

RECONSIDERATIONS

EXPLORING CHRISTIAN THOUGHT IN THE UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY

DECEMBER 2020

VOLUME 21, NUMBER 1

“THE GLORY OF GOD IN THE FACE OF CHRIST” A CHRISTMAS MEDITATION

The following meditations have all appeared in our weekly newsletter in recent weeks. Those who have been following the newsletter will find them familiar, but we are eager for everyone to recognize that we have added this important resource to our educational program. If you want to reflect on the angels as well as on Zechariah, the shepherds, and Mary, please go to our web site, scroll down and subscribe to our newsletter. For our recommended resource, we offer the poetry collections noted on p. 5.

Part One: Zechariah

Several years ago, a phrase from the Apostle Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians jumped off the page and opened up a wonderfully rich way of reading the gospels. In chapter four, verse six, the Apostle observes that “God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ is the one who has shone in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.” The Creator God, who created light in the beginning, now enlightens our hearts by giving us knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

I would like to suggest that this verse offers an excellent window through which to view the Gospels. It suggests that those who walked with Jesus gained knowledge of the glory of God as they looked into his face; and through their witness, we who have come along much later can do the same. Though we were not present 2,000 years ago, we can come to know Jesus through the eyes of those who were present with him, and in this way, we too can look into the face of Christ and gain knowledge of the glory of God.

As one begins to reflect on the idea of the glory of God in the face of Christ, moments such as the transfiguration of Jesus will probably come readily to mind, and yet, Jesus did not reveal his Father’s glory so much through visually spectacular moments such as the transfiguration as he did through day-to-day demonstrations of the character of God. I am convinced that it was in the more mundane experiences of Christ that his followers best gained the knowledge of the glory of God as they beheld

the very person of God in the face of Christ. I think the disciples saw it this way themselves. I find it striking, for instance, that after recording the miracle of turning water into wine, the Apostle John observes that Jesus “thus revealed his glory and his disciples put their faith in him” (John 2.11).

My premise for these meditations, then, is that one of the moments when Jesus most fully revealed the glory of God was when Mary gave birth to him and laid him in a feed trough. Those who looked into the face of her little baby saw “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.”

On that premise, then, I would like to ask a few simple questions. First: What did people see when they looked into that little face? Here, the answer is pretty simple and straightforward. All the onlookers, whether in heaven or on earth, saw the same thing: a newborn, Jewish, baby boy, wrapped in strips of cloth and lying in a feed trough. The questions that demand a bit more thought, however, are: What did each witness understand about this little boy? And: What did each one struggle to understand?

To begin with, allow me to offer one curious example of someone who encountered Jesus and saw in him the revelation of the glory of God. Strictly speaking, as far as we know, this person did not actually look into the face of Jesus, and yet he encountered Jesus and responded to him. I speak of the priest Zechariah and of his encounter with Jesus while Jesus was still in his mother’s womb.

Luke, who gives us the fullest account of the birth of Jesus, embeds that birth in the story of the birth of John the Baptist to Elizabeth and Zechariah. Luke's gospel begins by introducing this godly, elderly couple and telling the story of the appearance of the angel Gabriel to Zechariah in the Temple. As you may recall, because of his unbelief, Zechariah was struck dumb until the birth of his son; but at that birth, the faithful Zechariah regained his speech, and to everyone's surprise, he declared that his son's name would be John.

When we ask the question: What did Zechariah see? The answer is a bit different from what the other characters in the birth narratives saw. Zechariah saw a young girl, a relative from Nazareth, who was pregnant with her first child. She wasn't showing much, but by the end of the first trimester, which she spent with Zechariah and Elizabeth, it was clear that a child was growing in her womb.

When we come to the questions about what Zechariah understood and struggled to understand, we have to do some work. We can probably assume that his wife told him that their own son had jumped in her womb when the pregnant Mary walked through the door (Luke 1.39-45). We can also assume that Zechariah shared his wife's view of Mary as "the Mother of my Lord," but once Zechariah's speech returned, we need no longer assume. He shares his understanding of Jesus in his own words in the prayer that he offered at the time of his own son's birth.

In Luke 1.67 Luke records that after the birth of his son, "Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:"

68 "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,
because he has come to his people and redeemed them.
69 He has raised up a horn of salvation for us
in the house of his servant David
70 (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago),
71 salvation from our enemies
and from the hand of all who hate us—
72 to show mercy to our ancestors
and to remember his holy covenant,
73 the oath he swore to our father Abraham:

74 to rescue us from the hand of our enemies,
and to enable us to serve him without fear
75 in holiness and righteousness before him all our days."

Does it strike you that there is something amiss in this prayer?

