

# Immanent Glory

*Luke 2:1-20*

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery, preached on Christmas Eve, Dec.24, 2014, at Duke Chapel

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“You better watch out, you better not cry, you better not pout,” you better not sleep, “I’m telling you why.” I’m about to preach. And Santa Claus is not comin’ to this town yet. It’s too early. But, “He’s making a list and checking it twice, gonna find out who’s naughty and nice.” And by the looks of it, I think some of you have been naughty. But I won’t ask who’s been naughty because tis’ the season to be jolly. I don’t want to spoil the mood. “It’s a holly, jolly Christmas, the best time of the year.” That could be because it is not yet April 15<sup>th</sup>, tax day. We are not in tax season, which some might consider to be the worst time of the year.

But that doesn’t bother Caesar because he’s in control of the taxation policy of the Roman Empire. “In those days Caesar Augustus declared that everyone throughout the empire should be enrolled in the tax lists...[and] Everyone went to their cities to be enrolled,” including Joseph and Mary. There were no questions asked. No mention of tax evasion. Do what you’re told and everything will be alright. Everything will remain the same. You and your families will be safe as long as you enroll in the empire. Caesar Augustus was known as ‘savior of the world’ but the only problem was that he didn’t help his citizens save their money. Enroll in the tax lists. Enroll in the empire because as long as the empire is standing, as long as you stick with the status quo and sign up on the dotted line and ensure the stability of the civil system, you will be unharmed and there will be peace, or at least, the semblance of peace. Don’t rock the boat. Don’t question Caesar. Just enroll in the empire because the empire promises the maintenance of order. Caesar is Lord “in those days” and if you messed with the civil Lord, your life could really become lousy very quickly and you could lose everything you gained, at least that was the threat. Like Star Wars, the empire could strike back.

So to avoid imperial vengeance, and out of fear, just do your holy duty, pay homage to the state, and be law-abiding citizens as a way to maintain the glory of the earthly kingdom. That is, keep Caesar in charge and his system in place. Uphold the structures that make the state prosperous and as long as the state is doing well, we will do well. We will experience progress, socially and economically. This is what the empire promises—not just opportunity but prosperity—the dream will be realized. This is what civil religion promotes—trust Caesar, give him glory, and he may give you some too. Glory—fame and fortune.

And we want it too—the glory. We want to get the glory when we do our jobs well, succeed in the workplace, figure out the latest innovation or newest medical cure. After putting in all of that time and energy, we want the glory, even if we don’t really know what we’re asking for because remember God’s glory becomes gory on a cross. We want the glory even though Caesar is the only one who’s supposed to get the glory and honor in his empire.

And if you mess with Caesar, robbing him of his supposed glory, and what he has in place for his own benefit, I’m sorry to see what might happen. Caesar’s glory cannot be shared. Caesar declares that he is Lord, god, so to maintain his power, he enacts imperial domination or at minimum, offers the risk of punishment. The empire may make promises but it will probably only be glorious for those who benefit from its system, and that’s usually those in power and in control—the mighty Caesar.

The empire can be alluring with all of its perceived perks of opulence and accumulation, all of the magnificence of Christmas and its crazy commercialization that starts earlier and earlier each year, merging now with Halloween. Trees and lights and candles and ornaments and nutcrackers and ribbons and wreaths and mistletoes and stuffed stockings and gifts under the tree and apple cider and egg nog and turkey and ham and BBQ and BBQ and BBQ (and for the vegetarians) collard greens, and other veggies, and cornbread, and, and, the surplus of ‘and.’ I can guarantee that most of you won’t be eating fine dining from Chick-fil-A tonight.

We are surrounded by all of this, surrounded by what the empire may promote as glory. And all we have to do is enroll in it and experience what it can give—the glamor of grandeur. But this material abundance is imperial glory and may have nothing to do with the glory of God, no matter how good it may seem or how fuzzy it feels.

It's almost as if Luke reminds us that there is no glory in Caesar's empire. The material goods we have may only endorse a false security and religiosity while bolstering the liturgy of citizenry obedience and allegiance to the powers that be. This is not an anti-government message but it is the recognition that the kingdom of God is not the empire of this world or the United States. God's kingdom is not governed by Caesar, but by a king in a cradle who comes to save us from ourselves. Notice that it is not until we learn of the birth of Mary's baby in a manger that we hear about glory in our story and it has nothing to do with Caesar.

And where the glory comes maybe *the* surprise of Christmas. When shepherds are in the fields, guarding their sheep at night, the "Lord's glory shone around them." When the angel tells the shepherds not to be afraid and to look for the sign of a newborn baby wrapped snugly and lying in a manger, then the heavenly hosts praise God saying, "Glory to God in heaven." And when the shepherds return home, they glorify God. Three times we hear about glory and it's not located in Caesar's empire. Normally, God's glory is associated with the temple, but here it becomes manifest on a farm.

God flips the script and glory shines among the underside of an agrarian society. It may not appear to be as sophisticated or respectable as the palatial hallways of the empire or an elite university yet it is where the glory is shone—in the fields with sheep who sing their own Billboard-chart-making song to the Christ child, "baa, baa." The glory comes among shepherds, whose names we don't even know. They are the beneficiaries of glory, not Caesar or Quirinius. Shepherds, who were despised by religious groups because of their type of work; they were at a lowly place in the hierarchy of occupations, considered untrustworthy, and ceremonially unclean. The glory comes among the marginalized and the powerless, not the powerful and prestigious.

