

GLORIA IN EXCELSIS DEO, ET IN TERRA PAX

A Sermon for Christmas Eve, 2011

Text: Luke 2:1-20

“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will to men.”

“Glory to God in the highest, and peace to God’s people on earth.”

“Gloria in excelsis Deo, et in terra pax.”

Glory to God, peace on earth.

Sounds like a plan.

Of course, it is actually a song. We sang it together at the beginning of this service, in the hymn of praise. It crops up in Christmas carols like “Angels We Have Heard on High.”

It is a song, but it also expresses a plan. Which is being worked out. Which is still being executed.

Glory to God; peace on earth.

That is not simply a wish, but also a guide for a life of faith and love.

Let me take you to the Lord’s Prayer for a moment, to show you what I mean. Because just as the angels’ song expresses *God’s will* which was revealed in the birth of Jesus, so the Lord’s Prayer is, I hope, *our will* which we express not just in words but in our lives. I would expect the two to synchronize, wouldn’t you?

The prayer Jesus taught us begins with three petitions which interpret “Gloria in excelsis Deo”:

We say “hallowed be **thy** name”—and seek to glorify God’s name.

When we say “**thy** kingdom come,” we are asking that God’s kingdom come even among us, which is the best way to give glory to God.

When we say “**thy** will be done on earth as in heaven,” we are asking that God be respected, honored, glorified—even and especially among us.

Thus, the first three petitions of the Lord’s Prayer expand the idea of what it means to want God in the highest to have glory. It isn’t just wishing that God might have a happy day, but expressing our intention that people might glorify God in our thoughts, words, and deeds.

Then we turn a page. The remainder of the Lord’s Prayer addresses the particularities of what it means to have peace on earth. I think we would all agree that three sorts of things destroy peace: people not having what they need; people bearing grudges and trying to get revenge; and people being afraid of either messing up, or of getting hurt.

And when we say “Give **us** this day our daily bread,” we ask that all God’s children might have what we need for daily life.

When we say, “Forgive **us** our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us,” we seek to replace payback justice with peace.

When we say, “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil,” we name the other great preventer of peace, namely, fear of the future.

So, the last part of the Lord’s Prayer expands puts forth practical ideas for creating peace on earth. And if you look carefully, you will see that the way each of the petitions is expressed, we who know God as our Heavenly Father . . . *we are drawn into the task* of making this peace happen, in the world around us.

Sounds like a plan: Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace.

But part of the angels’ song is still missing. What is the last little bit? The part about “God’s people,” or “the people whom he favors”? For whom do the angels sing? For whom is this announcement? Does God play favorites, when he bestows the blessing of peace? How do we know if the song is for us?

Upon whom does the Lord’s favor fall?

In the world’s eyes, those who have the most things of the world are the fortunate. They have a lot of blessings to count. If it is God who blesses, it would seem that we are blessed by God in proportion to the evidence of our success. On the other hand, whatever is wrong with our lives would seem to be evidence that we are not favored by God. We are strongly tempted to believe what we see. That is always our default setting. We think that victims of tragedy are unlucky, that they have been forgotten by God; and we envy the lucky ones who receive many “blessings” and much “peace” from God. Accordingly, on a good day I feel blessed, on a bad day I feel cursed.

Working with this kind of thinking, the world satisfies itself. We project a God of its own invention onto the results of our own chicanery. And that will never bring justice or peace, since that rationalization perfectly serves the status quo, depressing the oppressed and legitimizing those who run things.

But here, Christmas Eve, a different sort of “favor” is being announced. The God of the highest heaven inserts himself into our world with a totally different value, in which the favor of God is something which is *intended for* anyone who will receive it. The good will, the favor of God is something which God in his power and out of his love, *bestows upon us*.

So we ask again, how the song of the angels is supposed to end? Upon whom does the Lord look with favor?

It turns out that the favor of the Lord is being expressed *precisely in the Son of God being born a tiny baby of a weak and deformed species, the human race*. In this tiny baby with no future, whose mother will live to see him murdered, God expresses his will, peace for the world. Terra. Earth. Anyone who will receive it. The God of mercy, whose glory it is to save and redeem, adopts unto himself the very meekness which attracts his own mercy!

Upon whom does the Lord look with favor? For whom is God's peace? For the world. Terra. In terra pax. For those people who, *by virtue only of their willingness to receive God's blessing*, are receiving his favor.

Of course, not everyone wished to receive that favor. Predictably, the poor, the sick, the outcasts, the no-hopers, were much more receptive to the blessing Jesus brought. Read the gospels and see. But it is not impossible for *anyone* to receive this favor, because it is for the whole world. And it is good to receive this favor, because with it peace comes to earth.

As baptized children of God, we are the singers of this song: Gloria in excelsis Deo, et in terra pax hominibus bonae voluntatis. We give glory to God who in his mercy has condescended to dwell among us. And because we have received his blessing without regard to where we were coming from, we bear his creative and redeeming peace to the whole world.

Whenever you hear or see that beautiful Latin refrain, "Gloria in excelsis deo," do not forget the other part—"peace on earth," because it is our duty and our joy to make peace happen in the world, for the Lord has looked with favor upon us, his lowly servants.

Amen.

