



Luke 2:8-20
Sing a Song for Christmas (vol. 2)
“Angels We Have Heard On High”

Rev. Brian North
December 7th, 2025

In 1862 a Roman Catholic bishop in England named James Chadwick published a hymn that within the next 30 years had become a staple of Advent and Christmas worship. The hymn is called “Angels We Have Heard on High,” and to this day it remains one of the most memorable and beloved Christmas hymns.

It began as a French folk carol titled “The Angels in Our Countryside.” It originated sometime in the late 1700s in the southern region of France, though we don’t know the exact date or who composed the tune or wrote the lyrics. Chadwick took the basic framework of that French folk carol—including the Scriptural references—but simplified the verses. You can think of his version as a paraphrase of the original French song.

The chorus “Gloria in excelsis Deo” is central in both versions, and Chadwick preserved it—including its grand melisma. You know that word, right? 😊 “Melisma” means “one syllable stretched over many notes.” “Gloria” in this hymn, and I’m not singing it for you. Hopefully you find something else in the sermon new or interesting today, but probably a few of you will find that musical terminology to be the highlight of the sermon. That’s a comment about the sermon, not any of you. 😊

“Angels We Have Heard on High” is a particularly fitting hymn for our passage, Luke 2:8–20, because it places us right beside the shepherds on the hillside—hearing the angels’ song and responding with joy. We will sing it this morning during communion. That theme of joy is what I want to focus on today. Unlike some carols that weave together multiple parts of the Christmas story, this hymn focuses specifically on the angelic announcement and the shepherds’ wonder. It doesn’t retell Luke 2 word-for-word, but its melodic Gloria captures the overflow of heaven’s praise and invites us to join the shepherds in joyfully rushing to Bethlehem to see the Savior God has made known. Let’s turn now to **Luke 2:8-20**. This is God’s Word to us this morning....

The shepherds are out in the fields, watching their sheep and going about their routine—when suddenly an angel, and then a whole company of angels moments later, appears to them. Now, if your worldview doesn't allow room for God—if you believe the material world is all there is, with no Creator, no heaven—then the appearance of angels will naturally be hard to accept.

But if you believe in a spiritual dimension—that God is real, and that He reveals Himself and seeks relationship with us—then angels aren't all that surprising. That's not to say they are everyday occurrences; but throughout history, including in Scripture, they do appear on occasion. They're not impossible, with God. From a Christian worldview, angels fit perfectly within how God acts in the world.

So, an angel appears, and the glory of God shines around the shepherds. The word for “glory” is “doxa,” and it's repeated later when the angelic host praises God when they say: “Glory to God in the highest!” **The angel's presence—reflecting the presence of God—terrifies the shepherds.** The Greek literally says, “They feared with great fear,” which is the typical human response to God's holiness.

When we realize the holiness of God in contrast to our lack of it, it catches our breath. It's stunning. God's holiness creates a sense of awe, mystery, and fear. And when that holiness confronts you in a visible, almost tangible way as we see here, it grips us even more. That's what's happening to the shepherds.

But in verses 10 and 11 the angel reassures them, “Do not be afraid.” It's the most frequent command in Scripture. Why should the shepherds not fear? Because he brings good news of great joy. The root word of “good news” is “euangelizo,” and is often translated as “gospel.” The phrase “I bring good news” can also be translated as “I bring the gospel” or even “I preach the gospel.” And he says that this news is “great joy.”

The message is that “today”—which reminds us of God's immediacy and his grace and goodness and very presence here and now— “today, in the town of David” a savior has been born. **Jerusalem is sometimes called the “city of**

David” but Luke uses “town of David” to mean Bethlehem. It’s his way of emphasizing a promise—and remember we talked about the promises of God a bunch last week—it’s his way of emphasizing the promise of God in Micah 5:2 that the ruler of Israel would come from Bethlehem. Other Old Testament passages make clear that this ruler would descend from King David. So, a *theological* statement is being made here more than a *geographical* one: The Messiah is born in David’s town because he is David’s promised Son.

The angel then gives three key titles for this child: Savior, Christ, and Lord. Stacked together, they make the identity of this child unmistakably clear.

1. **He’s a savior.** It’s not immediately explained here, but we learn later that he saves us from our sin and its eternal consequences. He’s called “*a savior*” here in this moment, but throughout his public life and the rest of the New Testament, Jesus is known as “*the Savior*”.
2. **He’s the Christ.** “Christos” is the Greek equivalent to the Hebrew word “Messiah.” Both mean “anointed one.” The Messiah was a long-expected, long-promised figure who would be anointed to lead God’s people.
3. **He’s the Lord.** This is the title Jesus is addressed by throughout the New Testament by those who recognize him for who he really is. Lord means “master.” He’s the one to whom we belong and he’s the one with authority and power.

