

# The Best Christmas Song Ever

Luke 2:8-14

Two of the strongest FM signals in the county have been cranking out Christmas music since Thanksgiving. Most of the time, I find it pure joy, but there are times when it's pure horror – like anytime they play Gayla Peevey's 1953 so-called classic, "I Want a Hippopotamus for Christmas" or those dogs barking out the tune to "Jingle Bells" or anything by the Chipmunks or any version of "The Twelve Days of Christmas." I understand that one of those might be a personal favorite of yours, and that's okay. There's nothing more subjective than musical taste. But, I hope that on some level, we can all agree that the best Christmas song ever was one we never sang and, in fact, never even heard. We only read about in God's Word.

<sup>8</sup>And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. <sup>9</sup>An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. <sup>10</sup>But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. <sup>11</sup>Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. <sup>12</sup>This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." <sup>13</sup>Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

<sup>14</sup>"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests."

A few weeks ago, Linda and I went to a musical stage version of "It's a Wonderful Life." I guess they did a good job bringing the story to the stage, but, because of the way it had to be edited, I think that it would have been difficult for me to follow the story line had I not already been so familiar with it. You see, that's my wife's favorite Christmas movie ever, so after thirty years of marriage, I know the story pretty well, and knowing the story made the stage production richer.

In a similar sense, though the story of the angelic appearance to the shepherds in the fields near Bethlehem is remarkable at any level, it seems all the richer when I am already steeped in the story of God's redemption of man. That night, a Promise as old as the dilemma of human sin itself was fulfilled. For centuries, God had been sending messengers to His people, encouraging them, "Do not be afraid." This night, the power behind all those encouraging words was born.

## I. The Heavenly Concert

### A. An Audience of Shepherds

No one had more pressing responsibilities in the land of the Bible than did shepherds, for sheep are very dependent and not too bright. We are touched by the tender picture of the LORD as our Shepherd of His sheep, but we should also recognize that built into the metaphor is a humbling and not-so subtle reminder of our neediness and our inability to find our own way. Indeed, shepherds were busy men, but when an angel of the Lord appears and invites a person to a birthday party, and then, he's backed up by a whole choir of his companions, one tends to drop what he's doing.

## **B. A Choir of Angels**

It would be a sin to pay the slightest worship to the mightiest angel, but it would be unnatural if we did not regard angels somewhat affectionately. After all, when we consider the roles of angels in the lives of men, we cannot help but like them for they seem to like us. This angelic ministry to the shepherds seems to indicate that they were pulling for men on this night. Men, not angels are the crown of God's creation. Christ did not come to save the fallen peers of the angels that were cast out of Heaven. It seems that if angels were as petty as men can be, they might despise us.

Yet, angels do not despise us. When God entered the world to redeem fallen men, the angels announced the news with joy. They were not annoyed at having to come and tell the news to humble shepherds. They sang, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests." The coming of Christ was good news for men, but the angels sang as though it was their own good news. That is why I conclude that they like us. Our good news is their great joy. They celebrate our good fortune. Isn't that what authentic love is really about?

The text reads as though these angels had as much joy in pouring out their songs that night before a group of shepherds as if they had been commanded to sing in a palace. Perhaps, they were more thrilled to appear to shepherds. Angels can better see the moral and spiritual limitations of humanity than can humans, especially prideful humans, so the pretentiousness of human pomp and prestige must surely annoy them. Men think it a great privilege to have an audience with important people. Men like to "drop names." Gabriel seemed genuinely okay with appearing to a young peasant virgin. And, this angelic choir seemed genuinely okay with disclosing the marvelous story of the Incarnation of God to shepherds.

But let's not turn this into a mere message about shepherds or angels. It is the message in song that was delivered to the shepherds that night outside of Bethlehem that means everything to us.

## **II. The Heavenly Chorus**

### **A. A Song of God's Glory**

The angels of heaven were present on many venerable occasions. They were present at the creation of the world. God Himself told Job "... the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy" (Job 38:7). No doubt, the songs of the angels gathered force through the ages as they witnessed one manifestation of God's glory after another. But when they saw God leave His throne and become a human baby on a mission to restore sinners, they lifted their voices higher still, "Glory to God in the highest." Even the angels could not conceive of God achieving any higher goodness and love than on this night. There is no higher expression of God's glory than this: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son ..."

