

## *To God Alone Be The Glory*

There's something wonderfully respectful about an audience that is quiet—no din from murmur and chit chat, no cell phones going off, no one wandering in or out for non-emergencies—just a whole lot of listening to what's going on. Maybe the audience is in an auditorium hearing a concert or in a theater watching a movie or a play. I don't mind if the audience spontaneously gasps at scary stuff, or laughs out loud at funny stuff, or cheers when the bad characters lose and the good characters win—as long as everyone is quiet during the dialog. That's respectful. It allows others to hear without distraction. Maybe the audience is a congregation, listening attentively to the Word of God as it is read or expounded. Spontaneous responses from worshipers can be okay. Baby sounds don't bother me during worship if the babies are just talking or laughing or trying to sing along, even when it's not time to sing. Jesus redeemed babies too. I want babies and toddlers in the assembly so often that, by the time they reach childhood, they have learned how wonderfully respectful it is to listen quietly.

Maybe you've been in a crowd when people were not quieting down, and those who wanted to listen tried to get everyone to make less noise. What sound did they make as they put one

finger up to their lips? Make the sound with me now. Sssshhhh! It would be interesting to know whether that sound is the same in other languages and cultures. It sure is effective in American English. I suppose it can be an angry sound. Sssshhhh! Or it can come off as less harsh if it's shorter and quieter. Sshh!

I'm talking about this because the theme for the Fourth Sunday in Advent is always, "Christ Is Coming! Behold!" Remember how we got here? Remember the wonderful progression of thought during these Sundays in Advent? First Sunday: "Christ Is Coming! Keep watch!" Second Sunday: "Christ Is Coming! Prepare!" Third: "Christ Is Coming! Rejoice!" And then just before Christmas itself, the Fourth Sunday in Advent calls out to us in softer tones, "Christ Is Coming! Behold!" This Fourth Sunday gives us time to slow down and think about how close Christmas is. It's time to "ssh" and think about the quiet awesomeness of Jesus being born for us.

We have Matthew's account of Jesus' birth before us today. Let's dig in and find the little truths that the Lord has hidden for us just below the surface. Let's see how many treasures we can find for our faith to feed on.

*18This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was*

*pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit.* Think about Christmas from Joseph's point of view. His heart is drawn to Mary, a young woman of excellent character. They become betrothed, which is like getting engaged, only more binding. And then, unbeknownst to Joseph, Mary is visited by the angel Gabriel, who explains that Mary has been chosen to be the birth mother of the long-promised Messiah (see Luke 1:26ff). Gabriel also mentions that Mary's cousin Elizabeth is pregnant with John the Baptizer—she's six months along already. Soon after Gabriel leaves, Joseph's fiancée is getting ready to go visit Elizabeth. We think Joseph knows where Mary is going, but it sure seems that he does not know about Gabriel's visit. Three months later when Joseph's fiancée comes home from her cousin's house, she's entering her second trimester. What's Joseph supposed to do? He hasn't slept with Mary—God's people back then did a better job of waiting until marriage than we do today. Imagine Joseph's thoughts: "Well, if my Mary has gone outside of the marriage already, what assurance do I have that she won't cheat on me again after our nuptials?"

Joseph could have demanded that Mary be put to death for her apparent fornication—they took sex-outside of

marriage very seriously back then! Could this be one reason why so many of our pastors have tried to hold the line? But <sup>19</sup>*Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to [any sort of] public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.* Joseph doesn't want to make a big deal about it. He's hurt, but he forgives Mary. And he gets ready to move on in life without Mary.

<sup>20</sup>*But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit."* Imagine Joseph trying to process this information. The Holy Spirit had never caused anyone else to become pregnant in this way. How Joseph's thoughts must have flitted about his mind! But through his angel, God was gently telling Joseph: "SSHH. Just listen. I AM REVEALING MY GLORY. Take Mary home. Be her husband as you planned. Don't be afraid of anything that anyone might say about your character. I know this looks bad. But I also know that you and Mary are innocent. Quiet your thoughts and listen carefully. I AM REVEALING MY GLORY. <sup>21</sup>*[Mary] will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."*

Can you hear Joseph thinking, “Lord, do you mean to say that you want me be the daddy of the long-promised Messiah? How can I succeed? He is to be King of Israel. I’m just a simple carpenter, Lord. What do I know about raising a king? Are you sure you’ve got the right guy?” “SSHH, Joseph. Set aside all the ‘what ifs’ that are distracting you. I AM REVEALING MY GLORY, and I want you to understand. This baby, your step-son—name him ‘Jesus.’ He will rescue people from their sins. SSHH, Joseph, never mind how. I am not ready to reveal the ‘how’ part of my glory yet. It is enough for you to know the ‘what’ part that I’ve revealed today.”

