

Introduction:

- A. *Illus.*: Susan and I went to see the movie, “The Man Who Invented Christmas.” It’s the story of how Charles Dickens came to write “A Christmas Carol” in 1843. According to the movie, Christmas wasn’t much of a holiday in England at the time of its writing. Then on Dec. 19, 1843, just six days before Christmas, the book came out. It sold out in a week, and Ebenezer Scrooge, the three ghosts, Tiny Tim and all the others became household names. Christmas became the huge holiday we know it to be and charitable giving went through the roof after it was published.

You remember the story, I’m sure. In one night the old miser Scrooge is completely transformed by the visit of the ghosts of Christmas past, present and future. When he realizes he *didn’t* die, he’s a transformed man. At first he didn’t know how much time has passed.

Running to the window, he opened it, and put out his head. ... “What’s to-day?” cried Scrooge, calling downward to a boy in Sunday clothes, who perhaps had loitered in to look about him.

“Eh? ” returned the boy, with all his might of wonder.

“What’s to-day, my fine fellow?” said Scrooge.

“To-day?” replied the boy. “Why, Christmas Day.”

“It’s Christmas Day!” said Scrooge to himself. “I haven’t missed it.”

At the very end, Dickens wrote,

Ever afterwards; and it was always said of him, that he knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge. May that be truly said of us, and all of us! And so, as Tiny Tim observed, God bless Us, Every One!

- B. I know another story quite like that. So do you. Only with shepherds and angel visitors instead of ghosts. An overnight Christmas transformation from “*keeping watch over their flocks by night*” to “*they returned, glorifying and*

*praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.” The transformed Scrooge glorified and praised Christmas. And over a 150 years later, we’re still following his lead. We can’t find enough ways to glorify and praise Christmas, but as believers we take our cues, not from Scrooge, but from the shepherds who *returned glorifying and praising God.**

- C. There is a little problem, though. We’re not that good at it. Once we come to Christ and the wonder wears off a little, joy seems like a Christmas tie or sweater hanging in the closet that we only put on for special occasions. But you can’t exactly just *put on* joy. Joy needs to be fed, fueled, sparked. And this is just the season to do it.

Both Scrooge’s story and the shepherds’ started in the dark.

*An angel of the Lord appeared to them, **and the glory of the Lord shone around them**, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”*

I. IF WE’RE GOING TO GLORIFY AND PRAISE GOD, WE NEED TO SEE THE GLORY OF GOD IN CHRIST’S BIRTH

- A. You heard it: “*and the glory of the Lord shone around them.*” What must that have been like!?! The few times in the Bible where someone sees the glory of the Lord are heart-stopping. It wasn’t just the floodlight effect. The angel and the light were alight with God’s own living glory. It was as if the atmosphere of heaven broke through just around them.
- B. But the angel’s words and the glory of the Lord encircling the shepherds are not the real glory story. The real glory lay

shrouded in the dim shadows of the stable. “*She gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.*” Later we’re told that “*Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.*” To see the glory, we need to do that also; slowly, patiently:

*“Today in the town of David
a Savior has been born to you;
he is the Messiah,
the Lord.*

This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” [vv.7,11-12] A sign of what?

There’s the greater glory. There is the very presence of God, the embodiment of the gospel in the baby. God’s Savior, the Messiah, the Lord himself, and lying in a manger. Glory to God in the lowest!

- C. The glory of this familiar scene is both obvious and reserved. I think we may miss the glory, not because we don’t understand what this means, but because we do not *ponder* it. Let me give you an example of great pondering. It comes from a sermon by St. Augustine preached at Christmas about 400 A.D.

“O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise”;

- *of that Lord through whom all things were made; and who was Himself made among all things;*
- *who is the revealer of the Father, creator of His mother;*
- *the Son of God from the Father without mother, the Son of man from His mother without father...*
- *The Word Who is God before all time became flesh at the appointed time.*

- *The maker of the sun was made under the sun.*
- *He Who fills the world lays in a manger, great in the form of God but tiny in the form of a servant; this was in such a way that neither was His greatness diminished by His tininess, nor was His tininess overcome by His greatness.* [Sermon 187]

Look on that scene in the stable for awhile and a glory brighter than that which surrounded the angels will be yours.

Not only must we *see* the glory of God...

II. WE MUST HEAR THE ANGELS GLORIFYING AND PRAISING GOD

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.” The birth of Jesus has two results that set the angels praising God, bursting through the curtain of heaven.

