

Christ is Born! Glorify Him!

Fr. John Konkle

At the celebration of the Nativity of our Lord and God and Savior, Jesus Christ, we greet one another with the joyous proclamation, “Christ is born!” And we reply to this greeting with the only proper response to such a proclamation, “Glorify Him!” We need not eschew the more common, and now highly secularized seasonal greetings, “Merry Christmas” and “Happy Holidays,” -- there is nothing worse than a pious grinch -- but let us not succumb to the cultural pressures to be silenced from the authentic proclamation of the feast: Christ is born!

This characteristic greeting of the Nativity feast echoes the angel’s words to the shepherds:

Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. ¹¹ For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹² And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger. (Lk 2:10-12)

Of what were the shepherds afraid? The preceding verse answers, “Behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid” (Lk 2:9). So here we have it: the proclamation that Christ is born is inseparable from the glory of the Lord encompassing us. But why would this be an occasion for fear?

It is tempting to have an image of God as being a big teddy bear and His glory being a warm and fuzzy embrace--an appropriately sanitized communion with our Creator in keeping with the warm and fuzzy spirit of the age. But if we consider the Biblical encounters with the glory of God, we find the Shepherd’s fear perfectly normal. Recall Moses’ meeting God in the unconsumed burning bush:

Then He said, “Do not draw near this place. Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground.” ⁶ Moreover He said, “I am the God of your father—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look upon God. (Ex 3:5-6)

Similar descriptions are given whenever someone is encountering the glory of God: Moses on Mt. Sinai (Ex 24:16-18; Ex 33:18-23; Ex 34:29-35), the consecration of Solomon’s temple (2 Chron 5:11-14; 7:1-3; 1 Kings 8:10-13), and the visions of prophets of Ezekiel (Ex 1:1-2:2), and Isaiah (Is 6:1-8), to name only a few.

Example of encountering the glory of God can be multiplied in the Old and New Testaments, as well as throughout the history of the Church. In all these accounts, we have expressions of profound and overwhelming holiness, of a terrifying encounter that will not leave us unchanged. The quintessential encounter to which all others point is, of course, the transfiguration of our Lord on Mt. Tabor in the company of Peter, James and John, with Moses and Elijah present. The disciples' reaction is typical of the divine-human encounter: "they fell on their faces and were greatly afraid (Mt 17:6; cf. Mk 9:6; Lk 9:34).

With these representative examples of being encompassed by the glory of God, we can appreciate a little more fully the shepherds' fear upon hearing the angel's announcement that Christ is born. So too, we can reflect on our own response to our customary Nativity greeting, which comes more directly from the opening paragraph of St. Gregory the Theologian's (+390) theologically rich and practically focused Nativity sermon.

Christ is born, give glory; Christ is from the heavens, go to meet him; Christ is on earth, be lifted up. "Sing to the Lord, all the earth, and, to say both together, "Let the heavens be glad and let the earth rejoice," for the heavenly one is now earthly. Christ is in the flesh, exult with trembling and joy; trembling because of sin, and joy because of hope. (Oration 38, On the Nativity of Christ, in *Festal Orations*, SVS Press, 2008, p. 61).

St. Gregory beautifully expresses the trembling joy that the shepherds' felt, and that we too are invited into. "Trembling because of sin, and joy because of hope." Being engulfed by the glory of God is frighteningly purifying--if we are willing to enter and remain in the glory. So the exhortation "go to meet him" summons us into the Refiner's fire, the only place where there is authentic joy founded in a steadfast hope.

Entering and remaining in that glory is not a foregone conclusion. When Moses led the people of Israel out of their bondage in Egypt, bringing them to the base of Mt. Sinai, God invited all the people to come and meet him. He longed to make them a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex 19:6). However, when the people experienced the awesome and overwhelming glory of the presence of God (Ex 19:16-20:18), "they trembled and stood afar off. ¹⁹ Then they said to Moses, 'You speak with us, and we will hear; but let not God speak with us, lest we die'" (Ex 20:18-19). Entering and remaining in the presence of the true and living God, not a comfortable God of our own making, requires confronting our own insecurities.

