

We Sing with the Angels

Luke 2:8-14

by Michael G. Lilienthal

Dear favored ones of God,

Do you believe in ghosts? A 2014 study found that 42% of American adults do.¹ 74% of American adults believe in God. Among U.S. teens, interestingly, 46% believe in ghosts, and 80% believe in God. 74% of teens believe both that Jesus is the Son of God and in angels, while 68% of adults believe these things. Besides demonstrating the trend of teens being more spiritually-minded than adults, this study implies that a large portion of the United States is sure that the supernatural is invading the natural, in order to interact with the mortal realm, or to deliver messages.

If you, like I do, read the Bible and believe it to be the inspired and inerrant Word of God, then you'll have to admit that the supernatural is indeed invading the natural, interacting with it and bringing messages. It started in Genesis, when "God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light" (Gen. 1:3). God sent his Word into the world, and thereby the supernatural in fact created the natural. Then, not too long after, "the serpent...said to the woman, 'Did God actually say...'" (Gen. 3:1). Evil spirits started imitating God and invading the world themselves.

Throughout biblical history, we hear accounts of God and his angels speaking to people, and of Satan and his angels speaking to people. The wicked King Saul speaks

¹ Larry Shannon-Missal, "U.S. Teens More Likely than Adults to Believe in God, Heaven and Angels," *The Harris Poll*, 13 March 2014, http://www.theharrispoll.com/health-and-life/U_S_Teens_More_Likely_than_Adults_to_Believe_in_God_Heaven_and_Angels.html.

to a ghost which claims to be the prophet Samuel, and gives the king a harsh message of God's Law, delivering the horror: "and tomorrow you and your sons shall be with me" (1 Sam. 28:19). God sends out prophets, sometimes with angels. The last several weeks we have heard about one angel in particular who spoke with key figures in the time just before Christ's birth: the angel Gabriel, who appeared to Zechariah (Luke 1:11), to Mary (Luke 1:26ff.), and to Joseph (Matt. 1:20). Today we hear about a host of angels who appeared to some shepherds out in a field.

In virtually every instance of a spirit's appearance in the mortal realm, the spirit is surrounded by terror, or by glory, which causes terror. In this age when nearly 2/3 of the United States is minded towards spirits and expects their reality, how do we judge between the true and the false spirits? Where should we direct people who believe in these spirits to discover whether their message is true? St. John tells us, "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God" (1 John 4:1). St. Paul gives us a barometer by which we can do just that: "But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed" (Gal. 1:8). And St. John, again, takes it even further: "By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God" (1 John 4:2-3).

Now that should trigger something in your brains right away: our Gospel from Luke tells us what these angels said: "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." That's precisely what John tells us that godly spirits

will confess. So we can believe that these angels are from God, and sing along with them.

I. The Savior Is Born

Go back through the appearance of the angel in each instance in the Gospel texts: when Gabriel appeared to Zechariah, he “was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him” (Luke 1:12); and when he appeared to Mary, “she was greatly troubled” (Luke 1:29); and when the angel appeared to the shepherds, “they were filled with fear.” You’ll notice that in each of these instances, the angels said the very same thing: “the angel said to him, ‘Do not be afraid, Zechariah,’” (Luke 1:13); “the angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary,’” (Luke 1:30); while we’re not told how Joseph reacted, the angel said to him, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear” (Matt. 1:20); “the angel said to [the shepherds], ‘Fear not.’” Are you picking up on the pattern?

It goes beyond the nativity story: at the resurrection, “the angel said to the women, ‘Do not be afraid’” (Matt. 28:5). And it even goes beyond angels: “when the disciples saw [Jesus] walking on the sea, they were terrified, and said, ‘It is a ghost!’ and they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, ‘Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid’” (Matt. 14:26-27); when Jesus “was transfigured before” the disciples, and they heard the voice of the Father booming from heaven, “they fell on their faces and were terrified. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, ‘Rise, and have no fear’” (Matt. 17:2, 6-7); after his resurrection, “Jesus met [the women] and said, ‘Greetings...! Do not be afraid’” (Matt. 28:9-10).

This is not a phrase or a pattern you'll witness from any of the evil spirits. Why? Why is the message of the godly spirits always introduced with, "Do not fear"? The angel who spoke with the shepherds gave a reason: "Fear not, *for behold*, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people." They bring the news of the birth of Jesus, "a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." The angel says that this happened "this day." This was a momentous event for the shepherds! They would be present on the very day that the hopes of God's people were finally fulfilled! The Savior was born! His birth had already occurred, of course, but now heaven affirms it, a heavenly messenger pronouncing the news to the shepherds.

