

wonderful and terrifying at the same time. And it seems to be both a literal, physical reality and a metaphor that represents so much more. From the perspective of human experience, it seems “glory is what God looks like when for the time being all you have to look at Him with is a pair of eyes.”¹

Sitting looking over the bare hills and the encroaching housing developments on the outskirts of Bethlehem, it seemed to me an unlikely place for such a display of God’s glory. But the appearance of glory amid the seemingly mundane is so much a part of the wonder and transformation to be found in the story of Jesus’ birth. The story also urges that the greater glory was not the dazzling appearance of the angels, the overwhelming experience of the shepherds or even the vast host of angels singing their hearts out in praise of God and His astonishing goodness. The greatest glory was Jesus Himself.

Those who told the stories of Jesus insisted that the most tangible way to encounter the glory of God in our

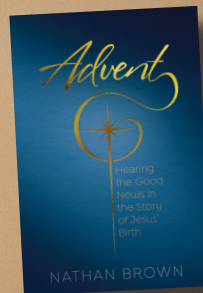
world was Jesus, as unlikely as it might have seemed. In a letter to the second generation of believers in the story of Jesus, John emphasised both the physical reality of their experience with Jesus and its ultimate transcendence:

We proclaim to you the one who existed from the beginning, whom we have heard and seen. We saw him with our own eyes and touched him with our own hands. He is the Word of life. This one who is life itself was revealed to us, and we have seen him. And now we testify and proclaim to you that he is the one who is eternal life. He was with the Father, and then he was revealed to us (1 John 1:1, 2).

One aspect of the incarnation is that God hid and even put aside His glory in becoming Jesus, to be born as a baby—but, in a greater sense, in this action and this story, His glory shines all the brighter.

1. Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker’s ABC (Revised and Expanded)*, HarperSanFrancisco, 1993, page 35.

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WHAT’S THE GLORY IN THE

Christmas story?



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Today, Bethlehem is a town of about 50,000 people, with narrow streets winding up, down and around the small Judean hills. One of the places that many of the tourist buses grind their way towards on the edge of town is known as the Shepherds' Field. It's a sparse, rock-strewn park with a few low trees and some patchy gardening and, across the road, a string of shops specialising in souvenirs carved from olive wood.

A small, pale-stoned Franciscan church sits in the middle of the park. There is also a fountain splashing water over a stone sculpture of a shepherd and his sheep, as well as a series of caves that have been converted into intimate chapels. These chapels, adorned with miniature nativity scenes and with their ceilings blackened by the smoke of countless candles, are places that many of the busloads of visitors file into for a short time of worship. They invariably sing a Christmas carol or two

from their own tradition of faith and in their own language. It sounds like a place in which it is always Christmas.

Towards the back of the park, near the edge of the low hill on which it sits, a number of shaded outdoor chapel spaces look over a dry valley to the surrounding hills. The hillsides are rocky, with small tufts of beige grass and clumps of the darker greens of olive trees or small pine trees. Shepherds and their sheep have often been seen making their way along this valley, even in recent years, although this is becoming less common as the continuing spread of the town and surrounding settlements push the shepherds and their flocks further away.

It's a remarkable place to pause, to sit and reflect, to remember and imagine the story that happened on these hills. As you listen to the sound of the breeze gently hissing through the pine needles and feel the dry dustiness of the air, you can almost hear the murmurs of a group of men on a quiet evening and imagine the sounds and smell of the sheep: "That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby,

guarding their flocks of sheep. Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord's glory surrounded them" (Luke 2:8, 9).

The first thing we tend to think of when we hear glory in a context like this is some kind of really bright light. It seems this was part of the experience of these startled shepherds. It would have been dark out on those hills as they settled in for the night, with only a small fire at best.

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The appearance of this heavenly being would have split the darkness and Luke's description used the language of light, but it seems that this was more than a bright light. It was more like a wonderful presence that surrounded them. In the cool of the night, the shepherds might have felt its warmth and even some kind of profound emotion, far deeper than their initial alarm.

By the presence of this angel, the shepherds were somehow drawn into the glory of God.

The angel delivered the good news of Jesus' birth and gave instructions about where to find the Baby, then the focus shifted again: "Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others—the armies of heaven—praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased'" (Luke 2:13, 14). It seems obvious that the song of the angels was not describing or ascribing to God mere brightness, as overwhelming as that might be. This declaration of glory was an exaltation of His greatness and goodness, the quality of His character and the wonder of His actions, a splendour that was so much more than appearance.

These two related uses of glory occur repeatedly throughout the Bible. It becomes a shorthand for God's appearance and presence, as well as His greatness of magnitude and nature. As in the case of the shepherds, glory can be