hand (because where else would it be?), and said calmly, "sure Charlie Brown, I can tell you." The complaining actors get quiet and the stage darkens as Linus walks to the center, and begins reciting the familiar words about those shepherds abiding in their fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. As the glory of the Lord shone 'round about them to which the shepherds trembled in terror, Linus repeated the words that have rung throughout the centuries when humans have encounters with the divine: "fear not!" His hands flung out as he said it, and that's when you realize — *Linus has dropped his blanket*. Fear collapsed under those

good tidings of great joy, and the single voice of a bathrobed shepherd boy with a security blanket reflected the light of a multitude of messengers, singing, "*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace, goodwill to all people.*" "And that," Linus said, "is what Christmas is all about, Charlie Brown."⁵

Brothers and sisters, might we do the same? That would be quite the sight to behold. It might just look a bit like the glory of God. Amen!

⁵ Observation of this classic moment found here: <https://www.crosswalk.com/special-coverage/christmas-and-advent/just-drop-the-blanket-the-moment-you-never-noticed-in-a-charlie-brown-christmas.html>