

Behold the Army of Angels, Singing in the Night

Meta

Date: December 24, 2023

Location: Apostles Anglican Church

Readings

Isaiah 9:1-7

Psalm 96

Titus 2:11-14

Luke 2:1-20

Opening

And the angel said to the shepherds, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger."¹

If you sat down to read Luke's entire story—an exercise I highly commend—you would notice this is the third visitation of an angel with a message from heaven. In fact, the opening scene in Luke's Gospel begins with an angel. The archangel Gabriel appears first to the priest Zechariah with news that his wife, Elizabeth, would bear a son named John, who would be a prophet in the spirit of Elijah. Gabriel appears a second time in Luke's Gospel, this time in Nazareth to the Virgin Mary, announcing that she will conceive the Son of God by the Holy Spirit.

When the scene changes to the fields of Bethlehem where shepherds keep watch over the flocks in the night hours, we are becoming familiar with angels and their messages. An angel appears to shepherds in the fields, possibly Gabriel again, though Luke does not specify for sure. The angelic pattern begun with Zechariah and Mary continues with the shepherds: do not fear, news from God, and then an outward sign to confirm the heavenly message.

Only something changes in this third appearance of the Lord's angel, a departure from the pattern. Once Gabriel delivered his message to Zechariah and Mary, he departed. The message delivered, the chosen servants enter the future with obedience. But after the angel of God announces the birth of Christ the Lord to the shepherds, the angel remains. The shepherds had been given great news and a great task—find the Christ child in the manger. But the shepherds' task would not come first. They were not to leave their fields and their flocks yet. There was *more*. More to see, more to hear, more to witness than a single angel appearing before them:

¹ *Luke 2.10-12*

And 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!”²

Even better is the translation that reads, ‘And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly army praising God...’ It’s a military word, actually. Heavenly host, that is. It was a multitude of *an army of angels* of the Most High God that surrounded the shepherds that night. Luke suggests that only some regiments of God’s heavenly army appeared before the shepherd’s eyes that night, not the full number. There were even more that our shepherds could not see.

And remember what Luke said about the glory of the first angel—the glory *surrounded* the shepherds. I suppose you’re like me. I’ve always envisioned the angel and the heavenly army aloft in the sky, but Luke doesn’t specify. They may have appeared as angels on the ground. Either way, Luke tells us ‘the glory of the Lord’ surrounded the shepherds.

If you heard someone say, ‘we have you surrounded’ you would not be at ease. But when the angel and the army of heaven surrounded the shepherds, they were surrounded by the glory of God. That which surrounded the Most High God in heaven now surrounded the shepherds on earth.

Not only the glory of God, the peace of God surrounded them. God sent his heavenly army in the fields of Bethlehem, not to wage war, but to wage peace. It was the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy, ‘Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended.’ The army of heaven came as an army of worship, to praise God and announce peace on earth, a peace that this world cannot give. It was a peace that passes all understanding, that would guard hearts and minds from all adversaries, that would lead our beloved shepherds to a manger where the Prince of Peace had been born.

The Poisoned Peace of Rome

Oh, before the angels appeared, there was much talk of peace, to be sure. Peace was a favorite topic in these years—the Pax Romana—the peace of Rome. Who hadn’t heard about the promise of Roman peace, living in a subjugated province of Caesar’s Empire? In the decades before Christ was born, the Roman poet Virgil heralded the majesty of the Pax Romana to his countrymen: ‘Remember, Romans, your arts shall be: to rule the nations as their masters, to establish the law of peace, to show clemency to the conquered, and to conquer the proud.’³Peace comes to all who submit to Caesar, who praise the glory of Rome.⁴ And for those who rebel against Caesar? We will keep peace by condemning all enemies of Caesar and his Empire to death—death on a Roman cross. The Pax Romana—the promise of peace?

Oh, compare this promise of peace with the annunciation of peace in Bethlehem fields, ‘Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among those with whom he is peace.’ Compare the Savior announced as good news for *all* people with the Caesar who lived to dominate and subjugate all peoples. Here is the sign of the world’s true Savior, ‘you will find him in swaddling clothes, lying in a feeding trough.’

² *Luke 2.13-14*

³ Virgil, *Aeneid*, 6.851-853

⁴ Paul Gordon-Jones, *Songs in Waiting*, 73.

Put not your trust in the rulers of this world, whether of ancient days or the present day, to bring you peace. The rulers of our world have too long sought their personal glory. What happened this night more than 2000 years forever changed our definition of glory and peace.

The glory of God is a Savior who would humble himself, to take our human nature upon himself so that we might be joined to his divine nature. Christ did not take his divine nature and turn it into flesh. The only begotten Son of the Father took on a body, our human nature, and raised it up to unite it with his divine nature. That is why the army of angels appeared before shepherds to glorify God and sing of peace on earth.

Angels were the heralds to shepherds and shepherds became heralds for all in Bethlehem. Why shepherds? Because God always reveals his glory to and through the humble.

When the angel Gabriel first visited Zechariah in Luke's Gospel, Zechariah sang of God's ancient promise that

In the tender compassion of our God, the dawn from on high shall break upon us, To shine on those who dwell in darkness and in the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace.

Shepherds have always been God's chosen servants. These shepherds tended the very same Bethlehem fields David would have tended a thousand years prior, when the Lord called David, the least of Jesse's sons, to be a shepherd King over his people, Israel.

Tonight the shepherds of Bethlehem guide our feet into the way of peace—from their fields to the manger of Jesus, the greatest of Jesse's sons. The glory that appeared with an angelic army leads them to the glory of the Christ child, born for us in poverty and humility.

My brothers and sisters, how we need to remember, even in our Christmas celebration tonight, that Bethlehem in 2023 does not celebrate the birth of Christ in peacetime. In the land where our Lord Jesus, the Prince of Peace, was born, there is warfare and profound human suffering. Just as an army of angels appeared before shepherds to wage peace on earth, so the Church must be an army of intercessors, praying for peace that only Christ can give.

Our hope is not in politics, ancient or modern—the Pax Romana or any other political solution. In this manger is our peace. He is our Peace. There is no real, lasting, or eternal peace without him. The peace of Christ is not just a cessation, a negation, an absence of something. No, his peace and his glory go together.

Remember our beginnings—we were made for glory; not to glorify ourselves but to be perfectly reconciled with God, with one another, within ourselves to glorify Him who made us!

Not since Adam and Eve had human beings lived in bodies that were fully reconciled with God. Not since our ancestral parents have human beings been fully reconciled between themselves and within themselves—the spirit ordering the soul, the soul ordering the body to worship and adore God their Creator. That was the glory of God in the first creation. And that glory was also the peace of God's first creation.

All that has divided nation from nation; all that has separated us from one another; all that has divided us within ourselves—he reconciles through the Incarnation of the Son of God.

On this night, unto us a child is born, a Son is given, to give us peace that we have lost and that we cannot regain ourselves. All of our attempts to regain glory become corrupted by ego, vanity, and pride. All of our attempts to regain peace do not bring lasting joy. Glory returns when we kneel in adoration, offering our praise to King Jesus. Peace returns when we invite him, not once, but again and again to take up residence in our hearts and join our human nature with his divine nature.

The army of angels appeared to the shepherds so that we might become an army of saints—saints who worship and adore Christ the Lord. Saints who intercede for the nations. Saints who receive the free gift of his peace themselves. Saints who find their greatest joy kneeling and glorifying God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.