And this news, he says, is "for all the people." This birth of Jesus is the pure Gospel message, intended for all humanity, for as Luke writes to his dear Theophilus elsewhere, "there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). Therefore "For the faithful, the birth of the Christ brings an end to all fear (cf. 1 Jn 4:18). Unfortunately, some will choose to reject God's kingdom, and they will receive the news of Jesus' birth with fear (e.g., Herod)."² The story of this Christ's birth would have a similar polarizing effect to the story of his death: "For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Cor. 1:18). And this same thought, once again St. John utters: "Whoever knows God listens to us; whoever is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error" (1 John

² Just, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, 107.

4:6). Already this infant had a terrible and glorious future cast before him, for Simeon foretold when he saw the Christ-child: “Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel” (Luke 2:34).

So the important thing is to test the spirits – learn to find this Christ-child, the Savior who is Christ the Lord, so that we might be “those who suffer wrong” to whom “He comes with succor speedy,” and not his “foe” over whom “He on His throne shall rest” victorious.³ In this the angel offers help, for he tells the shepherds, “And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” God never offers grace without adding to it the means whereby we can be certain it is true. He commands us to test the spirits, but he never leaves that to our own weak abilities; rather he informs us where the true spirits are to be found, and they are always in such poor and lowly places as we would never expect, “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich” (2 Cor. 8:9):

Thus his angel tells the shepherds that the Savior is to be found in the “baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” Thus Jesus says, “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me” (John 5:39). Thus Peter says, “Baptism...now saves you...through the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 3:21). Thus Paul says, “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it

³ ELH #103:2, 6.

not a participation in the body of Christ?" (1 Cor. 10:16). Thus Jesus commands: "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them" (John 20:23). In all these natural, visible, earthly means, the supernatural, invisible, heavenly spirits invade this world to interact with us and to deliver a message: the message that this Savior is born!

And in the birth of this Savior comes everything that belongs to him: for his death is foreshadowed by this birth, as the angel describes him with three distinct pieces to the sign given: "a baby," "wrapped in swaddling cloths," "lying in a manger"; compare to this Luke's later telling of Jesus' death, when Joseph of Arimathea took his body down from the cross, and his action is described: "wrapped it in a linen shroud," "laid him in a tomb cut in stone," "where no one had ever yet been laid" (Luke: 23:53). From conception, Jesus was put in the lowly place from which he would raise us up, and thus he descended from the womb to the tomb, in order for us to ascend through the baptismal watery tomb, causing us to be born out of that watery womb into new life in Jesus.

Because of this Savior, our reaction to God's glory is transformed from terror to peace.

II. Glory and Peace

Why did the angel appear to the shepherds? Think of the region. Who else was a shepherd in that land? David was a shepherd boy, perhaps on the very same hills, and from the lowly state of shepherding he was exalted into the kingship. In the very same way, Jesus would be the "good shepherd" who would "lay down [his] life for the sheep" (John 10:11, 15), and thereafter God "exalted him and bestowed on him the

name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil. 2:9-11).

This same shepherd David became a poet, a psalmist, "singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in [his heart] to God" (Col. 3:16). In the very same way, we were those shepherds, working at night "when no one can work" (John 9:4), when we "stumble" (John 11:10), living for nothing but the materials we can gain from our day-to-day work in this world. But because "the glory of the Lord shone around" us and invaded our world, bringing daylight into our night, we have become poets and psalmists. Notice what these shepherds did. They heard the song of the angel, and after seeing the Christ-child, "they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child.... And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen" (Luke 2:17, 20). They took the message of the angels, their song, and appropriated it for themselves, made it their own, so that they could "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...teaching them to observe all that" they had been told (Matt. 28:19-20). This is why we, too, sing with the angels.

Examine their song: it has two parts. First, "Glory to God in the highest." Glory is the manifestation of God's holiness. Why would we need to sing for God to have glory, if it is already a part of his essence? It is similar to the First Petition in the Lord's Prayer: "Hallowed be Thy name" "What does this mean?" Luther has us ask. "God's name is certainly holy in itself, but we pray in this petition that it may be holy among us

also.”⁴ That is, we pray that we may be counted among God’s friends and not his enemies, that we may always hold God’s name holy, hold himself glorious. We pray that we may praise him aright from here and hereafter. Think back one week ago, when we sang with Mary. In her song she uttered, “My soul magnifies the Lord” (Luke 1:46). Does God need to be enlarged? Not of himself, but in our hearts, we can certainly find more room for him. In Mary’s song she praised the God who “exalted those of humble estate” even as “he has brought down the mighty from their thrones” (Luke 1:52). Because of the polarization of humanity over the Christ-child, those who have observed the favor of God seek to hold him in ever higher esteem within themselves, while those who have not suffer as his enemies.

And this is closely connected to the second part of the angels’ song: “and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased.” This second part reemphasizes the polarization of humanity over this Christ-child: the peace only comes “to those who receive the news of the child’s birth in faith.”⁵

Now think back, two weeks ago, we sang along with Zechariah. Do you remember how his song prophetically concluded?

the sunrise shall visit us from on high
to give light to those who sit in darkness [*aha!*] and in the
shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace. (Luke 1:79)

⁴ Luther, *Explanation of Luther’s Small Catechism* (Mankato: ELS 2001), 18.

