

“The Love, Joy, and Peace of Jesus’ Birth”

Luke 2:1-20

Key Verse: 2:11

“Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.”

The birth of Jesus, recorded here in Luke 2, is one of the most famous passages of the Bible. Millions and millions of people around the world have heard and treasured this story. It even appears in “A Charlie Brown Christmas”, as Linus explains the true meaning of Christmas by reciting verses 8-14. The story is rich and full of meaning and we can relate to the characters in many different ways. Whenever we meditate on the Bible, we naturally wonder where we fit into the story. How is God speaking to us through the passage? Which characters or situations do we identify with? In today’s passage, I believe we will find ourselves closest to the shepherds. The shepherds are our eyes and ears for this story and the response of their hearts to the good news of the birth of Jesus is the response Luke wants us to have as well.

Shepherds were very low class. They lived out in the fields with the animals and were smelly and uneducated. They were exactly the kind of people you wouldn’t want sitting next to you on the train. One time, a man with a full roasted chicken from Jewel sat next to my daughter on the bus. That was ok, but then he tore off the plastic container and began devouring the chicken with his bare hands. My daughter was absolutely disgusted. These are the types of people the shepherds were.

Even so, God has a special heart for shepherds. Moses was a shepherd when God called him to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. David was a shepherd when Samuel anointed him king of Israel and later God even called him to be a shepherd not of sheep, but of the whole nation. Jesus identified himself as the Good Shepherd and when he commanded Peter to “feed my lambs”, he declared him to be a shepherd as well. It is very fitting then, that we view today’s story from the vantage point of the shepherds. I pray that we will receive the good news they received and

experience the great joy they experienced. We will consider our passage in three parts: the world's savior, the True Savior, and the shepherds' response.

First, the world's savior (vs. 1-3). The shepherds were very familiar with Roman history. They lived it and experienced it every day of their lives. Luke writes in verses 1-3, "In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world... And everyone went to their own town to register." That's the kind of power Caesar Augustus had. When he said "jump", everyone jumped. It was an expensive command that took a great deal of time and resources to carry out and it affected everyone. The Romans normally didn't require people to return to their home towns to register, but the Jews did so people like Mary and Joseph had to pack their bags and go. They had no choice in the matter.

Luke writes, "In those days...." He wants us to see what the world was like when our savior was born. To understand this, we must know a little more about Caesar Augustus. His original name was Octavian and he was the great nephew of Julius Caesar. After Julius Caesar was assassinated, Octavian learned that he had been adopted by Julius and made an heir. He partnered with Mark Antony and Lepidus to defeat their opposition. Then he defeated his allies as well, becoming the sole ruler of the Roman Empire. Octavian did many things to unite the empire and to build it up. After years of civil wars, Octavian ushered in the era of "Pax Romana", an era of peace and prosperity that lasted nearly two hundred years. In 27 B.C., the Roman Senate conferred on him the title "Augustus", which means "holy" or "revered". It was a title reserved for the gods. Whether we realize it or not, we still pay tribute to him since the month of August was named after him. Many considered him to be a savior and one inscription even declares him to be the "savior of the world".

In many ways, Caesar Augustus represents the world's view of a savior. Unlike Jesus, his philosophy was "the first will be first and the last will be last". He was at the very pinnacle of wealth, power, and fame. Aren't these the same things we chase after in our times? How many little Caesar's do we have running around today? As for wealth, we have a number of billionaires and it looks like Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk will be the world's first trillionaires. As for fame, we have a whole

host “YouTube influencers” who boast about their millions of followers. PewDiePie is in the lead with 111 million followers. As for power, we have no shortage of modern dictators, including Kim Jong-un. We seem to think that wealth, power, and fame can solve our problems. As I look around the high school I work at I often fantasize about what a couple million dollars could do for the school. What if our reputation could be improved? What if someone famous came from our school? What if we had better political connections? One of our former principals was friends with Mayor Daley and that’s how the school got new windows. We always want more wealth, more fame, and more power and we often turn to these things to solve our personal problems as well.

