

GLORY IN YOUR LIFE

Preached by Douglas Norris at First United Methodist Church, Palo Alto, California
December 25, 1983

Luke 2: 8-14

Lynne Caine, describing her experience in the book, *Widow*, wrote, "Christmas has been a horror to me since my husband died." A teacher said, "At Christmas I become depressively lonely. My soul has a deep need to feel a depth of joy, but I can't find it." What is missing? The glory of Christmas. The singing of angels. Howard Thurman, in his poem, "The Singing of Angels," wrote,

There must be always remaining
In everyone's life
Some place for the singing of angels.

When the angels appeared to the shepherds and sang to them, the glory of the Lord surrounded the shepherds. What about glory and angels? What does glory look like?

In the Bible, glory is the ascription of praise to God. To glorify God is to give glory to God in worship. The word "glory" comes to us from "gloria" in Latin. The Greek word for glory is "doxa," as in doxology. The doxology we sing when we present our offering is the act of doing doxa or doing glory. The "Gloria" which is so gloriously presented this morning by the choir and brass ensemble is the giving of glory to God, "Glory to God in the highest" ("Gloria in excelsis deo"), which is what the angels sang to the shepherds.

Glory in the Bible is also the visible sign of God's presence, usually associated with light, an aura, a luminous manifestation, a brilliance, a halo. Often paintings of the manger scene picture a halo around the family, or especially around the baby. In the book of Revelation when heaven is described as the Holy City, the city is lighted by the glory of God. The presence of God is so brilliant there is no need of sun, or moon, or stars.

Such was the experience of the shepherds that night long ago in the hills outside Bethlehem. The angels sang, and the glory--a light, a brilliance--surrounded the shepherds. What a magnificent experience!

What about angels? In the Bible, angels are sometimes messengers of God in human form. A person who brings a message or a blessing from God can be called an angel. But also, in the Bible, angels are spiritual beings, such as appeared to the shepherds. A few years ago it was popular to dismiss angels as belonging to folklore or superstition. The idea of angelic beings did not fit a scientific, materialistic understanding of the universe. But the universe as we experience it is not only materialistic, and experienced sensually through touch, seeing, hearing, smelling, and tasting. The universe is also spiritual. Some humans are privileged to glimpse the spirit world, as the shepherds did. Throughout history, people have had visions, have had experiences with glory. Saul on the road to Damascus was blinded by the glory, the light of God, and the experience was life-changing.

Thomas John Carlisle laments, "I wish some angel would whisper in my ear or ask me out to lunch or lift me up and set me down in sight of joy." Don't you long for, or would you be frightened of, an experience with God that would be glorious? Does your life need a touch of glory? Listen to Howard Thurman's entire poem:

There must be always remaining in everyone's life some place for the singing of angels--some place for that which in itself is breathlessly beautiful and by an inherent prerogative throwing all the rest of life into new and created relatedness. Something that gathers up in itself all the freshets of experience from drab and commonplace areas of living and glows in one bright white light of penetrating beauty and meaning--then passes. The commonplace is shot through now with new glory--old burdens become lighter, deep and ancient wounds lose much of their old, old hurting. A crown is placed over our heads that for the rest of our lives we are trying to grow tall enough to wear. Despite all of the crassness of life, despite all of the hardness of life, despite all of the harsh discords of life, life is saved by the singing of angels.

Oh, for an experience of glory, the brilliant splendor of God's presence. How does it happen? God is not manipulated; angels cannot be summoned at will; glory is not turned on like a faucet. We do not tell God when to act, but we can be ready. We can be open. Let's look to the shepherds for clues to discovering and experiencing glory.

First, the shepherds were ordinary people, not learned, not the beautiful people, not the wealthy, not leaders of the government, just ordinary people. They were ordinary people, like you and I, doing an ordinary task, doing what they were supposed to be doing, tending the sheep. They were not in meditation on top of a mountain. They had not fasted so that they hallucinated readily. They were tending the sheep, and it happened. The glory of the Lord appeared in their midst.