Moses doesn't give up on the fickle people of Israel, however, but rather pleads: "Do not fear; for God has come to test you, and that His fear may be before you, so that you may not sin" (Ex 20:20). Exactly as St. Gregory teaches us, the terrifying presence of God is to purify us, to free us from the bondage of sin. And yet in response to this invitation to a transformative divine

cleansing, we hear the most heart-wrenchingly sad words in Scripture: “*The people stood afar off*, but Moses drew near the thick darkness where God was” (Ex 20:20). There is nothing more lamentable than standing afar off from God. And yet Moses provides an alternative: entering the fearful darkness. So here we have the two ways: at the invitation to go to meet Him, will we stand afar off or will we enter the thick darkness where God resides?

By entering the illuminating darkness of God’s presence, of His glory, Moses himself becomes transformed.

Now it was so, when Moses came down from Mount Sinai (and the two tablets of the Testimony were in Moses’ hand when he came down from the mountain), that Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone while he talked with Him.³⁰ So when Aaron and all the children of Israel saw Moses, behold, the skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to come near him.³¹ Then Moses called to them, and Aaron and all the rulers of the congregation returned to him; and Moses talked with them.³² Afterward all the children of Israel came near, and he gave them as commandments all that the LORD had spoken with him on Mount Sinai.³³ And when Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil on his face.³⁴ But whenever Moses went in before the LORD to speak with Him, he would take the veil off until he came out; and he would come out and speak to the children of Israel whatever he had been commanded.³⁵ And whenever the children of Israel saw the face of Moses, that the skin of Moses’ face shone, then Moses would put the veil on his face again, until he went in to speak with Him. (Ex 34:29-35)

Entering into and abiding in the divine glory infuses us with that same glory--the creature comes to resemble his Creator. “A disciple is not above his teacher,” our Lord teaches, “nor a servant above his master.²⁵ It is enough for a disciple that he be like his teacher, and a servant like his master” (Mt 10:24-25; cf. Lk 6:40; Jn 13:16; 15:20). Standing far off, refusing the invitation to go to meet Him, leaves us comfortable and unchanged. Entering and abiding, fills us with a transformative terrifying joy.

St. Paul elaborates on Moses’ encounter with God, and in particular about the meaning of the veil which Moses used to cover the divine glory that shone forth from him. “[We are] unlike Moses, who put a veil over his face so that the children of Israel could not look steadily at the end of what was passing away” (2 Cor 3:13). Moses’ glory faded; he covered his face so that the people would not see the *deficiency* of his communion with God. But St. Paul proceeds to contrast the situation for those who have the Spirit of God dwelling in them.

Nevertheless when one turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.¹⁷ Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.¹⁸ But we all, with unveiled

face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord. (2 Cor 3:16-18)

Like Moses, we come to shine with the glory of the Lord by beholding the glory of the Lord, by meeting Him face to face. The difference for us whose very bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:19-20) is that we do not enter a tabernacle made by hands to be in the presence of this divine glory, but instead enter into our hearts (2 Cor 3:3). Entering our hearts, going to meet Him in the innermost core of our being and remaining there, is every bit as difficult--terrifying--as it was for the people of Israel to meet their Lord at Mt. Sinai.

Our tendency is to be more like Moses, going to the tabernacle (the prayer corner or the Sunday liturgy) for a 'refill' of glory, and then leaving the presence of God behind as we carry out our daily responsibilities with a veiled face--often veiled with self-generated piety--so that no one notices our fading divine light. This practice betrays the Nativity message: God becoming man in order to birth us into His family by the continual indwelling of the Holy Spirit, to create in us an abiding family resemblance, to replace the limitations of intermittent communion with abiding love and unity (Jn 17:22-23). We glorify God by becoming like Him, and we become like Him by dwelling in His terrifying glory.

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