These things can be blessings, but not saviors. Just ask the shepherds. I believe they would say that Caesar was a horrible savior and his peace was not really peace at all. The peace he introduced was a peace of complete domination. There was peace for 200 years because any opposition that arose was simply bludgeoned to death. There was no freedom or hope for the people. The shepherds were ready for a different kind of savior. Aren’t you?

Second, the True Savior (vs. 8-14). Luke wants us to see that God’s idea of a savior is very different from the world’s idea. Unlike Caesar, our Lord Jesus is gentle and humble. Look at his parents. In verses 4-5 we see Mary and Joseph obeying Caesar’s decree and traveling from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem in Judea. It was a long and slow journey that took at least four or five days. They were young and poor. Mary was pregnant and her time was very near. They were so humble, so weak, so isolated. I can’t imagine what Mary went through, but I have a sense of Joseph’s agony. When my wife was pregnant with our oldest daughter, we were very poor and she continued working as a waitress up until the time she was due. Some nights, she had to take the train home all by herself. I felt horrible because of the circumstance of our lives. That was but a taste of what Joseph and Mary experienced.

Verse 6 says, “While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.” The Prince of Heaven, the One through whom all things were created, entered the world as a

tiny, helpless baby. It is truly amazing! The Son of God couldn't even turn over by himself. Instead of lording his power and might over the people, he came as the most helpless infant.

After giving birth, Mary laid her child in a manger, a feeding place for animals. The Lord had his choice of the whole world and look where he chose to be born - a manger. Why? What does it tell us about him? He is a savior who can identify with us. He knows our every need and he understands our trials and burdens. He is a savior, full of grace and mercy, who is approachable and welcomes everyone to come to him. He is a savior who came to suffer and die for his people.

Verse 8 continues, "And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch at night." The fact that it was night was no accident. It wasn't so that the angel's glory would shine a little brighter and be easier to see. The darkness of night represents the darkness of the world in which our savior was born. Paul writes in Romans 3, "There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one." Paul summarizes the darkness of the world by saying, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." The penalty for our sin is death. There is nothing we can do to fix this. We can't simply resolve to be better people because we are sinful by nature. This is why wealth, fame, and power can't help us. What we need is a savior who can take away all our sin. It was certainly night where the shepherds were at, but it was night around the whole world as well.

But look what happened next: "An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified." The glory of God broke into the darkness. The Light of the World had come! The shepherds were terrified and who wouldn't be? Indeed, angels are terrifying in their power and glory, but there was more to it than that. The shepherds encountered the glory of God. When Isaiah encountered the glory of God, he thought he would die. In his vision, Isaiah cried out, "Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty." The shepherds were afraid because as sinful people, we are separated from God and cannot exist in his glory.

The glory of God is what was lost in the Garden of Eden. Before the fall, Adam and Eve enjoyed the presence of God. They were created in the holy image of God and had fellowship with him, but after their sin, they were separated from God and cast out of the Garden. The glory of God was with the Israelites in the desert as a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. It led them and protected them. Later, when the temple was dedicated, the glory of God filled it with such power the priests couldn't bear it. But again, because of their sin and idolatry, the glory of God eventually left the temple. And here, on this most wonderful night hundreds of years later, the glory of God penetrated the darkness. No wonder the shepherds were shaking in fear.

Verses 10-11 say, "But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.'" Each title brings joy to our hearts. First, Jesus is our savior. That is why he came into the world - to seek and to save the lost. When John the Baptist saw him one day, he exclaimed, "Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" Paul writes in Ephesians 1:7, "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace." The forgiveness of sins is the reason for our great joy in Christ. It is through the forgiveness of our sins that we can enjoy the presence of God once again.

Second, as Messiah, Jesus is God's anointed prophet, priest, and king. As prophet, he reveals God to his people. When we see the love and compassion of Jesus, we see God's heart for mankind. As priest, he sits at the right hand of God and intercedes for us day and night. When we are weak and don't even know what to pray for, he knows our every need and comes to the Father on our behalf. As king, he reigns in truth and righteousness and has won the victory over all our enemies, even death. He is the one Isaiah wrote about when he said "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and

righteousness from that time on and forever.” The shepherds and all God’s people had been waiting for the Messiah and on this night, he was born.