Zechariah's wife has just been blessed with a child in her old age, and now Zechariah rightly offers a prayer of praise to God. His prayer, however, is not about his own son. It is about someone else. Zechariah is a priest of the tribe of Levi, of the house of Aaron, but here he is praising God for a child born of the house of David, a horn of salvation through whom the Lord, God of Israel, would redeem his people. Zechariah is speaking not of his own son but of the son that would be born to his relative, Mary, a child through whom the Lord would fulfill his promise to King David and his covenant with Abraham.

Finally, Zechariah speaks of his own son.

76 And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High;
for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him,
77 to give his people the knowledge of salvation
through the forgiveness of their sins,
78 because of the tender mercy of our God,
by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven
79 to shine on those living in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the path of peace."

John would be the prophet who would go before the Lord to prepare the way for him. He would be a light that would shine in the darkness. He would point to a salvation accomplished through the forgiveness of our sins, rooted in the tender mercy of our God, and opening into the path of peace.

In his own unique way, then, Zechariah gained the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in Christ. He "saw" the baby Jesus and knew who he was. The baby born to Mary would be the Lord himself, for whom Zechariah's son would prepare the way. The son of Mary would be that horn of salvation through

whom the Lord, the God of Israel, would redeem his people. He would be the fulfilment of God's promise of a King in the lineage of David, whose kingdom would never end. He would be the fulfilment of God's covenant with Abraham through whom both Abraham's descendants and all the nations of the world would be blessed. He would be a light that shines even to our own day on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, a light that still guides our feet into the path of peace.

Part Two: The Shepherds

Apart from Mary and Joseph, the first witnesses, who looked into the face of Jesus and gained some "knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ," were shepherds who kept flocks in the countryside near Bethlehem. After giving us a brief account of the birth of Jesus, Luke records that "there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night," and

An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 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, Christ, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

And suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

"Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests." (Luke 2:8-14)

Here, perhaps more than at any other point in the story of Christ's birth, we see the birth for the breaking-in to human history that it is. The incomprehensibly great Creator God enters our world quietly and obscurely; but for a moment, the heavens open up, and a few shepherds see God's entrance for the extraordinary event it really is.

In his space trilogy, C. S. Lewis portrays our planet as the si-

lent planet, shrouded in darkness, cut off from realms of being that transcend our own and blind to them; but these realms of being really are there, and on that night they came into view for the shepherds. We do live on a dark and silent planet, but in the birth of Christ, God pierced the darkness and broke through the silence. The angels saw it, and for a moment, so did a few shepherds in the Judean countryside.

It was a moment filled with glory upon glory, and as we reflect on "the glory of God in the face of Christ," we do well to note the way that Luke's account reveals this glory to us.

First, the story reveals the glory of the Lord both in the heavens and on earth. The glory in the heavens, we are told, was the glory of the Lord, and that same glory appeared in the manger, for the one in that manger was the Lord of glory himself. The shepherds saw the glory of the Lord in both places. In the heavens they saw the glory of his majesty, and in the manger they saw the glory of his character. They saw the glory of a God who empties himself, takes on human flesh, and makes himself utterly dependent, because he loves us. Glory upon glory.

There is, however, a second way that Luke piles glory upon glory in this story. Not only does the narrative move from the glory of God in the heavens to the glory of God on earth, it moves from the revelation of the glory of God to the declaration of the glory of God by those who witnessed that glory. We see this movement first in the heavens. When the heavens opened and the angel spoke, Luke tells us, "the glory of the Lord shone round them." Then, upon hearing the message of great joy, "a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven." Beholding the glory of God in the heavens, the angelic worshippers responded to that glory by glorifying the one who is the source of that glory. They gave glory to God.

On earth, the shepherds repeated this pattern. Upon hearing the angel's message, the shepherds hurried to Bethlehem and found Mary, Joseph, and the baby just as the angels had told them. Then, Luke tells us, when the shepherds had seen Jesus, "they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child [and] returned, glorifying and praising

God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.” Having beheld the glory of God in the face of the infant Christ, the shepherds glorified the one who was the source of that glory. They gave glory to God.

There was, then, glory in heaven and glory on earth, and in both cases the encounter with glory evoked words of glory. In both realms of glory, the revelation of the glory of God led to the declaration of glory to God by those who beheld that glory. The angels praised God in the heavens, and the shepherds, spurred on by the glory of the Lord in the heavens, beheld the glory of the Lord in the manger and gave glory to him as well. On earth as in heaven, those who perceived the Lord’s glory, gave him glory.

But what does it mean to give God glory—with words—as both the angels and shepherds did?

