

“The Glory of the Lord”

December 24, 2017

Brian Watson

What is the greatest thing you’ve ever seen? Was it some part of nature? Perhaps a mountain, a sunrise, a sunset? Was it a work of art? Or perhaps it was something else man-made, like a city, with all of its impressive architecture. Was it a performance, perhaps an exciting game or a musical performance?

Sometimes, the most glorious things are not what we would expect. One of my favorite movies is *Good Will Hunting*. I think it’s the best Boston movie. It’s the story of Will Hunting, played by Matt Damon. Will is a troubled young man from Southie who also happens to be a genius. In order to avoid jail time, he has to see a counselor, and he ends up working with a man named Sean, played by Robin Williams. Sean is a professor of psychology at Bunker Hill Community College. His wife died years earlier after a bout with cancer. Will asks Sean, “When did you know that she was the one for you?” Sean answers quickly, “October 21, 1975.” He says he remembers it because it was Game 6 of the 1976 World Series, when the Red Sox played the Reds. He says he and his friends stayed up all night outside Fenway to get tickets. They got tickets to the game and then waited in a bar until the game started. And in walks this girl. Then Sean starts talking about the game. Bernie Carbo tied up the game in the bottom of the eighth inning with a three-run homer and the game went into extra innings, all the way to the twelfth inning. Then steps up to the plate Carlton Fisk, who hits a high fly ball down the left field line. You might remember how Fish kept waving to his right, trying to will the ball to stay in fair territory. The ball hit the foul pole, which meant it just barely stayed fair. Fisk’s homer won the game and the crowd rushed the field.

Sean is acting this scene out in his office and Will, in his excitement, says, “I can’t believe you got tickets to that game! Did you rush the field?” Sean says, “No, I didn’t rush the field, I wasn’t there.” Will says, “What?” Sean says, “No, I was in a bar, having a drink with my future wife.” Will can’t believe it Sean would pass on a World Series game in order to have a drink with a woman he didn’t know. Then he asks, “And who are these friends of yours? They let you get away with that?” Sean says he slid his ticket across the table to his friends and said, “I have to see about a girl,” and his friends could tell by the look in his eyes that he meant it. Then

he says he never regretted missing that game.¹ Most people would think that there's nothing more glorious than a World Series game at Fenway, but this man knew that seeing this woman was even better.

Tonight, as we continue to think about the first Christmas, we'll hear a story of how some ordinary shepherds saw the greatest thing they would ever see. Or perhaps we should say that they saw the *two* greatest *things* they would ever see. The first thing they saw was obviously glorious. But the second thing they saw, though less glorious in appearance, was actually greater. The greatest thing might not seem like much to most people, but they knew it was the best news this world has ever known.

We're going to continue our study of the Gospel of Luke by looking at Luke 2:8–21. Before I start reading that passage, I just want to remind us of what has happened in this story so far. Months earlier, the angel Gabriel came to tell Mary, an ordinary Jewish woman, that she would give birth to a baby who would be the “Son of the Most High” and the one who would inherit the throne of David and rule forever (Luke 1:32–33). In other words, he would be the “forever King” and he would be the Son of God. And Mary was told that this baby would be conceived in a miraculous way. Though she was a virgin, the Holy Spirit would cause her to become pregnant. In that way, Jesus is like a new creation. He will be what all previous human beings have not been like. He will be holy and pure, without sin. The coming of Jesus was the beginning of God's renewal of the world.

This morning, we saw that Jesus was born in Bethlehem (Luke 2:1–7).² He was born among animals, whether it was in a stable, a cave, or in a common room where both people and animals slept. In the birth of Christ, God descended to earth, even appearing in the midst of our filth, in order to save us.

Tonight, we'll see how the birth of Jesus was announced. The first people who hear about it are some decidedly average people, some shepherds. Let's first read Luke 2:8–14:

⁸ And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. ¹⁰ And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David

¹ That scene in *Good Will Hunting* can be watched here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jg_9FQk6UnA. There are few expletives in that scene, so be forewarned.