In fact, glory is in the ordinary; the heavenly is part of the earthly. The holy is on every hand, for those who have eyes to see, the imagination to dream, and the heart to feel. Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote, "Earth is crammed with heaven, and every common bush afire with God; and only he who sees takes off his shoes--the rest sit around it and pluck blackberries." The same bush: some see food, some complain about the stickers, but others see the holy, the glory, the grandeur of God crowded into the ordinary. It's in the attitude. Two workmen were asked, "What are you doing?" One replied, "I'm laying bricks." The other said, "I'm building a cathedral." Same task, different perspective. The latter had a sense of the glory of his task; he was creating something magnificent.

Exuberant Norman Vincent Peale credits his mother for planting a zest for life within him. One foggy night he and his mother were crossing on a ferryboat from New Jersey to New York City. To young Norman there was nothing particularly beautiful about fog, but his mother was ecstatic. She said, "Look at the lights, how they mysteriously fade into the distance." Her face was aglow when the fog horn blew. Then she said to Norman, "I have been giving you advice all your life, Norman. Some of it you have taken; some you haven't. But here is a suggestion I want you to take. Realize that the world is athrill with beauty and excitement. Keep yourself sensitized to it. Love the world, its beauty and its people." The earth is crammed with heaven for those who have eyes to see.

One of the classic cartoons is H. T. Webster's famous 1909 drawing, which celebrated the 100th anniversary of Abraham Lincoln's birth. The picture shows two Kentucky frontiersmen pausing to visit. One frontiersman asks: "Any news down t' th' village, Ezry?" His friend answers, "Well Squire McClean's gone t'

Washington t' see Madison swore in, and ol' Spellman tells me this Bonapart fella has captured most o' Spain. What's new out here, neighbor?" "Nuthin' a-tall, nuthin' a-tall 'cept for a new baby down t' Tom Lincoln's. Nuthin' ever happens out here." I wonder how many Bethlehem villagers noticed all the shepherds in town heading for a stable out back, and were told, "Oh, some baby has just been born. Nothin' too exciting. Nuthin' ever happens around here." They who have eyes to see....

Worship may be an experience of glory, for those who have eyes to see. We Americans want to be on a first-name basis with everyone. We expect new acquaintances to be chums, buddies, even God. We put Jesus signs on our bumpers and then drive through the mud. It is fine to know Jesus as friend, but there must also be times of worship, of reverence, realizing we are in the presence of the Living God, the Judge of the universe, the creator of all there is. When you read the Bible, open it in reverence. Expect to meet God in the Bible. Treat it reverently, with awe. When you pray, approach God in humility. Don't talk all the time when you pray. Watch, wait, listen. Be open to the glory, so that when God visits, you are ready.

The shepherds were ordinary people doing an ordinary task, and they learned that the line between the heavenly and the earthly, the material and the spiritual, is a very fine line indeed. The angels broke through.

Secondly, the shepherds heard the word. In the midst of their immediate reaction of fear, they heard the word of the angels. "To you is born a Saviour," said the angel. They experienced the love of God for them. Is there anything more glorious than to hear in the depths of your soul that God loves you, that you are special to God, that God loves you so much he sent his son, and he comes again and again to you. God so loves you he knows your name, as in baptism, he counts every hair on your head, says Jesus. I realize that in some cases that is not too difficult a task. However, someone said, "God made only a few perfect heads; the rest are covered with hair." When you hear the word that the Saviour has come for you, to relieve your burden, to forgive your sin, to cleanse you of garbage, to make you a child of God, to pay your way to heaven, then be prepared for glory in your life. It can be overwhelming.

Thirdly, the shepherds acted. They trusted the experience. They believed the angel. The glory experienced was translated into action as they went to Bethlehem. Too often we miss out on glorious experiences because we think they are odd, or too unusual, and they are dismissed. How many great experiences have been lost to dullness? Unbelief? The shepherds stretched. They did something outlandish; they left their sheep and went to the manger. They grew. As Howard Thurman wrote in his poem, "A crown is placed over our heads that for the rest of our lives we are trying to grow tall enough to wear."

I suspect the angels are waiting to break through into your life with the glory of the Lord. Can you hear them? See them? "There must be always remaining in everyone's life some place for the singing of angels." "And the glory of the Lord shone around them."

G L O R Y I N Y O U R L I F E

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DECEMBER 25, 1983