Over the years I analyze television ads leading up to Christmas. Over the 30 years I’ve done so I’ve noticed that there are fewer and fewer references to Christmas let alone to the birth of Christ in Bethlehem. More recently, there are fewer and fewer references to even Santa or Christmas Trees or Christmas Carols. The secular fallen world is doing its best to eliminate any even potential reference to it being a distinctly Christian holiday. My least favorite ad of this season is Old Navy where we see a whole group of young people gyrating on a stage presumably wearing Old Navy clothes. There is nothing at all “Christmasy” about it. I note that the Hershey Kiss ad still has the Hershey Kisses looking like handbells playing “We Wish You a Merry Christmas”. So while I will not buy clothing from Old Navy I will buy lots of chocolate from Hersheys! I also dislike the Amazon ads where they ask us –“Can you feel it?” Of course, if you can’t feel it (whatever “it” might be) then the way to feel it is obviously to go online and buy more stuff from Amazon. But what I really don’t like about it is the notion that Christmas is a “feeling”. Feelings come and feelings go. Sometimes our feelings are up and sometimes they are down, changeable and mercurial. What I don’t like is the sense of trying to conjure Christmas by decorating and by purchasing more and more gifts until finally we generate some vague feeling that we’ve had Christmas. Not only is this NOT Christmas, but there is a dangerous downside to equating Christmas with a feeling.

So what is Christmas? According to the Bible it is when the angel comes and announces to the shepherds that the Christ Child has been born and the GLORY of God descends and surrounds the shepherds. According to the Bible Christmas is when the angels and shepherds then give the GLORY they have received back to God, reflective of the light within and the presence of God now in, around and through them. “Glory to God in the highest!” “And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God, for all they had heard and seen...” (Luke 2: 20) On that first Christmas there was glory FROM God and then there was glory reflected back TO God. There was glory and there was glory. And when they approached the manger what did they see? Well, they beheld the little baby Jesus and from Him issues forth all the GLORY of God. The little baby shone with a bright glory. Some manger scenes depict the Christ Child with a halo and what they’re trying to represent is the presence of God in the manger, the light shining forth from the Baby Jesus. It is now clear that the original GLORY that accompanied the angel and the announcement to the shepherds, and the GLORY the was reflected back to God by the angelic host and the shepherds all emanated from JESUS! Of course it did! Even in the manger Jesus is GOD in the flesh. He is very God of very God. He is “God with us”, our Emanuel. And the presence of God is always known by the presence of His glory. They knew exactly who Jesus was, the SON of God in the flesh, because all the GLORY emanated from HIM!

Our scripture from the Gospel of John says “We have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father.” (John 1: 14) We have come to Bethlehem to see this great thing which the Lord has made known to us. We have seen the light. We have seen the glory. We have experienced the living presence of the living Lord God Almighty in the person of Jesus. And when we peek into the manger we see the GLORY radiating from the only begotten Son of the One True and Living God.
We have come to Bethlehem. WE HAVE BEHELD HIS GLORY!!!! That’s what it says. That’s what it says Christmas is all about – having the GLORY of God be in, around and through us, having the light shine. The Christmas Story is all about GLORY. Not about the way the world wants to celebrate it. Do you want just a fleeting, passing feeling? Or do you want the presence and the GLORY of God? The trouble with making Christmas about feelings is what if your feelings change? What if trouble intervenes? What if for all your efforts you cannot like some modern secular witchdoctor conjure the feelings of Christmas this year? Did Christmas come or didn’t it come?

I love getting out my fake Christmas Tree and walking it up the steps from the basement and decorating it with special ornaments. All the memories of all the people who gave me all those special ornaments conjure within me feelings. This year those feelings hurt rather than cause joy. And the year will come when I don’t have the ability anymore to walk that tree up the steps from the basement – no tree, no ornaments, no “feelings” about Christmas? Or there are special memories with special people, many who have gone on to be with the Lord. If those loved ones aren’t there and the feelings are gone does that mean Christmas doesn’t come? Or you are having financial difficulties and can’t “do Christmas” like you ordinarily “do Christmas” and Amazon.com isn’t going to be the source of the “Can you feel it?” this year. I always love the story in my family of the year when my Grandfather’s company had gone out of business during the Great Depression and there was no money for Christmas that year. He went to his family’s workshop and constructed for my Mother a dollhouse built of scap wood that cost nothing but was priceless. A couple of years ago I set up Mother’s dollhouse and put Dad’s trainset around it for the last time and the three of us went upstairs and we remembered that Christmas wasn’t about excess and all the things we normally associate with it. It was about a love that would build a dollhouse, for a daughter my grandfather loved. It was about a Living Savior come to Bethlehem to bring eternal life and GLORY forever in heaven. But now I must give the dollhouse away. The story of my grandfather’s love will fade with time. Can you see the danger in making Christmas about feelings and experiences and things, rather than about the GLORY of the Lord? Feelings and things are temporary; the GLORY of the Lord is ETERNAL...It is the foretaste of HEAVEN, the GLORY of heaven come down to earth at Christmas...

In a way, our theme for this Advent is a quote from Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, and it is about stained glass windows. She writes: “People are like stained glass windows. They sparkle and shine when the sun is out. But when the darkness sets in, their true beauty is revealed only if there is a light from within.” The day may come when it is impossible to conjure the feelings of Christmas, or when loved ones have been taken away, or when you cannot afford or cannot muster all the decoration and presents. There may be a day, as Kubler-Ross notes, when “the darkness sets in”. It is in that day, when we all best have partaken of the GLORY of God born in Jesus in Bethlehem. Because it is in that day when the only light that will light the stained glass windows of our soul is a light that radiates from within. A light that comes from God. A glory born and made manifest in Bethlehem. A light from within. This is Christmas. Amen and Amen.

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IF THIS HAS BLESSED YOU, PLEASE PASS IT ALONG TO A FRIEND!