By the time the Holy Spirit inspired the apostle Matthew to write down his Gospel, the connection was understood between what the angel just told Joseph and *22what the Lord had said through the prophet Isaiah (7:14). 23“The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel”*—which means, “God with us.” I’m not sure if Joseph ever saw the connection between this prophecy and its fulfillment. But we can. So SSHH, GOD IS REVEALING HIS GLORY to us! Before Jesus was even conceived in Mary, 700 years before!, the Lord already decided it would be a virgin birth—a miracle!

The world likes to scoff at such a thing. “The virgin birth can’t be real. Come

on! We understand DNA and RNA. Mary couldn’t provide both halves of the DNA. Scientifically speaking, Jesus must have had a human father. So how can you Christians hold on to the Bible as the truth?” Or sometimes the scoffing is subtle. Lots of leaders today want everyone to be tolerant of everyone else’s religion. (Tolerance is actually a cornerstone of successful governing.) They are very happy when philosophers say things like: “Even if a religion says the impossible happened, that’s okay because some people believe it to be true. Beliefs don’t have to be based in reality. If you find comfort in something that’s not real, so what? It doesn’t matter if Jesus was born of a virgin. Let’s not argue about it.” Our response: We don’t want anyone harmed no matter what their beliefs are, but it still matters that Jesus was born of a virgin, otherwise Jesus couldn’t be true God, and his work could count only for himself. | There are other ways to scoff subtly at the virgin birth. George Lucas included an homage to the virgin birth of Jesus in Episode 1 of the Star Wars series. The Anakin Skywalker character is claimed to have been conceived without a human father. “Oh, isn’t that nice? He’s imitating the Bible’s teaching.” Okay, perhaps, but in so doing he reduced the Bible’s teaching on the virgin birth of Christ to a mere religious myth, something you can believe,

whether it happened or not, as if God did not really do a miracle in Mary so that we could all spend eternity with him through faith in Jesus.

What are we going to do about all the people who refuse to believe Jesus was born of a virgin? Some of them are even pastors! What are we going to do? “SSHH, GOD IS REVEALING HIS GLORY. Don’t fret and worry about them. You have no control over what they say. Focus on what God says. He’s revealing his glory to us once again today. Jesus’ birth really happened this way. The virgin Mary conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus really is ‘God with us,’ God come down to earth to rescue us from sin. SSHH, listen quietly to today’s Gospel. GOD IS REVEALING HIS GLORY!”

Lots of people are not impressed with how God reveals his glory—hiding his authority in a little baby, letting the Messiah be born in a simple setting. “How can this helpless baby in the manger help me? No, no, there’s not much of a story here. We need a story that’s more stimulating than baby Jesus. How about Kris Kringle? How about a miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> St? How about a deer with a red nose, or a snow man wearing a top hat, who sings and plays with children? Yes, people will pay more attention to these stories.”

To everyone who believes in Jesus as Savior, the Lord says SSHH to all that. Look more closely at baby Jesus. The most glorious thing that the Lord can do is arrange for sinners to be fully forgiven. God can do fireworks. He already did—look at all the galaxies he created out there in space. But quietly organizing our rescue from sin is far more glorious to God. It’s even better than quiet moments in a forest or on a lake.

Apparently Joseph thought so too. *24When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. You’ll notice that Joseph did not take out an ad in The Nazareth Graphic proclaiming what God had done. He just obeyed the Lord quietly. He took Mary home. 25But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus. SSHH. There it is again. God’s glory being quietly revealed in Joseph’s obedience. It’s just like when the Holy Spirit works in you and me, helping us to fight against temptations, assisting us to apologize when we are wrong, moving us to respond to harshness with love, leading us to be concerned about where our friends and neighbors will spend eternity... He’s quietly revealing his glory in us. That’s why it’s so important for us to SSHH and realize how wonderfully respectful it is for us to listen attentively to the good news about our Savior’s birth.*