

Glory to God in the Highest – A Christmas *Gloria*

“*Glo-o-o-o-o-o-ria in excelsis Deo.*” You may not know any other words or phrases in Latin, but you know this Latin; you just sang it! *Gloria in excelsis Deo* – the song of the angels; the very first Christmas song. Are you sick of hearing Christmas songs on the radio? Did you mumble under your breath “O great” when you started hearing them the day after Halloween? Have you just about had your fill of “*All I Want for Christmas Is You*” and “*Last Christmas I Gave You My Heart*” and “*Have a Holly Jolly Christmas*”? Are you sick of them?! Or, do you love them? Could you listen to them all year long? Or, do you prefer to hear Christmas songs that are actually about Christ and his birth? No matter what kind of Christmas songs you enjoy – whether it’s Mariah Carey, Bing Crosby, or traditional hymns in Latin – Christmas is a singing celebration. We sing at Christmas! Here at this church, between tonight’s Christmas Eve service & tomorrow’s Christmas Day service, we will sing 21 Christmas hymns, because Christmas is a singing celebration. The birth of Jesus gives us every reason to sing for joy. And when we sing at Christmas, we are following the example of the angels.

Tonight, on this Christmas Eve, we return once again to the fields outside of Bethlehem, to the shepherds who were “**keeping watch over their flocks at night,**” minding their own business, when all of a sudden, “**An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.**” Well, of course, they’re terrified! How often does a fiery angel of God come down from the holy presence of the Lord Almighty, radiating the bright glory of heaven, with a message for mortals? I’d be terrified too. “**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.’**” And if the brightness of one angel were not enough, “**Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel**” (Lk 2:8-13). Place yourself there; look around! Everywhere you turn, there’s an angel; the sky is filled with them! It’s so bright, you have to squint. It’s so loud, you have to cover your ears. You’re so mesmerized, you’re frozen stiff. But as you observe this otherworldly scene unfold before your very eyes, your ears hear a song – a song not composed by mortals, not written for human voices or earthly instruments; a song composed in heaven, sung by a choir from heaven – “**No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived!**” (1 Cor 2:9) – a song that goes a little something like this: “**Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests**” (Lk 2:14). Or, in Latin, *Gloria in excelsis Deo et in terra pax hominibus bonae voluntatis*.

Last year on Christmas morning, I began a five-year Christmas sermon series on the five songs of the ordinary. Let me explain. In the traditional Lutheran liturgy, which is the historic Christian liturgy, the order of service that we typically follow here at St. John’s, there are five songs – I’ll call them songs, even if sometimes we sing them and sometimes we speak them – and these five songs are included in every Communion service. They are called the five songs of the ordinary. The word ordinary here is a technical term; it doesn’t mean common, plain, or simple; it means ordered, structured. The five songs of the ordinary give an orderly structure to the service. These five songs are: the *Kyrie* (I preached on that last year), the *Gloria* (that’s tonight), the *Credo* or the Creed, the *Sanctus*, and the *Agnus Dei* (which, Lord willing, will be my next three Christmas sermons). You can think of the five songs of the ordinary like pillars holding up a building. You can put a lot of beautiful things inside the building; you can put a lot of beautiful Scriptures and sermons and hymns inside the service. But the pillars don’t move; the five songs of the ordinary don’t change.

Tonight, the song we sing is the *Gloria in Excelsis Deo*. And not just tonight! When you come to church throughout the year, Sunday after Sunday, (and by the way, don’t just come on Christmas Eve and think that’s good enough) – when you come to church, and toward the beginning of the service you sing the *Gloria*, you are singing the very words of the very first Christmas song ever written; you are singing the anthem the angels composed in heaven and sang here on earth, and you get to join the “**great company of the heavenly host**” every time you sing it! We Christians have been singing the *Gloria* in our worship services for some 1700 years, going all the way back to the 300s! This angelic song is so sacred, so holy, so Gospel-rich that we made it one of the five pillars of the Christian worship service.