What does that tell us about where to look for glory, especially if the recent Pew Research study is right—that 41% of the population in the South live below the poverty line? God's glory has nothing to do with imperialistic regimes, order, systems, and structures that tend to place policies and procedures above people. Yet, God desires God's glory to still be known. The worldly empire promotes climbing up the ladder, going higher to gain glory but God reveals glory by coming down to earth. We may think glory has to do with an ascent when it may have everything to do with a descent.

"The glory of God floods [this earthly] story" (Fred Craddock) and where it shines is illuminating for us. The glory of God not only shines on, but lies in an animal's feeding trough, a manger with a baby who does everything that babies do. Glory is found on the earth amid human fragility and simplicity. And we may miss the glory and make no room for it in the usual places of our lives because it doesn't smell like the empire. Ironically, that's exactly why it is glory—it has nothing to do with empire and it smells like manger perfume. The glory of God is not synonymous to powerful institutions because institutions don't bleed but God eventually does; institutions aren't human. But God becomes a human.

And on this night, we discover that glory comes in human flesh, in a small person, in a child, the Word who "became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son" (John 1). The glory of God is revealed in baby Jesus on earth, a glory that is not dominating transcendence but immanent vulnerability and humility wrapped in loving human flesh, which is why the prophets declare, "a little child shall lead them" (Isa 11:6). Glory is with us. Jesus, the divine glory, the Christ child, is Emmanuel, God-with-us, not away from us. But as close as human flesh and baby skin.

This is immanent glory—God dwells among us so that we can even see glory in a humble child or in two adults Naomi, a Jewish woman, and Gladys, an elderly, fragile African American woman with Alzheimer's

and who's unable to speak. Naomi becomes vulnerable and humble and sings Christian songs to Gladys as a way to reach her because she knew Gladys grew up with these songs in church. Naomi rubs Gladys' right arm up and down, stares into her eyes, and then begins to sing, "Jesus loves me..." and as Naomi continues to sing, Gladys begins to keep tempo with her right hand. And when that song is finished, Naomi rubs both of Gladys' cheeks with her hands as she begins to sing, "He's got the whole world in his hands." And something amazing happens when Naomi starts to sing the verse, "He's got the mothers and the fathers in his hands." Naomi sings, "He's got the mothers and the fathers" and Gladys, who could not speak, responds antiphonally, "in his hands." "He's got the mothers and the fathers"—"In his hands." After the singing stops, Naomi, with her hands on Gladys' cheeks, asks Gladys, "You feel safe? With Jesus?" and Gladys, in a soft whisper responds, "Yeah."

God's glory, God's "yes" to us, is experienced in a senior care facility, ushered into the world through singing because God's kingdom is surrounded by singing, whether it be the Magnificat or the songs of angels at the birth of Christ, or the Christ hymn of Philippians chapter 2. A humble, simple song on earth between humans can be a sign of the glory of God in our midst. Nothing extravagant—just a melody with a human touch.

Glory can be revealed in simple human gestures, small packages, the little things of ordinary life—in babies that have no place to sleep, wrapped in regular pieces of cloth, not wearing the finest, purple, Calvin Klein, silk shirt, and lying, not in an ornate golden sleigh bed but a feeding trough. The old pastor John Ames, in Marilynne Robinson's Pulitzer-prize novel, *Gilead*, thought he would never be a father after his first wife died at a young age. But later he remarried a younger woman and became a father. He writes reflections that he hopes his young son will read some day. He tells his son, "I'm writing this in part to tell you that if you ever wonder what you've done in your life, and everyone does wonder sooner or later, you have been God's grace to me, a miracle, something more than a miracle...If only I had the words to tell you. There's a shimmer on a child's hair in the sunlight. There are rainbow colors in it, soft beams just the same colors you can see in the dew sometimes. They're in the petals of flowers and they're on a child's skin." Human skin. The face of God in Jesus Christ.

John Ames experienced the glory of God in the everyday through a child, not just Christmas. This is why he grasped for words. Words can't truly capture glory, which is why God's glory becomes revealed in a human body through the Incarnation. The shimmering, physical body of the earth is the theater of God's glory because the glory of God touches the earth in the human flesh of Jesus. The glory of God revealed in a Bethlehem baby makes second century theologian, Irenaeus, declare, "The glory of God is a human being fully alive" and that Jesus, through love, "became what we are, that he might bring us to be what he is himself." Glory. God loved us so much that God wanted us to experience his glory such that our fragile, bodily temples would become vessels of glory, ultimately. Glory is to become more fully human, not like Caesar, but a child, more like Jesus Christ in whom we see not only the face of God but the face of humanity.

With all of the violence against humanity in our world, the perpetrators forget that the glory of God is a human alive; it's so difficult to see glory these days, isn't it? A few bad apples can spoil the cobbler, they say. But there is One, a prince of peace, born this night, "with a glory in his bosom that transfigures you and me" (Battle Hymn of Republic). "All of us are looking with unveiled faces at the glory of the Lord as if we were looking in a mirror. [And] we are being transformed into that same image from one degree of glory to the next degree of glory" (2 Cor 3:18). This means we reflect God's glory. What a Christmas gift this year—that we might be able to see each other for who we really are, that when you look at each other, because of Jesus, you will be able to truly say, "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."

So "you better watch out, you better not cry, you better not pout, I'm telling you why," Jesus Christ, the glory of God, is coming to you.