God Incarnate! God in human flesh! Jesus is the glory of God. Somehow, a God of justice Who must condemn human sin for what it is must also be reconciled with a God of love Who created man for fellowship with Himself. Jesus bore judgment in our place so that God's attributes of love and justice might each find satisfaction. He accomplished this by coming to us as a baby.

What a wise way to prove that His power to save sinners is wholly independent of our puny notions of power and might. Consider the promises that were fulfilled in Jesus. Every time any man, woman or nation heard those words, "Do not be afraid," Heaven had Jesus in mind. He is the Promise to Abraham. He is the Sabbath rest yearned for by the ancient nation of Israel. He is the Deliverer of the people of God for which Zechariah, Mary and Joseph longed.

"The whole of God is glorified in Christ; and though some part of the name of God is written in the universe, it is here best read - in Him who was the Son of Man, and, yet, the Son of God." - Charles H. Spurgeon

## **B. A Song of God's Peace Come to Earth**

"Glory to God in the highest," was an old song. The angels had sung that from the foundations of the world. But now, they sang a new song: "Peace on earth." They did not sing that in the garden. Peace was no novelty in Eden. Adam walked in fellowship with God as his friend.

But, ever since the day when another angel barred Adam and Eve from Eden, there had been no peace on earth. Wars had raged. Men slaughtered one another. Man was at odds with God. Satan tormented us with temptation. But, now, when the newborn King made his appearance, the strips of cloth in which He was bound were like a white flag of peace. A treaty was extended. We could accept its terms and put an end to the war. Man never secured peace through observing the Law given by Moses. Peace came when an offended God extended His free pardon to men.

Paul coined the phrase, "when the time had fully come" (Galatians 4:4) to describe the moment of Christ's advent into the world. Strangely, this "fullness of time" was marked by an unusual era of peace throughout the world. Rome had no irons in the fire, so to speak, in terms of imperial acquisitions. In Rome was the temple of Janus, the god of beginnings and passageways. One practice surrounding that temple was to leave its gates open whenever Rome was at war anywhere in the world. It was a rare moment in time when those gates were closed, but history teaches us that it was such a time when the Prince of Peace was born in Bethlehem.

Obviously, those closed gates proved purely symbolic. They would soon swing wide open. The peace Christ brought to the earth would not immediately cause all wars and strivings to cease. In fact, the state of the world today raises honest questions as to precisely what this Prince of Peace accomplished. What Jesus introduced into this creation was simply the basis for peace. Reconciliation between God and sinners has been secured. But, this peace ruling throughout the earth is still only in the process of breaking into this world. The church on mission is God's vessel of choice for bringing this peace to pass. The church off mission is often the culprit for what appear to be horrible setbacks. Still, the work is in God's hands, as is the timetable.

## **C. A Song of God's Grace to Man**

The angels sang of God's "good will" or grace toward men. Wishful thinkers speculate about the fatherhood of God, but in reality, there is little support to be derived from the world around us that such speculations are valid. The evidence indicates that we reside in God's doghouse. We get sick. We suffer. We die. The Bible traces these curses back to the entry of sin into the world.

To conclude that God is everyone's loving parent, whether or not the sin issue has been dealt with, is to conclude that He is a patsy in regard to our sins. It is to conclude that ultimately, sin does not matter to Him. But sin did matter, and if we ever sever the image of a baby in a manger from the looming shadow of a cross, we reduce Christmas, even the biblical images of it, to sappy romanticism. The cross, not the manger, is the power of God to save.

It is only by the whole Gospel story that we can detect the fullness of God's grace. If you doubt His love for you, I direct your attention to both a manger *AND* a cross and ask, "Sinner, what does this tell you about God's good will to men? What more could He do? Would He have given up His Son to become one of us?" And, would He have allowed Him to bear the sins of us all?

#### **D. A Song of Joy**

The angels sang, "I bring you good news of great joy ..." As we have already established, Jesus' birth did not benefit them like it did us, but they love us because they love those that their Creator loves. They rejoiced on that holy night over our good fortune. The heavens are still filled with rejoicing whenever a sinner repents and comes into God's kingdom. Surely men, the actual recipients of God's favor, ought to sing just as enthusiastically, if not more so, than the angels.

Consider the Christmas angels. They did not fall with Adam. The curse of death did not directly affect them, but did they deliver their message to the shepherds with a tone of indifference? Did they yawn as they sang: "Glory to God in the highest"? Friends, you are the true benefactors of the gift of God in Christ Jesus. Honor Him with your worship. What's *NOT* to sing about?

