

Behold: "Gloria In Excelsis Deo!"

These words from the Christmas carol "Angels We Have Heard on High" are right out of the Latin Scriptures and "the multitude of the heavenly hosts singing, 'Glory to God in the highest'." With their telling of the Christmas story, Luke and Matthew fired the imagination of the great Renaissance artists who painted the many and varied scenes of the nativity. Today those scenes are reproduced on many a Christmas card bearing the well wishes of loved ones and are displayed in manger scenes on the lawns of churches and the mantels of homes.

John's gospel doesn't have a narrative of Jesus' birth but it is John who expresses most clearly the significance of Jesus' birth: who the Christ child is and why He was born to us.

John 1:14 And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.

The Word who was in the beginning, was with God, and was God (John 1:1), was made flesh on that first Christmas night. More important to John than the wonder and splendor of the angelic choirs singing of His glory, is that in Jesus, "we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father."

The word "beheld" was used of those who attended the great Greek dramas and "beheld" the plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides being acted out on the stages of the Greek amphitheaters.

John says we "beheld His glory." I can imagine John as an old man recounting those few and remarkable years with Jesus. "For three years we saw His life played out before us on the streets of Palestine as He interacted with people. We literally saw love and compassion embodied as He responded to their needs. We watched and heard as He explained the mysteries of life through simple stories. We saw Him heal the sick, raise the dead, forgive the sinful, rebuke the religious charlatans, and calm the tempestuous seas. We listened as He taught us about His Father, and we watched Him find solace for His own soul as he prayed to His Father. Every day 'we beheld His glory'. His entire life was 'Gloria In Excelsis Deo'."

John explains the significance of Christmas as he raises the prologue to His gospel to its climax with these words in verse 18.

John 1:18 "No man has seen God at any time; the only begotten God, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him."

This is the significance of Christmas. The One who was born in Bethlehem and laid in a manger came to explain God to us. From that time to this, anyone wanting to understand who God is, what He is like, how He would act in this world under any imaginable circumstance, can look at Jesus and see God. "He has explained Him" to us.

There is much we can understand about God from the pages of the Old Testament. Great revelation came through the prophets, those marvelous men of God of whom the world is not worthy. We learn of the power of God through the Exodus stories. We learn of the holiness of God through the law. We learn of the tenderness of God through the psalms. But all together the prophets, psalmists, priests and kings simply could not show us the depths of God's heart. For that, God had to send His Son.

Specifically, what is it about God that we could never have comprehended without Jesus explaining Him to us? John expresses it this way:

John 1:16-17 For of His fulness we have all received, and grace upon grace. For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ.

The one thing that all the Old Testament prophets, poets, and chroniclers could never explain because they never understood it was the depth and magnitude of God's "grace upon grace." The "fullness" of God and His "grace" could only be expressed through incarnation: Christmas happened, and God became flesh. Sure, "the law was given through Moses," but the law could never reveal grace and truth. The only way He could explain it was to come Himself and live out grace and truth among us. Only in this way could we ever "behold" the breadth, width, height, and depth of God's love for us. Only through incarnation could we behold (like watching a lived out drama) the Gloria In Excelsis Deo.

What then is His highest glory? What do we "behold" when we take the time to do more than just glance His way? "Grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ." His highest glory is His grace and truth.

Behold His grace and truth. "(Behold) His glory." Behold, He is the kind of God who turns water to wine so a party wouldn't have to stop. Behold, He is the kind of God who helped a wooden hearted Pharisee see beyond his precious law and "behold" what God truly wanted was a loving relationship with him. Behold, He is the kind of God who gave the water of life to a woman four times divorced with a live-in boyfriend. Behold, He is the kind of God who says to an adulterous woman, "Neither do I condemn you." Behold, He is the kind of God who longs for His wayward children to return home, and when they do, with no regard for past transgressions or his personal dignity and social decorum, He runs out to meet His returning children, showers them with kisses, places royal robes on squalid backs, and throws welcome home parties in their honor. Their honor? There is no honor for rebellious, unclean sinners. Not with us maybe, but there is with God. This is "grace upon grace." This is the God Jesus had to show us. This is the kind of God God really is. Behold! Gloria In Excelsis Deo!

So, dear friends, be done once and for all with your mean, bad tempered, angry god who is out to get you when you wander. Give up your bookkeeper god who keeps accounts of your sins and works so he can pay you what you deserve rather than lavishing upon you freely what you could never earn. Be done with your Santa Clause god who is "making a list and checking it twice, gonna find out who's naughty and nice." Realize that none of us can ever be nice enough to earn His favor and none of us is ever naughty enough to cause the forfeiture of it. As Jesus explained in the parable of the laborers in the vineyard, God is the kind of God who gives simply because "I wish to give" (Matthew 20:14). It is here that the greatest glory is found. Behold! Gloria In Excelsis Deo!

The greatest glory of God is not in the unimaginable wonders and endless mysteries of the trackless universe. It is not in water becoming wine, lame men walking, blind men seeing, and not even in dead people rising. It is not seen in angels singing, shepherds visiting, and wise men worshipping. The greatest glory, the Gloria In Excelsis Deo is seen in God loving us. It is seen in God loving us without conditions, loving us who are at the same time much naughtier than we could ever realize and never as nice as we think. It is in His loving us, even finding delight in us, that He shows His grace, and in His grace He displays His greatest glory. Behold! Gloria In Excelsis Deo! This is the heart of Christmas.

Be comforted. Mightily are we loved!

Merry Christmas!