² The sermon, “Born This Day in the City of David,” can be found at <https://wbcommunity.org/luke>.

a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹² And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”³

This scene takes place in the area of Bethlehem. Some shepherds are watching their flocks at night. They were watching them to make sure no one stole them. After all, sheep were valuable. While these humble shepherds were doing their job, they saw an amazing sight. An angel of the Lord appeared to them. Not only that, but “the glory of the Lord” shone on them, too. The “glory of the Lord” refers to God’s special presence. It is usually in the form of a brilliant light, but it was also associated with a cloud. In the book of Exodus, the glory of the Lord appears in a cloud when they received manna from heaven (Exod. 16:10) and when God’s presence entered the tabernacle (Exod. 40:34–35; see also 1 Kgs. 8:11). It also appeared on the top of Mount Sinai when God made a covenant with Israel (Exod. 24:16–17). The presence of God was literally awesome.

It’s no wonder that the shepherds were afraid. From what the Bible says about angels, they are probably frightening creatures. They’re frightening not because they’re evil, but because they’re powerful.

But the angel tells the shepherds not to be afraid. And he tells the shepherds, “I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.” The angel is literally sharing the gospel with the shepherds, a message that isn’t just for Jews, but for all kinds of people throughout the world, in all eras. And this is the message: “For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”

There’s a lot packed into that one sentence. The first part of that sentence might have reminded the shepherds of this prophecy in the book of Isaiah:

⁶ For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given;
and the government shall be upon his shoulder,
and his name shall be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

⁷ Of the increase of his government and of peace

³ All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

there will be no end,
on the throne of David and over his kingdom,
to establish it and to uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time forth and forevermore.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

In that prophecy, we're told a child would be born who would be called "Mighty God" and "Prince of Peace." He would be a king from the line of David, the most prominent king of Israel who reigned about a thousand years earlier. But unlike David, this King's government and peace would have no end.

They're also told this boy is Savior, Christ, and Lord. In Luke 1, Mary said God was her Savior (Luke 1:47). In the Old Testament, God is called the only Savior (Isa. 43:3, 11; 45:15, 21; 49:26; 60:16; 63:8). "Christ" means "anointed one." It's the same title as "Messiah." ("Christ" is based on a Greek word and "Messiah" is based on a Hebrew word.) This is a term used of one who would come to deliver the Jewish people (Ps. 2:2; Isa. 61:1). The term "Lord" was often used to translate the name of God in the Old Testament. So, these shepherds are told that God is born in the little town of Bethlehem. The long-awaited hope of Israel has come.

What's interesting is that some of this language was used of the Roman emperor, Caesar Augustus. An inscription dating to 9 B.C. says that the Greeks of Asia recognized that "Providence" had sent Augustus as a "savior" and that "the birthday of the god Augustus was the beginning of the good tidings for the world."⁴ Augustus was the most powerful man in the world at the time. He strengthened the Empire and established the *Pax Romana*. But he was not really a savior or a god. The true Savior, the true God, however, was born in a small town, among animals, to very ordinary people. And his birthday was the beginning of good news for the world.

When the shepherds are told this message, the night sky is filled with a multitude of the heavenly host, which means a heavenly army of angels. They filled the night sky with brilliance. This would have been an amazing sight, particularly for people who had never known electricity, machines, fireworks, or movies. Without a doubt, this was the most amazing thing they had ever seen.

⁴ For details, see Craig A. Evans, "Mark's Incipit and the Priene Calendar Inscription: From Jewish Gospel to Greco-Roman Gospel," *Journal of Greco-Roman Christianity and Judaism* 1 (2000): 67–81, available at http://www.jgrchj.net/volume1/JGRChJ1-5_Evans.pdf.

And the shepherds are told that this message brings glory to God and peace to those on earth with whom God is pleased. The fact that God comes in the form of a baby to rescue his people brings him honor and praise. It brings him glory. But it also brings peace to those who receive God's favor. And it's not some kind of generic peaceful feeling. It's a peace that encompasses all of life. It's a peace between two parties that had been at war. Mankind has been in rebellion against God from the beginning. Jesus came to bring peace by living the perfect life that we should live, a life of love and obedience, a life devoted to God. And he came to be our Savior, by dying in our place so that our sins could be punished. All who turn to him in faith are those who receive God's favor. Anyone who turns to Jesus can experience peace with God.

