

This Christmas morning, I have invited you to make music. (Well, jingle bells) every time you hear the word glory. We are looking, especially, for references to God's glory. And yes, this is partly to remind us that we are at a birthday party. Celebrating the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ. Celebrating in the year 2021

This has been a hard year. We are celebrating, at the same time BC's covid rates are spiking. Inflation is rising, political unrest globally is surging. All that and I know this can be a hard time of year because we feel like we should be celebrating but really, we are worrying. Worrying about the world, worrying people we love. This week, as I write, two members of my extended family are in surgery and I know among us I am not alone. Many of us have people who we worry about right now

So fellow Christians I invite you into a very special sort of celebration. A way of celebration and praise that Christians throughout the centuries have been known for. Bring your whole self present. Acknowledge all your worries and fears, all your sadness and hurts. All of you is welcome here. And then celebrate and even joyfully praise God's glory as well. Again, I say, bring your whole self present.

With all that is dark and all that is light in our hearts, we turn our attention to scripture. Because we are celebrating something in addition to a new baby. With the birth of Jesus, we ring in a new era.

The old era was all about the Roman Empire. Emperors who claimed to be gods and used all their authority, all their power, to collect taxes. Because that was what this census was for. This story starts with details about how the entire known world would be registered. Every person was counted so that the emperor could efficiently collect taxes. Money, men, and resources were then sent away from provinces like Syria. These taxes were sent to Rome so that the emperor, with his friends and family, could sit on golden thrones, wear royal robes and sleep in luxurious rooms with soft beds. The glory of the Roman empire was a grand spectacle.

But at an incredible price. Romans used extreme force to impose order, including the collection of taxes. I've read historical sketches that suggest that Augustus Caesar is directly responsible for the commands that killed hundreds of thousands of people. His direct orders. Roman glory came at an extreme price. Especially since this estimate does not include the taking of slaves, generally maiming people or wars at the time that Augustus Caesar was not directly involved in.

Now you might be thinking, Okay, there preacher. We were having a good time ringing our bells on this beautiful Christmas morning. A little less doom, gloom and worry, a little more birthday party cheer, right?!

But I didn't start it. It's in our passage. This passage begins with Caesar and taxes. This passage invites us to notice Romans in their human hunt for power and glory. Sometimes you can only see the light after you have experienced the darkness. The light shines in the dark. This passage directly contrasts the little baby, born in a stable, wrapped in simple cloth and lying in a manger with what we all know was a luxurious life. The life of Caesar Augustus in Rome, Quirinius in Syria, or even King Herod in Jerusalem.

Especially when the passage brings up David. Remember King David. God promised King David, "Your house and your kingdom will endure forever (2 Samuel 7: 16). And this passage reminds us, a couple of times, that Joseph is in the line of David. Mary and Joseph are in Bethlehem, which is the town of David, so that this child, in the line of ancient kings, could be born in the town of ancient kings. But, instead of a king's birth, witnessed by heads of state, wrapped in silk and satin, laid to rest in golden cradles. This child's birth is seen by the stable's creatures, dressed in whatever cloth came to hand and laid in a manger. We see the contrast. By starting the story with the empire and taxes, we see how different this birth is. Human glory in the mighty luxury of empire, God's glory in a baby in a manger.

When we look for where God's glory is. We also find God's glory with the shepherds. God's glory appears to people who are sleeping on the ground, wrapped in the dirty cloth of their cloaks, outside under the stars. "An angel of the Lord appeared to them [the shepherds], and the glory of the Lord shone around them" (Lk 2:9). What do you think that looked like?

The Glory of the Lord.

We say that a lot in church (you might have noticed). The Psalms are full of God's glory. Psalm 24 names God "king of Glory" (Ps 24:10). Our Eucharistic prayers call us to celebrate and praise God's glory, but what does glory mean?

As you might imagine, the word glory has collected many meanings. In Hebrew, the word is *dkabod* (kaw-dode), its root meaning is weight. This is a word heavy with glorious meaning. It hints at abundance, riches, splendor, and honor. And *dkabod* is experienced by God's people. In Exodus, we hear, "To the Israelites, the glory of the Lord looked like a consuming fire on top of the mountain" (Exodus 24:17). Sometimes God's glory looks like fire, and it is proper and reasonable to be afraid in the face of the weight of God's glory. We are afraid before the vast greatness of a glimpse of God.

In Greek, the word is *doxa* and appears hundreds of times. It can mean glorious, honor, or, to give praise. This word's meaning sings of dignity and worship. The word connects to splendor and brightness. But not like a cozy hearth's welcoming glow. God's Glory is bright like the moon, sun, and stars are fiercely brilliant.

Glory properly belongs to God and to Jesus. St Paul says, "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' [and] made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ" (2 Cor 4:6).

And that is the birth we celebrate today. In the darkness of all that worries us, we celebrate. We ring in a new era. The light of God's glory comes into the world and shines in our hearts. Today we remember that the glory of God- shining like a star –is born into the world to give us the gift the light of God's glory.

Only consider, like the almighty brightness of the sun, God's glory is a scary gift. The glory of the Lord appeared to shepherds, and they were terrified. All that brightness like fire, all that weighty splendor. The shepherds were afraid. And, afraid partly because they were much

more familiar with the dark and dangerous glory of earthly kings and empires. The shepherds in their field received this gift and they were afraid.

Yes, we can be afraid of God's glory. But God's glory is also beautiful. A modern mystic, Thomas Merton experiences God's glory. He says, "The whole world is charged with the glory of God, and I feel fire and music under my feet" (Thomas Merton, "the Sign of Jonas p 228). God's glory appeared in the world and then the angel said, do not be afraid (Lk 2:10). The angel invited the shepherds to see the beauty, like music. The angel sang, "I bring good news that will cause great joy for all the people."

In a passage that starts with emperors and taxes this is another contrast. We see the light of a new kind of king, a new kind of power, a different sort of glory. So when we read "Peace to those on whom God's favor rests." we are invited to see the light by comparing it to the dark. Good news and joy used to be only for people in power, Roman kings or corporate empires. But today, we remember and celebrate that God's favor is not all about human power. God's favor is not reserved for the rich and powerful. Today we celebrate that this good news is a great joy for all people. And we say-

Glory to God in the highest, glory to all the earth and we ring bells to celebrate the era of God's glory here on earth.