

“The God Who Comes in Humble Glory”

Luke 1:26-38; Luke 1:46-55

A Sermon by Rev. Bob Kells

On this Fourth Sunday of Advent, we draw closer still to the town of Bethlehem and the wondrous story that will play out there in the days that lie ahead. The town is on the horizon and though we cannot see into the manger itself just yet, we get some insight into the nature of the One whose coming was foretold through the words of the angel Gabriel. Speaking to Mary, the angel says:

“And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end” (Luke 1:31-33).

With a description like this, you’d think this child would be born in a palace, surrounded by riches and finery befitting his status as the Son of God. With a resume like that, you’d expect great things of this child who, it was said, would one day sit on the throne of the great King David. But, as we all know, that’s not how God works. God, the Creator of the universe, comes to us in majesty and in glory, but not in the way we humans think about these things. God entered the world in humble glory, choosing a young peasant woman in a small village on the fringe of the greatest empire in the world to be the mother of God’s Son.

We know this story so well that perhaps it escapes us, the meaning of this holy birth.

Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us. Say the word “God,” and people think—Supreme Being, Deity, Heaven, Eternity and things unseen. We also think of the power, the might, the magnificence that goes along with that word God. If we’re looking for a word to sum up what we think about when we think about God, we could do a lot worse than to use a word I’ve already mentioned: “glory.” God’s glory appears throughout the Bible.

We hear of it:

- At Mt. Sinai, where God came down in cloud and lightning, to keep human eyes from seeing his glory.
- In the Exodus from Egypt, when God led Israel out of slavery and into freedom, God’s glory—the *shekinah*, that’s the Hebrew word—appeared as a pillar of cloud and fire.
- The psalms and the prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures spoke of God’s glory...and
- In the New Testament, God’s glory shows up at the announcement of Jesus’ birth; the angels appeared to shepherds when “the glory of the Lord shone around them,” and the angels praised God: glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!” (Luke 2:9, 14).
- God’s glory is associated directly with Jesus, “to him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity,” wrote the Apostle Peter. “Amen” (2 Peter 3:18).¹

I probably don’t have to tell you this, but human beings like to get the glory too. Throughout history, kings and queens have been pointed to as powerful, terrifying, glorious...many of the same terms used to describe God. In our day and time in the United States, we don’t look to royalty so much but to people with particularly influential roles: sports figures, movie stars, political leaders.

- Many of them live high-flying, ostentatious lifestyles.
- Many of them love the attention given them by fans, the media, anyone.
- Many love to be recognized for their achievements.

¹ “glory,” in Mark Allan Powell, Ed., *Harper Collins Bible Dictionary, Revised and Updated*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2011), 331-332.

These folks are loving the glory people give them. We see them arriving at award ceremonies and gala events, dressed for excess, and ready to be seen as powerful, influential...glorious.

Seldom do leaders in any field sneak in the back door, but on occasion they do.

It was February, 1861. Abraham Lincoln was on his way to Washington to assume his duties as the newly elected President of the United States. Normally, the arrival of a president would be met with pomp and circumstance: bands playing, crowds pushing, and shoving, and cheering to welcome the leader of the nation. But this was hardly possible. The country was on the verge of civil war. Seven states had already seceded. And there were credible threats against Lincoln's life that made a public arrival in the nation's capital very risky. Following the advice of his security detail, Lincoln and two others quietly slipped out of their hotel in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, on the night of February 22nd. Disguised as common travelers, they boarded a train that took them through Baltimore, where many people were sympathetic to the Southern cause. There, they changed trains and finally arrived in Washington at 6 in the morning. When they got off the train, they were startled as a man cried out, "Abe, you can't play that on me." Congressman Washburne, a friend of Lincoln's from Illinois, recognized him immediately and escorted the president-elect to the Willard Hotel.²

Abraham Lincoln had to sneak into Washington, DC, because of threats against his life. At Bethlehem, God entered the world through the back door, so to speak, to avoid the threats of King Herod against a rival king. It wasn't the most glorious entry into the world by human standards—it was an arrival in humble glory. And while we love the songs of the season that tell of a silent night and a sleeping child, the night of Jesus' birth was anything but.

- The glory of the Lord arrived to the shrieks of a woman's painful labor in a cold stall filled with hay.
- His first cries split the night air as his mother washed him and dressed him in swaddling clothes.
- She placed him in an animal's food trough—his first cradle.
- Nothing and no one of any account took notice of this birth; some barnyard animals and a few scraggly shepherds were all who greeted the child.
- Not even the innkeeper, who gave this family the stable for the night, bothered to check in on the expectant parents.

There was nothing about this child that was worthy of note by worldly standards. And yet, this is how God's glory arrived for those who need to experience it the most...in human form, weak and vulnerable, under threat from the powers that were at the time. God arrived in humble human flesh for people who need God most. Not for the rich and famous who put their stock in the glories of this world and in themselves. But for the poor, the overlooked, the spiritually destitute, the sin-sick, and those who grieve.

Years later, when someone asked about his mission, Jesus replied: "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick" (Matthew 9:12). Jesus arrived in humble glory, and his arrival turned the world upside down. Mary's song, known as the Magnificat, points to the ways that God is acting do just that:

"His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;

He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty" (Luke 1:50-53).

The faithful who have read these words over the years have noted how Mary speaks of this world over-turning event in the past tense, as if it has already happened. She prophesizes these things even before she has seen the

² History.com Editors, "Abraham Lincoln arrives in Washington, D.C.," November 13, 2009, article on internet,

<https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/lincoln-arrives-in-washington>, accessed 17 December 2020.

promised child, even though she never saw them happen in her lifetime. Mary took God at God's word. Her response, and her praise, is a response of faith in the God whose humble glory she would bring into the world.

There are a few other words, eight of them to be precise, that are deserving of our attention this morning. They come from the announcement, or annunciation, from the angel Gabriel to Mary.

“Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you” (Luke 1:28).

These are the words that left Mary perplexed, confused, uncertain as to exactly what they meant. And even after she understood what God was asking of her—go bear a child and, by the way, your husband is not the father—it's kind of hard to see how this would constitute being favored.

If Mary had trouble with this, what about us? Do we find it difficult, in our sometimes troubled and mixed up lives, to believe these words? Can it be that we can hear in the words of the angel a promise for us? Pastor and theologian David Lose of the Lutheran Church asks: “What if we hear these words as directed toward us: ‘Greetings, favored ones! The Lord is with you.’” Would that make a difference in our Advent preparations this year?³ I hope that it will.

And so, today:

- I offer you the blessings of the Lord, who loves you enough to send Jesus for you, for me, and for all the world. God is for us!
- I offer you a reminder that God is with us, always; day and night; in your joys and in your woes; in sickness and in health; whether you are at the top of the hill or treading one of life's deep valleys. God is never far from you.

Here it comes, beloved: Good news! Good news!

- God is with us!
- God will never leave us!
- God is always for us!

Favored ones: May the love and grace of God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you in the Holy Spirit in these Advent days, and always.

Amen.

³ David Lose, “Luke 1:26-38,” *...in the Meantime*, article on internet, <https://www.davidlose.net/2020/12/advent-4-a-greetings-favored-ones/>, accessed 17 December 2020.