I find it encouraging to see that while the poets agree in urging us to offer words in response to the birth of Jesus, they struggle to know just what to say. Even they are a bit tongue-tied. “The shepherds sing; and shall I silent be?” George Herbert asks. John Milton, feeling the same awkwardness, implores the “Heavenly Muse” to grant him words that he might bring them as a gift to the infant God. “Hast thou no verse, no hymn, or solemn strain,” he begs, “to welcome him to this his new abode?” Similarly, Martin Luther, overwhelmed at the thought that “In my distress thou com’st to me,” also asks, “What thanks shall I return to thee?” What words might be adequate? What language shall we borrow to give our infant Lord the glory due his name?

Together with these who wielded words far more deftly than I could ever hope to do, I also struggle for words, so I will merely point to the example that the shepherds and the poets provide. I encourage you, first, follow the shepherds’ example of borrowing words. It is worth noting that the shepherds borrowed the angels words. They simply told others what the angels had said to them. As these short meditations demonstrate, I unabashedly borrow words all the time. I borrow from the gospels and the psalms, I borrow from the poets and the hymn writers, and I encourage you to do the same. Keep a good hymnal by your Bible and allow the “angels we have heard on high” to lead you in song.

Second, follow the shepherds’ example of bearing witness to what they experienced, what they saw, and what they knew. They give no indication of being nervous about sharing their experience, or about how best to express it, or about whether they should create a program or take a demographic survey first, or about whether they would be able to answer people’s questions, or about how weird it would sound, or about how people would respond; they just shared what they knew about Jesus and about their personal experience of him.

Third, I encourage you to draw deeply on the poems and carols whose authors wrote with such insight and artistry. Reflect, for instance, with George Herbert on the experience of the shepherds outside Bethlehem on that night of nights. “My soul’s a shepherd too,” Herbert writes, “a flock it feeds of thoughts, and words, and deeds.” The pasture, he continues, is the Word of God, and the streams that enrich that pasture are the streams of God’s mercy and grace. Here is an image well worth cultivating as a way of being in the world. My soul as a shepherd of being. My thoughts and words and deeds as the flock for which my soul cares. The word of God as my pasture, and his mercies as the streams from which I draw life. Here, in such green pastures and by such still waters, both shepherd and flock can flourish, making music that outshines the sun and outsings the daylight hours.

Part Three: Mary

In proposing that we use Paul’s comment about gaining “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ,” as a framework for reading the gospels, and specifically for reflecting on the experience of those who looked into the infant’s face, I suggested that we ask three simple questions. First, What did they see? Second, What did they understand? And third, What did they struggle to understand?

The answer to the first question is straightforward enough and relatively easy to answer. Mary and Joseph, the shepherds, the angels, and any random stranger who happened to stick his head in the door to see if everybody was okay all saw the same thing: a newborn baby boy. He looked pretty much like any other little Jewish male infant. No reason to think of him as anything unusual.

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ON THE MORNING OF CHRIST'S NATIVITY

John Milton

This is the month, and this the happy morn,
Wherein the Son of Heav'n's eternal King,
Of wedded Maid, and Virgin Mother born,
Our great redemption from above did bring;
For so the holy sages once did sing,
That he our deadly forfeit should release,
And with his Father work us a perpetual peace.

CHRISTMAS 11

George Herbert

The shepherds sing; and shall I silent be?
My God, no hymn for Thee?
My soul's a shepherd too; a flock it feeds
Of thoughts, and words, and deeds.
The pasture is Thy word: the streams, Thy grace
Enriching all the place.
Shepherd and flock shall sing, and all my powers
Outsing the daylight hours.

YOUNG MARY

Madeleine L'Engle

I know not all of that which I contain.
I'm small; I'm young; I fear the pain.
All is surprise: I am to be a mother.
That Holy Thing within me and no other
Is Heaven's King whose lovely Love will reign.
My pain, his gaining my eternal gain
My fragile body holds Creation's light;
Its smallness shelters God's unbounded might.
The angel came and gave, did not explain.
I know not all of that which I contain.*

“The Glory of God in the Face of Christ” A Christmas Meditation, continued from page 4

The questions about what these onlookers understood and what they struggled to understand, however, are not so easily answered. Consider, for instance, what his mother Mary understood and what she struggled to understand. As Mary gazed into that little face, she understood better than anyone that her little baby was exactly that—a little baby. She had just given birth to him. She knew he was the genuine article. She knew this much to be obvious and true. There were inexplicable mysteries surrounding her son’s conception, but the baby himself was clearly the real article. He was a little boy—her little boy, and he was as needy and dependent on his mother as any other little baby born before or since.

