

# **Awesome Glory**

Canadian Lutheran, 2003

On Christmas Eve in 1953, something awesome happened to me, something that I will not forget as long as I live. We members of the Sunday School were involved in the presentation of the Christmas story at Neukirch in a tiny Lutheran church on the northern edge of the Barossa Valley. It was a hot night, and the church was full. We children were crammed together up front, before a richly decorated Christmas tree and an ornate wooden altar with the words “Holy, Holy, Holy” carved in German on it. A sense of happy excitement filled the church as the candles bathed it with their soft light.

I had, I vaguely remember, just finished the recitation of the Christmas story from Luke 2:1-20, which I had learnt by heart, and had returned to my place. Then we stood, facing the congregation, and sang our next song. The words of the first verse were:

**All my heart this night rejoices,  
As I hear,  
Far and near,  
Sweetest angel voices.  
‘Christ is born,’ their choirs are singing,  
Till the air  
Everywhere  
Now with joy is ringing.**

As I sang that song I was so utterly overjoyed that it seemed to me as if heaven lay open above us and the angels were hovering in a circle up there over us, singing their Christmas song: “Glory to God in the highest.” Even though that was not our song it seemed to fit in with it perfectly as a kind of descant above it.

That awesome experience has left a permanent imprint on my soul. The joy of it, its radiance, comes back to me every Christmas and whenever I sing the Great Gloria, the angelic song: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased.” That song sums up Christmas for me. Since God’s Son has become a human being, we are at peace with God; since he is pleased with us, we can join the angels in their adoration of him.

If we are to make sense of the song of the angels when they appeared to the shepherds that first Christmas Eve, we need to go back to the Old Testament and remember God's dealings with the Israelites. There we discover how patiently God prepared for this great event. We learn that God's glory is the radiance of his visible presence. According to Psalm 29, God is fully and openly manifest as "the God of glory" in heaven itself. There his angels, his royal courtiers and attendants, have full access to his glory and share in it as see him face to face. They are therefore called to "ascribe glory and power" to the Lord as they pay homage to him. There in the heavenly sanctuary they give glory to him as they adore him. His glory evokes their doxology, their glorification of him.

In contrast with the angels, God gave the Israelites limited access to his hidden glory, first in tabernacle, the portable place of residence for God, and then at the temple in Jerusalem. He revealed his glory to them, most strangely at Mount Sinai, by concealing it in a cloud (Exod 24:15,16). Then after Moses had consecrated the tabernacle, the cloud covered it as God's hidden glory filled its inner room, the Holy of Holies (Exod 40:34-38). This was repeated after Solomon had dedicated the temple in Jerusalem (1 Kgs 8:10,11). Yet even though the Israelites had access to God's grace at the tabernacle and the temple, they did not have access to his glory; they could not see him face to face. Even the high priest did not have access to it when he entered that inner room on the Day of Atonement, for he was completely enveloped in a cloud of incense that hid God from his sight (Lev 16:2,13). Thus no doxologies were performed at the temple, because God's glory remained hidden from his people.

Yet God was not satisfied with that degree of proximity to his people. Through the prophet Isaiah he promised that his glory would eventually be disclosed on earth. In a vision at the temple he heard the proclamation by the angels that, like heaven itself, the earth would one day be full of the Lord's glory (Isa 6:3). The Lord would appear in glory in new Jerusalem as his temple (Isa 4:5), so that through it the light of his presence would shine out over the whole earth, like the dawn of a new day on a dark landscape (Isa 60:1-3). He would reveal his glory on earth so that all people would be able to see it for themselves (Isa 40:5; 66:18) and proclaim it among the nations (Isa 66:19). Then, like the angels, all the nations of the earth would give glory to him with a new song of praise (Isa 42:10-12).

The Christmas story in Luke 2:8-20 tells us how God kept these promises. On the night that Jesus was born the glory of the Lord appeared on earth in an unexpected way to unexpected people in an unexpected place. It did not show up for the priests at the temple in Jerusalem during the performance of the sacrificial ritual at the Feast of the Passover or the Feast of Tabernacles, as many Jews had been led to expect. Instead, it appeared to some shepherds, camped out at night in the fields outside the village of Bethlehem. What's more, God's glory was no longer veiled in a cloud, but it shone out over them. This glorious sight was accompanied by the appearance of an angel who announced the birth of Jesus, the Messiah, in David's home town. Then, as the climax of the event, the whole army of angels appeared before them and invited them to join them in singing their new song to celebrate the incarnation of the Lord: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased." But the shepherds did not take up their invitation there and then. Instead, they went to see the baby for themselves, for in Jesus the glory of God now resided on earth. Only after they had seen Jesus did they join with the angels in glorifying God (Luke 2:20).

This story connects the birth of Jesus with the service of the angels before God in heaven as well as the performance of the divine service in the church on earth. It does this in three ways. First, the birth of Jesus brings heaven down to earth for us. The vision of God's glory is no longer restricted to the angels in heaven; it is no longer hidden from human sight in a cloud at the temple in Jerusalem. It is now revealed to us human beings in the human face of Christ (2 Cor 4:6). God's radiant presence now resides in the body of the risen Lord Jesus; his body is the temple of the living God, the place where the triune God meets with us earthlings (John 1:14; 2:21; 17:24). There we share in his glory (2 Thess 2:14; 2 Pet 1:3); our vision of his glory glorifies us (2 Cor 3:18). Second, because God's glory is located in Jesus, the place for the performance of doxology has changed. Since we stand with the angels in God's gracious presence whenever we assemble for worship, we give glory to God the Father and the Son together with them in his church here on earth (Eph 3:21; Heb 12:22-24; Rev 5:13). By our performance of the doxology together with the angels, we tell the world that heaven has come down to earth for us and all people through the birth of Jesus. Through Jesus we now have access to the presence of God the Father in the church, the holy assembly of people and angels. Third, by his incarnation God's Son has joined the song of the angels in heaven with the song of the church on earth

(Eph 1:6). Since both stand together in the presence of the triune God in the divine service, they both reflect his glory by glorifying him as a single choir with one doxology.

The song of the angels at the incarnation of our Lord permeates the divine service, for in it we have access to heaven here on earth. The riches of God's glory is available to us there (Eph 3:16; Phil 4:19). Thus the Introit, the entrance verses from the psalm for the day, traditionally culminate in a doxology to the triune God. The Kyrie, the beggar's cry for charity from Christ, is followed by the angelic song: "Glory to God in the highest." Before we hear the reading from the gospel we give glory to Jesus as our Lord because he embodies the hidden glory of the Father and reveals it to us through his words and deeds. Then in the Lord's Supper we once again join with the angels as we adore the triune God with the words: "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of hosts; heaven and earth are full of your glory."

Thus the song of Christmas goes with us throughout the year. As we bodily share in the glory of God who lives in us, we glorify him with our bodies (1 Cor 6:20). We reflect the radiance of his presence with us in our earthly journey (Matt 5:14-16). Like stained glass windows, we are illuminated by the uncreated light of Christ. His glory fills us secretly, as it once filled the Israelite tabernacle, and spills out from him into the world around us.