⁵ Just, *op. cit.*, 111.

The peace foresung by Zechariah has now come! See, how what is sung by God's people truly comes. Compare to this the promise Jesus made: "And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith" (Matt. 21:22). This peace comes to those *εὐδοκίας* – those "with whom he is pleased," whom God favors, whom he has chosen, who have received him in faith.

That is the song of the angels, short and sweet, yet full of doctrinal weightiness. A truly (literally) heavenly composition. But why, then, if it's perfect in this short form, will we sing something extended just a few moments after the sermon? Turn ahead to page 64 in the front of your *Hymnaries*. We'll soon be singing this *Gloria in Excelsis Deo*, the song of the angels. Look at the first line: "Glory be to God on high: And on earth peace, good will toward men." That's the angels' song, right there. It takes up one stretch across the page, seven measures. Why are we singing something that goes on for another two pages?

There's a reason for it. The rest of this canticle is a later-composed text that built on the angels' song, a "private psalm" written by someone inspired by biblical poetry, who wished to express praise and worship to God in song. The person who composed this song, within just a couple centuries, probably, of Jesus' life, had himself been directed to the babe in Bethlehem, the sign the angels pointed to, and in the Word of that Savior saw God's glory and the peace that came from it on account of faith. So he sings (and we with him): "We praise You, we bless You, we worship You, we glorify You, we give thanks to You" all things we do, "for Your great glory." Because God's light has shined in our dark hearts, we respond, and we can't help it, with song. This

five-fold expression serves as the bridge between the song of the angels' and the confessional song of this private psalmist, when he states that he himself wishes to sing along with the angels.

The rest of the song should carry some quite familiar themes. It calls out first, "O Lord God, heav'nly King, God the Father Almighty." Then it calls out, "O Lord, the only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ." By the end of the song, it confesses, "You only, O Christ, with the Holy Spirit, are most high in the glory of God the Father. Amen." You know that in the Apostles' Creed we confess, "I believe in God the Father Almighty"⁶ Then we confess also, "And in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord," and in the Nicene Creed, "And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God."⁷ We likewise confess, "I believe in the Holy Spirit," and "I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life, Who proceeds from the Father and the Son, Who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified."⁸

Go back to the song. There's a whole section in the middle, where we sing, "O Lord God, Lamb of God, Son of the Father, You take away the sin of the world, have mercy upon us. You take away the sin of the world, receive our prayer. You are seated at the right hand of God the Father, have mercy upon us."⁹ In the Creed we confess that Jesus, the Son of God, "was crucified, died and was buried," "for us men and for our salvation...was crucified," and also that "He ascended into heaven and is seated at the

⁶ ELH p. 68.

⁷ Ibid. 68-69.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid. 65.

right hand of God the Father Almighty.”¹⁰ This whole Creed is intertwined in this song with what I’ve said before is the most basic prayer: “have mercy”!

This *Gloria in Excelsis Deo*, therefore, is A) a confession or Creed based on the Gospel message of the angels’ song; B) a request for the mercy promised by such a Savior for such a wretched and sinful soul; C) the natural singing reaction of a believer in this Gospel message. The mercy will come to the one who sings this song in faith, and that mercy means forgiveness of sins and “the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding” that comes with it (Phil 4:7). This peace, remember, only comes “to those who receive the news of the child’s birth in faith,”¹¹ hence the credal extension in our *Gloria in Excelsis Deo*. The one who sings this song is confessing the faith with which he has received the news of this child’s birth, and therefore claiming the peace God has promised to those who do receive it so.

Singing with the angels, therefore, like singing with Zechariah or with Mary, or with David, Moses, Miriam, Solomon, Isaiah, Hannah, or any other Christian or believer, is more than just putting their words and tunes into our mouths. Singing with them is singing with them in spirit, being “filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Eph. 5:18-21). Singing with them is taking the Word of God and repeating it to one another, and

¹⁰ Ibid. 68-69.

¹¹ Just, *op. cit.*, 111.

to our own souls, so that we are strengthened in faith in the Son of God who came from heaven to this earth to raise us who were dead on this earth into his heavenly mansions. Singing with them is putting that Word, their songs, into our own words, our own melodies, like these shepherds “glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them” (Luke 2:20), like this private psalmist who believed the Gospel preached in this Word and confessed in his own song. Singing with them is gathering together with them, and “where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them” (Matt. 18:20).

We sing with the angels therefore, because the supernatural has invaded the natural, in the form of a “baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger,” and again through the divine Word of God put into human language, and through the Holy Spirit infused into regular H₂O, and in the glorified body of Christ and the blood he shed on the cross hidden under normal bread and wine, and through all these the supernatural Holy Spirit comes into our hearts and infuses faith in that baby, so that the glory of “God in the highest” means that we are “those with whom he is pleased,” and therefore means “peace.”

Amen.