#### **E. A Song of Restoration**

"Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you. He is Christ the Lord." Luke wrote in Greek but, we can be sure the angels did not speak to the shepherds in that tongue. "Christ" is the Greek equivalent of "*Messiah*." These Jewish shepherds were the first recipients of the news that *messiah*, that long-awaited Savior of Israel from God, had come. This is why they would immediately go to find the baby in the manger and then tell everyone they could about what had happened. And, this also may be why some people actually believed them. Shepherds resided well down the social ladder, but the earnestness with which they told their story coupled with the yearning of the nation for *Messiah's* arrival was powerful. They seemed to have impacted at least two old saints of God that had been waiting for this moment in time.

On the eighth day, the infant Jesus was taken to the temple to receive His name and to be circumcised. There, we encounter two older saints of that age. One is a prophetess named Anna. When she saw the child, she began to tell everyone in earshot at the temple who was interested in God's redemption of Israel that this child was the One for whom they had been waiting. The other old saint was Simeon. God had assured him that he would not die until he had seen "the Lord's Christ." I suspect that the enthusiasm of both of these old saints had been stoked by the shepherds' report that Christ had come. Simeon took Jesus in his arms and said:

<sup>29</sup>"Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace.

<sup>30</sup>For my eyes have seen your salvation,

<sup>31</sup>which you have prepared in the sight of all people,

<sup>32</sup>a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." - Luke 2:29-32

Didn't the angels announce that their "good news of great joy" would be "for all people"? Now, Simeon was confirming that Jesus was a gift not only to Israel but to the Gentiles as well. The message is pretty clear. The reconciliation that God envisions is not something that affects only the standing between Himself and specific individuals. All mankind can be reconciled to God, but that demands that they must come to see themselves as reconciled to one another as well. That is why any kind of Christianity that allegedly fosters racism, bigotry or class distinction is a false Christianity. This is why it is dangerous for the words, "I will never forgive" to cross the lips of any Christian.

One Christmas, Lucy comes to Charlie Brown and says, "Merry Christmas, Charlie Brown. This is the season of peace on earth and good will toward men. Therefore, I suggest we forget all about our differences and love one another."

Charlie Brown's face lights up like a Christmas tree, and says, "That's great, Lucy, but can't we continue to do that all year long?"

And Lucy replies, "What are you, nuts?"

The Gospel of Christ is a gospel of restoration, not only man to God, but man to man. Are you laboring to be an instrument of restoration in the lives of others? One great old carol of the season in particular reminds us of the Christian's duty to be an instrument of God's peace.

*Yet with the woes of sin and strife The world has suffered long;  
Beneath the angel strain have rolled Two thousand years of wrong;  
And man, at war with man, hears not The love-song which they bring;  
O hush the noise, ye men of strife And hear the angels sing.*

- Edmund Sears

One night in the fields near Bethlehem, angels sang to shepherds, announcing the birth of the Savior of the world. Angels make sense. Angels are heavenly beings. Angels are cool. We don't have to see or hear a sky filled with angels to be stricken with awe. Just imagining the scene will do. Shepherds, on the other hand, don't seem quite right. Shepherds were dirty. Shepherds smelled funny. People looked down on them. Working with sheep by day and sleeping with them by night was a hardly a credential for acceptance in the Bethlehem Country Club. So, why would God Incarnate enter our world so close to the lowest rung of society as to be born in a manger and visited by shepherds? A martyr from the fourth century pondered the same question.

"The Lord of all comes as a slave amidst poverty. The hunter has no wish to startle his prey. Choosing for his birthplace an unknown village in a remote province, he is born of a poor maiden and accepts all that poverty implies, for he hopes by stealth to ensnare and save us.

"If he had been born to high rank and amidst luxury, unbelievers would have said the world had been transformed by wealth. If he had chosen as his birthplace the great city of Rome, they would have thought the transformation had been brought about by civil power. Suppose he had been the son of an emperor. They would have said: 'How useful it is to be powerful!' Imagine him the son of a senator. It would have been: 'Look what can be accomplished by legislation!'

"But in fact, what did he do? He chose surroundings that were poor and simple, so ordinary as to be almost unnoticed, so that people would know it was the Godhead alone that had changed the world." - *Theodotus of Ancyra*