What Mary struggled to understand was what else he was. Given the mysterious and miraculous nature of the conception of this child, she knew he was something more. According to Luke’s account, she knew that his name was to be Jesus, which Matthew explains to us implies that he was to be a Savior. Mary also knew that her son would be great, that he would be called the Son of the Most High, and that the Lord God would give him the throne of his father David—forever! Most remarkably, while the conception would always remain a mystery to her, she knew that the Holy Spirit had come upon her, that the power of the Most High had overshadowed her, and that her child would not only be called son of Mary but Son of God. Her son would be God’s Son. But “Son of God”—what could that possibly mean?

Putting the pieces together: the words of the angel Gabriel; private, tearful talks with her husband; conversations with her cousins Elizabeth and Zechariah; a visit from some shepherds who had their own amazing story to tell, she pondered. She wondered and tried to imagine what it all meant. She gazed into her baby’s face as she nursed him and wondered what it could mean that she was looking into the face of the Son of God, Immanuel, God with us. How could it be, as her cousin Elizabeth had stated so bluntly, that Mary had become the mother of her Lord.

As Madeleine L’Engle has “Young Mary” admit, “I know not all of that which I contain.... All is surprise: I am to be a mother.”

But she ventures, “That Holy Thing within me and no other Is Heaven’s King whose lovely Love will reign.... My fragile body holds Creation’s light; Its smallness shelters God’s unbounded might.” But then, Mary reaches the limits of imagination. “The angel came and gave, did not explain,” she tell us, and then she concludes as she began: “I know not all of that which I contain.”

Luci Shaw writes with similar insight and imagination. With Mary, she ponders these things in her heart and contemplates what it means for the Word to be “Made Flesh.”

After the bright beam of hot annunciation
Fused heaven with dark earth
His searing sharply-focused light
Went out for a while
Eclipsed in amniotic gloom:
His cool immensity of splendor
His universal grace
Small-folded in a warm dim
Female space—
The Word stern-sentenced to be nine months dumb—
Infinity walled in a womb
Until the next enormity—the Mighty,
After submission to a woman’s pains
Helpless on a barn-bare floor
First-tasting bitter earth.*

The Light of Heaven “eclipsed in amniotic gloom.” “The immensity of splendor ... small folded in a warm dim Female space.... Infinity walled in a womb.”

The glory of God in the face of a fetus.

But wherein does that glory finally lie?

Certainly, it lies in the miracle of the conception, but even more it lies in the way that the baby Jesus reveals the character of God. What sort of God are we talking about who subjects himself to amniotic gloom? What sort of God humbles himself this way? The very thought of God being humble sounds odd, if not simply wrong, and yet this is exactly what we are

dealing with. He is a God who humbles himself and who loves the humble.

As Mary herself put it early in her pregnancy, the Lord God “scatters those who are proud in their inmost thoughts,” but he lifts up the humble. “My soul glorifies the Lord,” she says to her cousin, “and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.” (Luke 1.46-48, 51-52) Like the angels and shepherds, Mary responds to the glory of God by giving him glory, and as she does so she delights in the humble character of a God who is mindful of the humble and lifts them up.

Humility is not a static quality. It is a choice, and in Jesus, God made this choice. He humbled himself by becoming one of us, and he humbled himself still more by becoming one of us in the way that he did. The infinite, eternal Word of God, by whom all things are created, rendered himself mute, “stern-sentenced to be nine months dumb. Infinity walled in a womb.” This is the humility of the Son of God. This is the glory of God in the face of Christ. Mary saw it up close and very personally and pondered it in her heart.

“May it be to me as you have said,” Mary says to the angel, and then she “glorifies the Lord” as she reflects on the blessings that are about to be poured out through her son. She provides an example for us all, and in the second stanza of “Made Flesh,”

Luci Shaw captures this as well. I am once again glad to borrow words from one who wields them well.

Now, I in him surrender
 To the crush and cry of birth.
 Because eternity
 Was closeted in time
 He is my open door
 To forever.
 From his imprisonment my freedoms grow,
 Find wings.
 Part of his body, I transcend this flesh.
 From his sweet silence my mouth sings.
 Out of his dark I glow.
 My life, as his,
 Slips through death’s mesh,
 Time’s bars,
 Joins hands with heaven,
 Speaks with stars.*

Notes

*Highly recommended sources for Madeleine L’Engle’s and Luci Shaw’s poetry include: Madeleine L’Engle and Luci Shaw, *Winter Song: Christmas Readings* (Regent College Publishing, 2004), and Luci Shaw, editor, *A Widening Light: Poems of the Incarnation* (Regent College Publishing, 1997).

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May God bless your celebration of Christ’s birth and grant you his peace in the new year.





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This newsletter is a publication of the Christian Study Center of Gainesville which facilitates the thoughtful consideration of a Christian understanding of life and culture in the university community



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