

# "Glory To God"

Romans 16:25-27

December 18, 2011

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Advent

Glory! We hear a lot about this, especially during the Christmas season. On that first Christmas night, the angelic choir sang, "Glory to God in the highest!" But have you ever stopped to consider what true glory is? More important, are our ideas about glory the same as God's glory or are we missing something?

Most people think that glory refers to might, power, and honor that serves the glorious one. It is an athlete's glory to win the victory – which means he/she has to beat someone else. It is a businessman's glory to lead his company to the Fortune 500 list and make the cover of their magazine – which calls attention to himself. An actor receives glory when he goes onstage to accept an Oscar and thanks all "the little people" who helped him.

This is the kind of glory most of humanity desires. We, too, want power, honor, wealth, and success in our lives. We even bring this kind of thinking into the Church. Pastors may want the power and honor that being a successful pastor brings. Congregations may want the wealth and success that big congregations have. We want the numbers, the dollars, the prestige. We want people coming to us, talking about us, praising us, and giving us glory. Luther called this kind of thinking "a theology of glory".

It's no wonder that so many contemporary Christian songs will talk about God's glory. We think that God's glory is all about power and might, praise and success, brightness and light, and we want to share in that. Christians long to be in God's glory, to share in God's glory, and to experience God's glory. But is that a good idea?

God indeed has the glory which involves power and might, brightness and light. But this naked glory of God is not something you want to have any part of. Sinful human beings cannot be in the glory of God and live. Once, Moses asked the Lord, "Show me your glory." The Lord replied, "You

cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live.” (Exodus 33:18-20) Isaiah, the prophet, realized the same thing. In Isaiah 6, Isaiah stands in the presence of the Lord in His throne room in heaven and sees the Lord in all of His glory. He’s not excited to be in the glory of God. It’s not something he is basking in. He says, “Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.”

But there is another kind of glory. Some have called it God’s “hidden glory.” If it is His naked glory that utterly destroys sinners, then it His hidden glory which saves them. This is the Gospel – the good news – which Paul has preached and which we still preach today. This is “the mystery that was kept secret for long ages.” It is not kept secret because of God’s desire to keep sinners out of His presence but because of sinners’ unwillingness to come into God’s presence this way. While we are looking for the glory which brings power and might, we are blinded to the glory by which God comes to us in humility and weakness.

We see the promise of a Savior delivered in humility and weakness in our Gospel reading for today. The angel Gabriel does not visit the daughter of rich socialites in Jerusalem. Rather, he comes to the daughter of peasants in the backwater village of Nazareth, a town so unimportant that it is never mentioned in the Old Testament. The Savior will not come into a well established family but through the womb of a virgin.

We will soon read again the story of the Savior’s birth occurring in humility and weakness. He is not born in a palace, but in a stable. Our choir today got it exactly right when they sang about the “cradle rocks in glory.” But we need to understand it clearly. It is not the glory with which we often portray it: a young baby swathed in an ethereal heavenly glow which lights up the stable and lying in a soft straw filled bed. The glory of the Christ Child is in a dark dank stable. There is nothing soft about straw. It is quite harsh and rough. And the cradle for the Son of God is a dirty, smelly cattle feed trough.

The glory of the Savior as He lives and moves and ministers will largely be unnoticed. There is no wealth or success, but only poverty. One time, when a man thought it would be relatively easy to follow Jesus, Jesus told him, “Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.” (Luke 9:58) While many are interested in Jesus’ power to heal or feed them, He doesn’t get the glorious numbers which many religious leaders crave. In fact, defections got so bad that Jesus had to ask the twelve disciples, “Do you want to go away as well?” (John 6:67)

But the most important place where this hidden glory of God is revealed is perhaps the strangest place. After Jesus rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, He said to His disciples and those around Him, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” (John 12:23) And where does Jesus go to be glorified? To a throne to rule? No. He goes to a cross to die. The true glory of God is to be found in the beaten and bloody, suffering and dying Son of God on a cross.

God glories, not in destroying sinful man with His power, but in saving him by His grace. To bring that about, God had to go to the extreme measure of sacrificing His own Son in our place. He placed our sin on Him so that we might receive His holiness. He carried out His wrath on His sinless Son so that we would be protected from it. He punished Jesus so that He would not have to punish us. He sacrificed Jesus to death so that we might live. He ultimately restored Jesus to the glory Jesus knew from the beginning when He raised Him from the dead. He did that so that we might share in that glory forever in heaven. It is this “theology of the cross”, not the “theology of glory” which grants us forgiveness, new life, and eternal salvation.

It is this hidden glory and its results which have been disclosed and made known to all the nations. But this proclamation of the Good News does not happen through visions, signs, wonders, and other glorious things, but through the prophetic writings – the Word of God. It is through the preaching and teaching, telling and sharing of the Word of God which produces the obedience of faith – nothing fancy or glorious by worldly standards.

We talk about “glorifying God” or “giving glory to God” and think this involves some glorious effort which results in noticeable and measurable results. But that’s not the case. The glory we give to God is also that hidden glory. Once, people asked Jesus, “What must we do to do the works God requires?” Jesus answered, “The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.” (John 6:28-29)

This is what glorifies God and does the work God requires: believe in Jesus. Believe in the Baby of Bethlehem and the Man of Calvary. Trust in His all sufficient merit. Look for His glory, not in power, might, and success, but in His Word and Sacraments where you receive His gifts of forgiveness and salvation. Glorify God, not in acts which bring you praise and honor, but by living out your lives in your vocations, serving God by serving your neighbor, both physically and spiritually. When Mary was faced with, perhaps, the most glorious opportunity ever given a woman: to bear the Son of God, she did not rush into the streets, seeking personal glory, and bragging about how she was about to become the Mother of God. She simply said, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” May that be our outlook on life in the kingdom of God, too. We do not seek power or might, praise or success. We simply say to God, like Mary did, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.”

Glory is shown in power and might. It is also shown in humility and weakness. Glory is seen in the bright light of heaven. It is also seen in the darkness of a manger in a stable and a cross upon a hill. Glory results in praise, honor, and distinction. It also results in faith, love, and service. Therefore, as we wait to celebrate the birth of our Savior in hidden glory at Christmas and to anticipate His return in full glory at the Last Day, we proclaim, along with Paul, “to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen.