

Luke 2:1–38  
Advent III midweek  
(Gloria/Nunc Dimittis)  
Kaiserslautern Ev. Luth. Ch.  
December 20, 2023

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dearly bought hearers by the blood of Jesus Christ,

For this last Advent midweek service, we consider the final two canticles of Christmas, found in Luke chapter 2. First we looked at Mary's song, the Magnificat, which is sung at vespers, the church's evening service. Then we looked at Zechariah's song, the Benedictus, which is sung at matins, the church's morning service. This evening, we consider two canticles of Christmas we sing every Sunday in the Divine Service: the Gloria and the Nunc Dimittis. Or almost every Sunday - maybe you've noticed the Gloria has been omitted during this penitential season of Advent. There are four canticles in Luke 1 and 2 but only three Wednesdays this Advent. That's the main reason we're looking at two canticles this evening. But it works out perfectly since these last two canticles both show up in the Divine Service and because of the themes they express, particularly the theme of peace on earth.

The Gloria is the song of the angels. Angels play a huge role in the Christmas story, starting already with the Annunciation, when the angel Gabriel announced to Mary that she would bear the Son of God. After the birth of Jesus, an angel appears to shepherds in the region, keeping watch over their flock by night. King David himself was a shepherd boy from Bethlehem. Now these shepherds of Bethlehem are the first to hear the good news, that the Good Shepherd, the ruler of God's people, David's son and David's Lord, was born where animals eat. The angels were the messengers.

Wherever angels appear, the glory of the LORD shines, which frightens sinners. That's why the angel says: "Fear not!" He reassures the shepherds that this is a joyful announcement, the birth of the Savior. This is a message of great joy for all people. Christ the LORD, the anointed one who is God Himself in the flesh has been born in the city of David. The sign to look for? Not a great spectacle, but a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger, in a feeding trough. God's glory is to become man, to be born as a little baby and then grow up to die for the sins of the world. That's the message of joy and peace of which the angels sing.

Suddenly, the veil was pulled back and the shepherds could see the reality of what was happening. It wasn't just one angel, which would be frightening enough, but a whole army of angels! These shepherds have a glimpse at what our world really looks like, a world where God is in control and actively working for our good. Our normal human perspective is so limited. There's so much we don't know and so much happening we're not aware of. God gives us pictures in Scripture, and at times we might experience one little part of this reality. But these shepherds have an even fuller glimpse than what we could imagine. They see with their own eyes the army of angels rejoicing over their triumphant leader, the LORD of all, who enters the world like a champion onto the field of battle. God enters our reality the way young David approaches Goliath. He looks small and weak, like a nobody. But this child is here to defeat Satan, death, sin, and all the forces of darkness at work in this world. The nasty giants of this world will be slain.

And so the angels sing: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom He is pleased." When God became man, heaven and earth were united. What before seemed so far apart, or so separate and distinct, was now as close together as body and soul. Jesus is both God and man. This brings glory to God, for stooping down to save His creation,

and this brings true peace on earth for all those who believe. God has stepped in on behalf of His people. He restores the broken relationship between God and man creating peace by the blood of His cross. And that peace with God leads to peace with one another in the forgiveness of sins. As God has forgiven us, so we forgive those who sin against us, living at peace with one another. It's an imperfect peace here, but what began at the incarnation will be completed when Jesus returns with the heavenly host.

That first Gloria sung by the angels at the birth of Christ is quite a bit shorter than the Gloria we sing as part of the liturgy every Sunday. That is, every Sunday except during Advent and Lent. With joy we await the return of the Gloria on Christmas! In the liturgical Gloria, we take the song of the angels and make it our own. We praise, bless, glorify, and give thanks to God for His great glory. We sing to Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world and who listens to our prayers. We pray that the babe of Bethlehem, now seated at the right hand of God the Father, would look with mercy upon us. He is the only man who has lived a perfectly holy life. He is the only man who is worshiped with the Father and the Holy Spirit in all eternity. There is no way to adequately express the glory due His holy name!

Interestingly, the Gloria of the angels is quoted again in Luke 19[:38] when Jesus enters Jerusalem for Passion week. That's the reading for Palm Sunday and for the first Sunday of Advent. The disciples of Jesus rejoiced and praised God for the mighty works they had seen, saying: "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" In this way Luke brings His account full circle: the baby of Bethlehem is the same King who rides into Jerusalem to die for the sins of the world. Jesus, the King of kings, the root and the descendant of David, makes peace between heaven and earth. All creation glorifies its maker!

Forty days after the birth and circumcision of Jesus, Mary and Joseph brought the Christ child to the Temple in Jerusalem for the purification of Mary and the presentation of our LORD. That's what we celebrate on February 2, which is 40 days after Christmas. Old Simeon, a righteous and devout man, full of the Holy Spirit, was at the Temple, too. By the power of the Holy Spirit, Simeon knew he would not die before he saw the Messiah of Israel with his very eyes. When old Simeon encountered the infant Jesus in the Temple, he scooped up the young boy in his arms and sang the Nunc Dimittis, which is Latin for "now you let depart." "Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word, for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."

The Nunc Dimittis as part of the liturgy is actually a Lutheran innovation from the 16th century. As you know, we sing it at the end of our celebration of the Lord's Supper. This canticle fits perfectly with our sacramental theology. In the Lord's Supper, we receive the true body and blood of Jesus in, with, and under the outward forms of bread and wine. As Simeon held the infant Jesus in his arms, so do you take Jesus into your mouth. The Christ child, laid in a manger, a place of food, becomes food for you, too. He was born in Bethlehem, the house of bread, and in the Lord's Supper he comes to you in bread. Peace is made by the blood of the cross, and then He gives you the very blood He spilled on the cross to drink for the forgiveness of your sins. "The peace of the Lord be with you always," the pastor sings right before the Agnus Dei and the beginning of distribution, as he holds up the bread and wine, which are Christ's body and blood. After each celebration of the Lord's Supper, you can say with Simeon: Lord, you are now letting me depart in peace because I have seen and tasted that you are good. This means that with the forgiveness of sins you receive tangibly in the Lord's Supper, you are able to meet your

impending death with peace. You can depart this place and this life in peace knowing that your sins are forgiven, that you are at peace with God and man.

As you listen to Christmas music this week, both secular and religious, keep in mind the power of music for conveying God's Word and remember the Christmas canticles from the Gospel of Luke. When God became man, heaven and earth broke out into songs of joy. From Mary's Magnificat to Zechariah's Benedictus, from the Gloria of the angels in Heaven to the Nunc Dimittis of Simeon at the end of his life, the people of God sing the praises of Him who created, redeemed, and sanctified us in Jesus Christ. May the Christ child inspire such joyful praise in your life this season, as we praise the LORD for becoming man to save us and to bring us to life everlasting, where we will sing His praises with the angels into eternity. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. We stand for the prayers.