I suppose it's no accident that shepherds were the first people to hear about Jesus' birth. Throughout the Bible, many important figures were shepherds. Abraham, Jacob, Moses, and David were shepherds. And Jesus claimed to be the "good shepherd" (John 10:11, 14). Shepherds are important in the Bible because sheep are important. It's possible that some of the sheep that these shepherds were watching over would be sacrificed at the temple in Jerusalem as part of the Old Testament sacrificial system. They were slaughtered in place of sinners. Jesus, the true "lamb of God" (John 1:29) laid down his life for his people, his sheep (John 10:11, 15, 17–18). He died to pay for our sins. The true lamb was born in Bethlehem, and those who tended lambs were the first people to hear this good news.

Once the shepherds receive this great news, they rush to Bethlehem to see this child. They were told he would be in a manger, which is a feeding trough. What a strange thing to think that their God, Savior, and King would be in that setting. But there he was. Let's read verses 15–20:

¹⁵ When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." ¹⁶ And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. ¹⁷ And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. ¹⁸ And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. ²⁰ And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

The shepherds make tracks to Bethlehem to see this child. And when they find the baby there, just as they had been told, they report this message to the people there. I suppose some

people beside Joseph and Mary were there. All who heard the message, that this baby was also Savior, Christ, and Lord, wondered. I don't suppose this means they all really believed it. But they must have thought it was an amazing story.

Mary, however, "treasured up these things, pondering them in her heart." Even though she was the mother of Jesus, and even though the angel Gabriel told her that Jesus would reign forever and was "the Son of the Most High" (Luke 1:32-33), she probably didn't immediately understand what was happening. But she meditated on what the shepherds said. She thought about it.

The shepherds then went back to where they came from, and they praised God. They had seen an incredibly impressive sight when the angels appeared to them. They probably saw the most brilliant light that the world has ever seen. Yet seeing this ordinary-looking baby in a feeding trough was a more amazing sight. Somehow, this was God in the flesh. This was Jesus Christ, truly God and truly man. The eternal God entered into time. The God who lacks nothing and needs nothing became a vulnerable, helpless baby who relied on his parents. The God who created the world and everything in it became a part of creation. The God who wrote the story of history and the story of the Bible wrote himself into the story, in order to make himself known, and in order to save us.

In this brief story, we see different responses to the birth of Jesus. The shepherds heard a message and responded with action. They went to see if it was true. And when they saw it was true, they praised God and they told other people what they had seen. This is a response of faith.

Others wondered at the message the shepherds delivered. But I'm sure many of them really didn't believe it. They probably thought, "There's no way this baby could be what these shepherds are saying he is. No way. How could a baby born like this be divine? How could he be the Messiah?"

Mary, for her part, took in all the words the shepherds delivered to her. And she thought about it. And even in the last verse that we'll read tonight, we see that she and Joseph were obedient. They named their baby Jesus, just as the angel Gabriel told them. And they had him circumcised on the eighth day, which is what the Old Testament law required. This is verse 21:

²¹ And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

How do you respond to this message? Do you think, “Yeah, that’s a nice story,” and then go about your life, pretending that you never heard this? If that’s you, I would encourage you to be more like Mary. Ponder these things. Be more like the shepherds and do some work to see if it’s true. I realize some people think that angels and miracles can’t possibly be true. I would simply say that these things are rare and extraordinary. The shepherds thought so. And there are many accounts throughout the world of miracles happening. Have you ever really investigated to see if Christianity is true? I would love to help you. You may be surprised to find that there are many rational arguments for the truth of the Christian faith. You may be surprised at the different lines of evidence that support this message.

My hope is that we would all respond to the message of Christmas with joy, with thankfulness, in faith and obedience. God has come to us to save us. The greatest, most glorious thing we could ever see is not a Super Bowl or a skyscraper or the largest diamond you could imagine. The greatest thing is to see the glory of God shining in the face of Jesus Christ.