

Occasional Sermon: Gloria in Excelsis

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

August 20, 2017

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

You and I normally spend a few minutes on Sunday morning engaging with the words of the Bible, and trying to discern how God might be speaking to us, now, from this or that book of the Bible, from this or that story about Jesus.

I chose this morning instead to speak with you about a song we sing on at least half of the Sundays of the year, a song we sang just moments ago: *Glory to God in the highest, and peace to God's people on earth.*

And for this sermon, I brought with me two pieces of outdated technology: a book (some of you may be old enough to remember books) and a compact disc (surely none of you is old enough to remember a compact disc.)

The book is actually in the pew with you. Our worship book, known as the ELW. And in the book, the ELW, there on pages 91, 92, and 93 is the outline of Sunday worship. With the required parts printed in bold. And the optional parts NOT printed in bold.

And this is a venerable tradition, well over a thousand years old in the printing of Christian worship books. The SHALL instructions and the MAY instructions. There is a difference between saying, "Thou shalt" and "Thou may." The assembly SHALL do this— means it's obligatory. The assembly MAY do this— means it's optional. Clergy have SHALL and MAY instructions as well. In this particular book— on pages 91, 92, and 93— the SHALL instructions, the mandatory parts, are printed in *bold*. And the MAY instructions, the optional parts, are printed in *not-bold*.

And on page 92, when it talks about how we begin worship each Sunday, it says there are two mandatory parts and four optional parts. The two mandatory parts are the Greeting ("The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, et cetera, be with you all." ("And also with you.") MANDATORY. And the prayer of the day, which convenes us and draws us into the theme of the day. MANDATORY.

And then there are four optional parts. The Confession OR Affirmation of Baptism. You can do one or the other or neither. The Hymn. The Kyrie. And the "Canticle of Praise."

So there are these four optional pieces in the opening of Sunday worship, and at Dove of Peace

we use two of them almost every Sunday of the year. The Gathering Hymn. (Today it was “O Zion, Haste.”) And the Kyrie. We almost always do them, but we don’t have to. The Confession is something that we do on about 40 Sundays of the year. Most, but not all. And I hear about that. When we don’t do the Confession, I hear about it.

And then the “Canticle of Praise” we include on about 40 Sundays of the Year. And it varies between “This Is the Feast,” which we sing about ten to twelve Sundays of the year. And “Glory to God in the Highest,” which we sing about 30 Sundays of the year. And on the remainder of Sundays we omit the Canticle of Praise.

And I want you to be aware of these things because this is something that is CRUCIAL about Lutheran Christianity which is celebrating its 500th birthday in a couple of months. You’ll be hearing all about it. You’ll turn on CNN or the Discovery Channel and they’ll be talking about 500 years of Lutheranism and you’ll think, “*Oh, that’s me,*” and your friends might ask you why you are a Lutheran. So Pastor Steve is here today to tell you why that matters.

One reason it matters is that Lutherans respect tradition. But we don’t submit to it. We believe that people need traditions, they need patterns, they need reliable things. But we also believe that sometimes people worship customs and habits and they declare that human traditions are God’s will. When they are not. Jesus quoted the Old Testament prophet Isaiah: *In vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines. You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.*

You and I and other citizens of the United States are at this very moment experiencing a big debate about Civil War monuments. In Christian history– which is vastly bigger and longer than American history– we also have our monuments. And sometimes those monuments become false gods. And sometimes they are just monuments. Some people worship tradition for its own sake. Other people reject tradition because it is tradition. Lutheranism takes the middle path outlined by Paul in the New Testament. If traditions are good and constructive them, we keep them. If traditions are bad and divisive, we eliminate them. Tradition is not automatically and intrinsically good or evil.

And therefore, what you find on pages 91, 92, and 93– and what you experience every time you worship at Dove of Peace on a Sunday morning is a carefully crafted blending of what is required and what is not required.

Glory to God in the highest, and peace to God’s people on earth is NOT required. That is why, on many Sundays we sing IT, on other Sundays we sing “This Is the Feast,” and on other Sundays we sing nothing at all. Martin Luther said that the congregation should sing the song on most Sundays unless the pastor decided that it shouldn’t. And Luther said that in his *Formula missae et communionis pro ecclesia Vuittembergensi*, the Latin order for Mass in Wittenberg that he created in 1523. Which was followed by his German order for mass in 1526 which did NOT include “*Glory to God in the highest.*”

I brought a book and a compact disc to the sermon today. In the book, there are ten different musical settings for Holy Communion. And in those ten different settings of Holy Communion, there are ten different musical versions of “Glory to God” and at Dove of Peace we have used ALL TEN of them. In case you get bored with those ten, the book has three more versions, #162, #163, and #164, and so far we’ve used only one of those three.

I brought a book and a compact disc. I know you guys don’t know what a compact disc is. But this is how we used to listen to music. And this one of my most cherished CDs. You can literally still buy this. Or download it on Amazon. Antonio Vivaldi’s *Gloria*. 1989. Robert Shaw & The Atlanta Symphony Orchestra & Chamber Chorus.

One of my earliest and most treasured digital recordings. Today I possess dozens of recordings of “Glory to God in the Highest.” By Beethoven. Johann Sebastian Bach. Mozart. Haydn. Schubert. Dvorák. On and on. I grew up hearing the “Glory to God” sung in classical music. And I grew up going to church every Sunday morning. But it wasn’t until I joined the Lutheran family that I could sing this song with Beethoven and Bach and Haydn. And even Vivaldi. When I began to experience Lutheran worship, my song was joined to the song of Vivaldi and Mozart from the 18th century. And Beethoven from the 19th century. And Bach from the 17th century. When I joined the Lutheran worship experience, my voice came alongside the music of all of these geniuses that I had grown to love when I was a teenager and a very young adult.

And later, when I was educated in preparation for becoming a pastor I learned how this song goes back to the earliest Christian church, that it was sung by Christians in Greek and Latin... that it is older than the Creeds that we recite... and I learned finally and ultimately how this is a Christian PSALM, modeled upon the ancient songs of Israel, the psalms of our Old Testament. So there may be no greater song of kinship than “Glory to God in the Highest.”

And in these current times, these days darkened by division, when armed Nazis are marching not in the streets of Germany, but in the great public spaces of America— In these days when the Church must spiritually bolster the nation’s immune system, so that the bacteria of hatred and the virus of fear and the cancer of division do not overwhelm the entire body of the nation’s public life— In these days it is fitting that part of our customary practice, part of our witness is this great song about Christ that establishes kinship. Horizontally, around the world, every Sunday with hundreds of millions of Christians in every time zone and in every language. And vertically, through the centuries and the eons, testifying to our unity with the saints of the ages.

Glory to God in the highest, and peace to God’s people on earth. It is the angel’s song at the beginning of the Christmas story, which is itself the beginning of the Christian story. It is fitting to begin Sunday worship on a fairly frequent basis with the angels’ voices from Christmas. It is fitting to stand with *this* monument to the enduring message of Christianity Glory to God in the highest, and peace to God’s people on earth. Or as the King James version translated it: *Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.* Amen.