So, you’ve sung these words before – different melodies, but the same song. Let’s listen to a few familiar examples. Que the piano/organ, please. 1) from the old hymnal; 2) from the supplement; 3) from the new hymnal; 4) another from the new hymnal; 5) now here’s a German hymn version of the *Gloria*; 6) and finally, this well-known Christmas hymn. And if you’ve been around St. John’s at all in the last several years, these beautiful melodies are undoubtedly familiar to you.

But let’s unpack the text! **Lk 2:14 – “Glory to God in the highest heaven!”** And why should we glorify God? Because “**on earth**” he has brought “**peace to those on whom his favor rests.**” God’s favor rests on humans! Even the angels know this! Angels stand in presence of God; they know the will of God; they execute the commands of God; they see things we cannot see; they know things we cannot know. But in this song, these angels are acknowledging that God’s favor rests on humans! God’s greatest love is for humans! Jesus didn’t come to save angels; he came to save humans!

Jesus didn't become an angel; he became a human! Jesus didn't die on the cross and rise from the dead as an angel; he died and rose as a human! The mystery and miracle of Christmas, the true meaning of Christmas, is the incarnation of the Son of God – Christ Jesus taking on human flesh and becoming one of us. The angels all know this! And they do not resent God for it; they praise him for it! They glorify him for it! They say, “Look at what our gracious God is doing for his beloved human people!” They love him for it! The Triune God is just as much the angels’ God as he is our God. And on that first Christmas Eve, the angels were genuinely excited to proclaim the good news that the Savior of the world was born, that God’s favor rests on humans, and that because of baby Jesus there is peace on earth.

Peace! Not international peace, or political peace, or military peace. Jesus himself said that he did not come to bring peace but a sword (Mt 10:34). The Gospel message that Jesus is the world’s only Savior divides people into two groups: believers and unbelievers, those who trust him and those who reject him. But from his lowly manger, baby Jesus calls to each one of us, inviting us to trust him, to believe that he is our peace! **Micah 5 – “[The] one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times... who will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord... he will be our peace.”** The peace Jesus brings is the forgiveness of sins – forgiveness for you and forgiveness for me – and the promise of eternal life in heaven. This is the peace the angels were singing about. God’s angels have seen everything: every war, every murder, every crime, every sin. They know very well that sinful humans do not deserve forgiveness. You do not deserve forgiveness; neither do I! But glory to God in the highest, because on earth we have Jesus; and in Jesus we have God’s peace, God’s forgiveness, God’s favor!

The early Christians took this glorious song of the angels from Luke 2 and expanded it into a hymn of praise that eventually became one of the five songs of the ordinary. They included in this ancient hymn the words of John the Baptist, **“Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (Jn 1:29)**, because you can’t truly glorify God for the birth of Jesus unless you see the glory of God in the death of Jesus. The reason Jesus became human was so that he could die as a human, in payment for our sins. The cross loomed large over Jesus for his entire life, even in Bethlehem, even in the manger. The cross was always his mission, always his goal. Jesus was born to die, and born to rise. And by his birth, life, death, and resurrection, Jesus the Lamb of God took away the sin of the world, our sin, once and for all,

Which is such a powerful, amazing, life-changing, Gospel message that we can’t help but respond by singing, in the words of the *Gloria*: “*We praise you, Laudamus te; we bless you, benedicimus te; we worship you, adoramus te; we glorify you, glorificamus te; we give thanks to you for your great glory, O Lord God, heavenly King, God the Father Almighty.*” We can hardly contain ourselves, glorifying God for his grace! Remember that next time you’re at church and you’re feeling a little tired and you start mindlessly mumbling the words, “*Glory be to God on high...*” Stop and think about what you’re singing, and why you’re singing it! You’re singing to God the Father, who planned your salvation and gave you his Son. You’re singing to God the Son, who willingly left his home in heaven to come and live among us and die for us to save us because he loves us. “*O Lord, the only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ; O Lord, Lamb of God, Son of the Father, you take away the sin of the world; have mercy on us. You take away the sin of the world; receive our prayer. You sit at the right hand of God the Father; have mercy on us. For you only are holy; you only are the Lord.*” And you’re singing to God the Spirit, who brought you to faith and strengthens your faith through Word and Sacrament. The *Gloria in Excelsis* is a Trinitarian hymn: “*You only, O Christ, with the Holy Spirit, are most high in the glory of God the Father.*”

