

Date Preached	24-Dec-2020	Date Initiated	14-Dec-2020
Where Preached	SAK	Appointed Readings	Vigil/Nativ, All Yrs

" Glory to God in the highest heaven, ||
and on earth, peace among ~those whom God favors~. "



A very warm *Merry Christmas* to you, my sisters and brothers; and, indeed: Glory to God in the highest!

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You have heard me say it before: I don't do very well choosing favorites. Whatever the category, I tend to like a range of options rather than singling out one to stand above all others. Well, tonight, I give you an exception that, I suppose, proves the rule: I *do* have a favorite Christmas carol, and it is "Angels We Have Heard on High." The first time I remember ever singing it was Christmas Eve when I was in third grade—that would have been 1975, for that's the year I graduated to 'prime time,' as it were. Before then I had been in the Primary Choir. Being too young to sit by ourselves for the whole Christmas Eve service, we little one more or less paraded in at the beginning of the service, sang one or two songs and then went to sit with our parents.

But now I was in the Junior Choir. We got to sit by ourselves, up in the choir loft, all jammed together in folding chairs. We were packed in tightly, between the organ console on the left and a bank of exposed organ pipes on the right ... for—echoes of Our Savior—there was no room for us in the pews in the loft, because the kids from the older choirs took those. I sat next to my friend Alan Gilmore, as I did every single year until we graduated high school, and we just took it all in: the loud organ right beside us; the funny new perspective of looking down at the tops of people's heads; and how far away the pulpit at the other end of the nave seemed from up where we were.

All of that faded away, however, when it came time to sing "Angels We Have Heard on High." Part of its appeal lies in its contrasts, doesn't it? The vertical, square declarative statements of the stanzas,

[*sing*] "Angels we have heard on high, singing sweetly through the night,
and the mountains in reply echoing their brave delight."

... followed, each time, by repetitions of the lush, smooth, rolling [*sing*] "Gloria": pure joy and highest praise just pouring forth from our lips, over and over again. Who couldn't smile—no, beam!—while singing that refrain? Who didn't feel the electricity of Christmas Eve ... the sudden click of alignment between heaven and earth ... in crying out, with the angels; *as* the angels ... "Glory! Glory to God in the highest"? And when Mr Krott, our beloved choirmaster and organist—who's still on that very same bench even to this day, by the way—added the organ's regal trumpets *en chamade* to the final refrain ... well, I simply can't think of a more ecstatic, more exuberant memory in all my fifty years of going to church. The unalloyed joy ... refined music trying to contain our borderline-raucous outburst of praise ... the letting loose of every single glad tidings our hearts could muster: What better way could there be to welcome our King and Our Savior into the world than singing with the choirs of angels?

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"Angels We Have Heard on Hight" depicts, in song, a unique moment on the Gospels: the one and only appearance of heavenly host. Angels appear in all four gospels, but usually solo and also usually only to one person. At the apex of tonight's Gospel reading—the *Gloria in excelsis* (though Luke wrote in Greek, not Latin)—the entire army of angels in heaven breaks forth into song, once and for all. For Luke, it is a moment of sublime transcendence: a brief but ... well ... *glorious* glimpse of all heaven thronging to proclaim the Incarnation: God's taking human form so that all humanity might finally know God and be saved. If ever there was a time for the skies to swarm with endless angels, this is it!

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But at least equally significant is who *hears* this ethereal choir's eternal *Gloria*. For it is not the powerful or privileged ... not the few who hold the levers of power or even the crowds who fill the cities and towns ... who hear God's messengers' exquisite, unparalleled song of praise. No, it is the lowliest of the low, the shepherds. Unknown to those who dwell in imperial palaces ... and out-of-sight, out-of-mind for those with even the most modest roof over their heads ... the shepherds live lives that are bound up in the sheep whose care constituted their whole existence. They are more dispensable than the valuable animals they tend; their lifestyles more ovine than human. They live rough: in cold, dark, windy fields and dank, damp caves. They wander from hill to hill, always looking for more grass and clover for the sheep to eat. Because sheep are vulnerable, defenseless animals who can't be left alone overnight, the shepherds must stay with them 24-7. Somewhat like the cowboys of the American West, they have only one another for human company and sleep with one eye open, always watching for predators, thieves, stragglers and strays. It is a barely human existence: one that none aspires to, but many benefit from.

And yet ... it is to the shepherds—the poorest and lowliest in Judea—that God parts the curtains of heaven and sets the skies resounding. The proclamation of Jesus' birth, like everything else in His life, runs entirely counter to our earthly norms. God bypasses all worldly pomp and splendor and announces the arrival of God Incarnate to a smelly, dirty band of wanderers who live in squalor and misery. Uneducated, the shepherds can't think great thoughts or write theological position papers. Destitute, they certainly cannot pledge to God's cause. Alone and outcast, they have zero power and little opportunity to turn many minds in Jesus' direction. No, God chooses the shepherds *not* because of their gifts or accomplishments—what they have or can do—but, rather, because of their *pain and privation*. It is the shepherds who see the heavens suddenly explode in supernal light ... and hear angel choirs burst into the *Gloria* to end all *Glorias* ... because God knows their very *nothing-ness* uniquely positions them to grasp the *everything-ness* of Christ.

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In truth, 2020 has been a pretty shepherd-y year for us all, hasn't it? We've all been made virtual outcasts by a virus that wrapped its fingers around our normal patterns of living and wouldn't let go; by waves of protest and violence and mutual disregard that took by surprise people from across the political spectrum; by a level of vitriol and animus in our electoral politics without precedent in living memory. Millions in this country alone have been plunged—or plunged even more deeply—into unemployment, hunger, homelessness, physical or emotional disease on account of a disease none of us had heard of a year ago. We've been largely confined to life within our own little flocks, suddenly unable to interact with others—even to attend worship—as we used to take for granted. Perhaps few of us are bodily hungry, but all of us are spiritually starved of the Body and Blood of Christ that sustains us.

But *this* night ... this *holy* night ... this night that marks the rebirth of the world: Listen! What do we hear out there on the frigid, dark hillside? "Do not be afraid." Wandering the desolate

fields of our anxiety and despair, we hear: "I bring you good news of great joy. The Savior of the world ... the Savior of *you* ... is here ... now ... with you." Slowly, it dawns upon us, as it did upon the shepherds that ancient night, that however similar tomorrow may *seem* to today, nothing can or will ever be the same again: God has indwelt the human race ... has interrupted the order of this world ... has made all things God's own. Christ the Good Shepherd has come among us, His flock, and no dark night ... no deprivation ... no predator can do us any lasting harm.

The angels are, once again, singing on high. They send God's glory and love and charity and wisdom and good will and peace echoing around and around this world, and this year, we, shivering and pining in the dark with the shepherds, are in the perfect place to hear them. And then, almost as if by a miracle, we, too, are soon belting out "Glory to God in highest" with the joyful abandon of a third-grader up there in the choir loft for the first time. We send it peeling from every hill, every valley; every city, every village. Praise and glory to God soon rise from every race, every party; from every continent, every people; from the highest of the high to the lowest of the low. In the very face of everything that assails and threatens to dehumanize us, the whole of God's people comes to sing:

"Come to Bethlehem and see, Him Whose birth the angels sing;
come, adore on bended knee Christ the Lord, the new-born King."

Glory to God in the highest! Glory to God in the highest! Glory to God in the highest!



*The Rev Douglas S Worthington
St Andrew's Parish
Kent, CT*