- A. “Glory to God in the highest heaven.” Isn’t it always and eternally true that there is glory to God in the highest heaven? Aren’t the great angelic beings constantly worshipping with, *“Holy, holy, holy”*? **Of course, but the birth of Christ raised the exaltation in heaven to a new level; not necessarily louder but deeper.** The incarnation is the epitome of God’s love and faithfulness, his sovereignty and humility. Here was an act of God far more glorious than creation or his deliverance of Israel from Egypt. Here was a divine accomplishment that took the beings of the highest heaven to deeper adoration. At the birth of Jesus, the Son of God, the heavenly hosts saw in God something they had never seen before. It was almost as if the angels shouted to the shepherds, *“Do you have any idea what this means!?”*

J. I. Packer, in his classic book, *Knowing God*, wrote, “...the supreme mystery with which the gospel confronts us, ... lies, not in the Good Friday message of atonement, nor in the Easter message of resurrection, but in the Christmas message of incarnation. The really staggering Christian claim is that Jesus of Nazareth was God made man—that the second person of the Godhead became the ‘second man’ (1 Cor 15:47), determining human destiny, the second representative head of the race, and that He took humanity without loss of deity, so that Jesus of Nazareth was as truly and fully divine as He was human. ... The more you think about it, the more staggering it gets. Nothing in fiction is so fantastic as is this truth of the incarnation.” [p.46]

The angels of heaven grasped this staggering truth and that’s why there was “glory to God in the highest heaven.” When we ponder the reasons, the wonder grows within us, too.

- B. The other result is celebrated in the second phrase, “and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.” Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote in the midst of the Civil War,

“There is no peace on earth, I said,
For hate is strong, and mocks the song
Of peace on earth, goodwill to men.”

If you look around, there is still no peace on earth. But there are those among the citizens of this world who have found peace through Jesus the Messiah, the Lord. It is the peace of God, given to us in Christ, that astonishes the host of heaven and gives us reason to sing.

Illus.: Dave Papritz passed along a story from Friday’s *Wall Street Journal*, titled “The Salvation of ‘Napalm

Girl’.” It is the testimony of **Kim Phuc Phan Thi**. You’ve seen her picture. That photo won the Pulitzer Prize in 1972 at the height of the Vietnam war. It showed her, “age 9, running along a puddled roadway in front of an expressionless soldier.” She writes, “I was photographed with arms outstretched, naked and shrieking in pain and fear, with the dark contour of a napalm cloud billowing in the distance.”

She was badly burned and 45 years later still receives treatment. She writes, “*For years I bore the crippling weight of anger, bitterness and resentment toward those who caused my suffering.*” On Christmas Eve, 1982, she was attending a special worship service at a small church in Vietnam where the pastor explained that Christmas “*is about the gift of Jesus Christ, who was wrapped in human flesh and given to us by God. As the pastor spoke I knew in my heart that something was shifting inside me.*”

“*A decade removed from the defining tragedy of my life, I still desperately needed peace. I had so much hatred and bitterness in my heart. Yet I was ready for love and joy. I wanted to let go of my pain. I wanted to pursue life instead of holding fast to fantasies of death. When Pastor Ho finished speaking, I stood up, stepped out into the aisle, and made my way to the front of the sanctuary to say ‘yes’ to Jesus Christ.*”

“***When I woke up that Christmas morning, I experienced my first-ever heartfelt celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ.***” [That’s a far better story than Scrooge’s!] “*I know what it is like to experience terror, to feel despondent, to live in fear. I know how wearying and hopeless life can be sometimes. After years in the spiritual wilderness, I felt the kind of healing that can only come from God.*”

Dave told me he wept when he read that, sitting there in a coffee shop. Through Christ, God's peace has rested on countless people, including most of us, and each one is a reason to glorify God.

Luke 2:15-20...

III. HAVING SEEN AND HEARD ALL THESE THINGS, LET US GLORIFY AND PRAISE GOD!

- A. The shepherds returned to their work "*glorifying and praising God for all the things they had seen and heard.*" Isn't that a richer ending than, "*God bless us, everyone!*"
- B. Our sermons this season have answered the question, *What to give for Christmas?* This morning the question is what to give God? Christina Rossetti's famous poem said, "*What can I give him? Give him my heart.*" But once we've given God our heart, then what? **Give him glory and praise.**

It can be a tall order for people who are such dim bulbs and mumbling worshipers. But if we, like Mary, *treasure these things and ponder them in our hearts*, and like the shepherds, *spread the word what we've been told about this child*, we will return to our daily lives on Tuesday *glorifying and praising God for all the things we have seen and heard.*