

“Excelsis”

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A Brief Reflection for Christmas Eve

Luke 2:14

December 24, 2016

In a moment, we'll sing another carol: *Angels We Have Heard on High*.

It's actually a translation into English of a French carol that's more than two centuries old. The French one is called ***Les Anges Dans Nos Campagnes***, which means “Angels in our Countryside.” Supposedly in the old days, in the southeast of France, shepherds would sing it across the hills on Christmas Eve.

Apparently, those shepherds knew **Latin!** The whole chorus is in Latin. So we need some practice.

The first word, ***Gloria***, is easy. Except in the song, we don't sing “Gloria” quickly and get it over with. We hold the word, letting it pour over our lips and into the air, a bit at a time. As a child, I pictured it like falling down the stairs. (I was a clumsy boy.) Fall down the stairs, but in a controlled manner. And at each landing, pull yourself up a bit. All the while, breathe out the first sound “*Glow*. . . .” Then, when you get to the bottom, sigh the last bit of the word “. . . *ria*” Let's try it . . . *Glo-o-o-o-o,o-o-o-o-o,o-o-o-o-o,o-ria*. (Imagine shepherds echoing that over the hills to each other. Haunting.)

The next Latin word, ***in***, is easy. It means “in.” In the music, it starts us climbing up again.

Now, the hard word. Here's how to pronounce it. Think of a few eggs. Think about what's left of them after you make your omelette. Arranged those shells in a letter “C.” Now, make another “C” of shells. Now you've got it. “*Egg-shell-Cs*.” And as you're singing it, your climbing up three stairs. ***Excelsis*** means “most high” or “highest.”

Lastly, ***Deo***. That means “*God*.” Sing it like you're leaning back and resting. Because falling down the stairs is hard!

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Gloria in Excelsis Deo! Glory to God in the Highest!

Gloria is a celebration word! We are celebrating who God is, the fullness of God's being, the power of God's presence. We can picture God's glory as an overwhelming, blinding light that washes over us, like a wave. It's like the light of God's glory has a pressure to it. It both terrifies us — remember the shepherds, “sore afraid” — and it fills us. We celebrate God.

In Excelsis Deo, “to God in the highest.” Many things have “glory” — beauty, majesty, fearful wonder and deep meaning. Every person has glory. All glory is a reflection of God's glory, for God makes and holds all things. Everything's identity, meaning, purpose, and

hope comes from God. God is “the highest” — not just having more. God isn’t simply many degrees more glorious than us, even a billion-billion-billion more than us. God is entirely different than us.

So why, then, do we sing about the *Gloria* of the *Excelsis Deo* with voices that come down the notes?

Because the glory of God has “come down” to us.

In Jesus, the “highest of glories” became found in a manger, lying in hay, beside an exhausted mom and a nervous dad.

In Jesus, the God-of-Glory, took off majestic robes . . . to wrap them around us. Jesus became like us, so we can be like him.

Glory to God in the highest!

Gloria in excelsis Deo!

Let’s sing!