Last year, we focused on the *Kyrie*. *Kyrie, eleison* means, “Lord, have mercy.” It’s our way of saying, “Lord, we need your help; things are bad! We need your forgiveness for our sins, and we need your help in our lives. Lord, have mercy! *Kyrie, eleison!*” And God responds to our *Kyrie* by sending us Jesus. And then we respond to God sending us Jesus by singing the *Gloria*. *Gloria in excelsis Deo* is a jubilant response to God’s grace. We can’t help but respond to God’s grace, in our singing and in our living. When we sing “*We praise you, we bless you, we worship you, we glorify you, we give thanks to you for your great glory,*” those aren’t just lyrics; that’s a lifestyle. I really hope that from now on, whenever you chant the somber *Kyrie* and then sing the joyous *Gloria*, I hope you don’t just sing the words, but you also live the words. **“For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age” (Titus 2:11-12).** That is our “*Laudamus*”; that is our “*We give thanks to you for your great glory.*”

There’s nothing wrong with enjoying a little “*Last Christmas I Gave You My Heart*” and “*All I Want for Christmas is You.*” But we Christians have the true meaning of Christmas, and we have the original Christmas song – sung in heaven and on earth; sung by angels and by mortals; sung in many different melodies and many different languages; and sung every Sunday in God’s church on earth. Don’t just mumble through the words. Sing the *Gloria* with all your heart, and live the *Gloria* in your daily life, because someday baby Jesus will gather you into the heavenly choir of angels, “**the great company of the heavenly host**”; and in glory everlasting you will sing, “*Gloria in excelsis Deo; glory to God in the highest.*” Amen.

**Luke 2:14** – “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

**John 1:29** – “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”

### **Gloria in Excelsis Deo**

Glory be to God on high, and on earth peace,  
good will toward men.  
We praise you, we bless you,  
we worship you, we glorify you,  
we give thanks to you,  
for your great glory,  
O Lord God, heav’ly King,  
God the Father Almighty.  
O Lord, the only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ;  
O Lord God, Lamb of God, Son of the Father,  
you take away the sin of the world;  
have mercy on us.  
You take away the sin of the world;  
receive our prayer.  
You sit at the right hand of God the Father;  
have mercy on us.  
For you only are holy;  
you only are the Lord.  
You only, O Christ, with the Holy Spirit,  
are most high  
in the glory of God the Father. Amen.

*Gloria in excelsis Deo et in terra pax  
hominibus bonae voluntatis.  
Laudamus te, benedicimus te,  
adoramus te, glorificamus te,  
gratias agimus tibi  
propter mangam gloriam tuam,  
Domine Deus, Rex caelstis,  
Deus Pater omnipotens.  
Domine Fili Unigenite, Jesu Christe,  
Domine Deus, Agnus Dei, Filius Patris,  
qui tollis peccata mundi,  
miserere nobis;  
qui tollis peccata mundi,  
suscipte deprecationem nostrum.  
Qui sedes ad dexteram Patris,  
miserere nobis.  
Quoniam tu solus Sanctus  
tu solus Dominus,  
tu solus Altissimus, Jesu Christe,  
cum Sancto Spiritu:  
in gloria Dei Patris. Amen.*

Sermon Series:

2024: Lord, Have Mercy – A Christmas *Kyrie*  
2025: Glory to God in the Highest – A Christmas *Gloria*  
2026: Lord, I Believe – A Christmas *Credo*  
2027: Holy Lord – A Christmas *Sanctus*  
2028: Lamb of God – A Christmas *Agnus Dei*