Then the angel gives them a sign. And I always find this a little humorous—wasn’t the angel itself, and then the whole angelic army a moment later, enough of a sign? Just tell them where to go! But the sign they’re given—finding a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger—points to God’s activity in the world, and in a completely unexpected way. It’s a baby who is Lord, born into an animal’s feeding trough. Not exactly a royal crib, but God works in mysterious ways. His glory is wrapped in humility.

Then the whole company of angels proclaims, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests” (Luke 2:14). In the hymn, “Angels We Have Heard on High” this is where the line, “Gloria in excelsis deo” comes from. You’re singing Latin when you sing that line, and it simply means “Glory to God in the highest.” Peace is spoken of here, and it is next Sunday’s Advent theme, but briefly: Biblical peace is not the absence of conflict, but the presence of a restored relationship with God. Jesus brings this peace, this restored relationship with God your creator, and without him, that restoration and that peace is impossible.

And: This restored relationship with God—this peace—is what produces such joy in the shepherds. As the first angel said, this is a joyful message. Verse 16 tells us that the shepherds then “hurried off” into Bethlehem. The energy, joy, and excitement is palpable. And after they see with their own eyes everything the angel proclaimed, their joy overflows into sharing with others about this good news. Verse 20 then tells us they returned to ordinary life, to the fields where the sheep are, and they do this as they are “glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen.”

Throughout this passage we see joy and the effects of joy. To summarize: The angelic message is one of great joy; the birth of a baby is a joyful; the fulfillment of God’s promise is joyful; the angelic chorus of “Glory to God in the highest and peace on those to whom is favor rests” is filled with joy; the shepherds hurrying to town shows joy; their spreading the word about this child is fueled by joy; And then their return to the fields “glorifying and praising God” is filled with joy.

So, what does this teach us about joy, and how can this passage help us live with more joy?

First, joy isn’t something we manufacture or concoct on our own: it is something that comes from God. The birth of Jesus is the joyful event that causes the other joy-infused things to happen. All the rest of the joy-filled activity flows from that: the angels, the going to town, the proclaiming to others, the praising. All of those joy-filled things are because of what God

has done in this joyful event, in the birth of Jesus. That event, and Jesus himself, is the source of our joy, and that comes from God.

Second, joy comes from having this peace with God that comes from knowing Jesus. Jesus is Savior, Messiah, and Lord—but if we don't recognize that, then the joy that God gives in Jesus will not be ours. Santa and a Christmas tree do not bring joy. *Jesus* is the center of this joy – his birth, his life, his death, and resurrection are deeply joyful. And that joy becomes our joy when we trust Jesus. When we allow the evidence for the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus to hold sway in our hearts and minds and trust Jesus his peace becomes our peace and his joy therefore becomes our joy. Knowing Jesus as Savior, Messiah, and Lord brings joy.

Third, this joy leads to sharing it with others. The angels shared it with the shepherds at their place of work. The shepherds then share it with others in the town where they likely lived. We talk about leading people toward Jesus where we live, work, and play...and we see that right here. I realize that we may not be able to go into our places of work and announce the good news of Jesus in this same way as we see here. I get to do that, and I'm very grateful that it's actually part of my job description in what I do as pastor. That's a rare thing.

But each of us (including me) can communicate our faith in countless natural ways: in conversations, in holiday plans, in what you display on your desk or in your home, in our hospitality and generosity with the people in our lives. When someone asks a direct question, you can share—not a theological lecture—but simply share how Jesus has impacted your life. That's what the shepherds did: "Here's what God has done; here's what we heard; here's what we saw." Living with joy opens the door to conversations about Jesus.

So, here's the heart of it: Because Jesus has come as our Savior, Messiah, and Lord, we are called to receive the joy he brings and to share that joy with the world around us – where we live, work, and play. What might that look like for you during Advent and this Christmas? Some of us may be hearing about this good news for the first time. Or maybe it's not the first time but you're still looking at the evidence of Jesus' life, death,

and resurrection and trying to decide if he's too good to be true. And if that's you, then I want to encourage you to keep seeking, and to realize that the angels' message is for you as well. Jesus really is good news and peace with God comes through him, and this is a joyous thing to celebrate and live into each and every day.

But most of us in the room already believe. We acknowledge Jesus as Savior, Messiah, and Lord. What does it look like to share this joyful message with the people God has placed in our lives? How do our words, our actions, our attitudes, communicate the joy that comes from knowing Jesus?

The shepherds were ordinary, blue-collar kinds of guys. In fact, the people of that profession in their day were usually considered lower status. They were not powerful, influential people. And yet God worked through them as the first proclaimers of the good news of Jesus, and the joy that he brings. If God can use them, he can use us. Let's be bearers of joy this Advent and Christmas wherever we go, so that others would come to know the joy of Jesus as well. Let's pray...Amen.