Third, Jesus, the Son of God, is Lord as well. He is Yahweh, the great “I Am” who spoke to Moses in the burning bush. Seven times throughout his ministry Jesus declared himself to be “I Am”. Jesus said I am the bread of life, the light of the world, the door of the sheep, the good shepherd, the resurrection and the life, the way, the truth and the life, and the true vine. All of them point to his deity. All of them illustrate his work as our Savior, Messiah, and Lord.

The heavens couldn’t contain the joy of that night. Verses 13 -14 say, “Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.” Imagine the sight! Perhaps the words echoed from one rank of angels to another, declaring the glory of God again and again. Glory to God for his wonderful mercy! Glory to God for his almighty power! Glory to God for his wisdom and righteousness! Glory to God for his grace and love! Glory to God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!

Not only that, but peace on earth to those on whom his favor rests. True peace, true shalom. Peace that passes all understanding. Peace that only the Prince of Peace can bring. The world was given the greatest gift that night. It was the gift of God’s Holy Son. The word of God says that whoever believes in him will never perish, but has eternal life. Can you imagine a cause for greater joy than that?

Third, the shepherds’ response (vs. 15-20). Verse 15 says that “When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.’” The shepherds decided to go and see. Can you imagine how different this story would be if they hadn’t? Can you imagine hearing such glorious and wonderful news and not responding? It would be tragic. It would mean forgoing the wonderful joy of heaven just to keep plodding along in our world. It would mean keeping Caesar as their savior and master.

The decision to go and see seems very familiar, doesn't it? It sounds very much like the invitation Jesus gave to the disciples when they first met him. Two of the disciples asked Jesus 'where are you staying?' Jesus responded, "Come... and you will see." Our Lord invites us to come and see as well. Jesus says, "Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." Jesus stands at our door and knocks, waiting for us to invite him in. The Bible says in Psalm 34, "Taste and see that the LORD is good; blessed is the one who takes refuge in him. Fear the LORD, you his holy people, for those who fear him lack nothing." We can taste and see that the Lord is good by coming to Jesus for ourselves as the shepherds did that holy night.

Verse 16 says that they "hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger." And what did they see? They saw an ordinary child who was not ordinary at all. They saw the miraculous gift of God and the fulfillment of centuries of prophecy lying there in a humble manger. In their arms, they held their own creator, their savior, and their king. Who could keep such a thing to themselves? Who could meet the creator of the world and not post it on Facebook? Verse 17 says, "When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child..." They believed what the angel said – that this good news would cause great joy for all the people. So, they went out and shared the gospel with everyone they met. This is what people do when they have met the Lord and experienced the joy of salvation. They want others to come and meet Jesus as well.

Mary's response, on the other hand, was a little different. Verse 19 says, "But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart." Mary meditated deeply on the words of the angels and the meaning of the little boy she held. She sought a deeper knowledge of the Lord. Apostle Paul prayed for the Ephesian church to have this kind of knowledge as well, saying "I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe." The shepherds ministered to the world as Mary

ministered to her soul. The good news must go out and yet at the same time, the good news must come in.

Verse 20 says, "The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told." True. They went back to the sheep and their jobs. They went back to their daily routines and their families. They went back to seeing Roman soldiers in the streets and witnessing the persecution of their people. But were their lives the same? Not a chance. They had witnessed for themselves that God is a God of his word. They witnessed firsthand that all of the promises of God are yes in Jesus. They had received the life of Christ and a living hope in the kingdom of God. Their Lord and Savior had come and their joy could never be taken away.

Today is December 26. As we speak, all the Christmas items are being removed from the shelves at Walgreens and Target. All the presents have been opened and the wrappings tossed away. The joy of Christmas quickly fades as our families leave and all the decorations are put away. Sometimes we get sad when Christmas is over. However, this aspect of Christmas does not honor our Lord. It doesn't reflect the great joy of the good news. The great joy we have in Christ is something that must grow day after day. The good news of Immanuel, God with us, should never decay or diminish in our hearts. The lives of the shepherds were forever changed by the love of God and so are ours. Each and every day, let us give thanks to God for the amazing gift of his Son. Let us taste and experience the great joy he brings now and forever.

One word: Today, a Savior has been born to you!