

The Song of the Angels

Dec. 20 & 24, 2020

Series: *Songs of Christmas* Luke 2:1-20

Merry Christmas everyone. We're continuing with our *Songs of Christmas* series. We've been exploring the early chapters of Luke's gospel, where the story's characters have a habit of breaking into song when they hear the news that the long-awaited Messiah, the Saviour, was about to be born.

Today, we're going to look at song the angels sang in Luke chapter 2, when they announced the birth of the Christchild to the shepherds who were keeping watch over their flocks by night in the fields of Bethlehem.

Luke's account of the birth of Jesus is one of the Bible's most familiar passages, even to people who have little church background. You may have never been to church in your life, but if you've ever watched *A Charlie Brown Christmas* you've heard this passage.

And precisely because it's so familiar to so many, its meaning can easily be lost on us. So I invite you to open your ears, mind, and heart in a fresh way to the radical and challenging truth behind the story of Jesus' birth as told in Luke 2:8-20.

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.

They were terrified, but the angel reassured them. "Don't be afraid!" he said. "I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David! And you will recognize him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger."

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."

When the angels had returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, "Let's go to Bethlehem! Let's see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." They hurried to the village and found Mary and Joseph. And there was the baby, lying in the manger. After seeing him, the shepherds told everyone what had happened and what the angel had said to them about this child.

All who heard the shepherds' story were astonished, but Mary kept all these things in her heart and thought about them often. The shepherds went back to their flocks,

glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. It was just as the angel had told them.¹

It's in verse 14 that the angels actually sing their song:

Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased.²

But in order to really appreciate the significance of the angels' song, you have to back up to the opening verses of Luke chapter 2. There, we find Caesar Augustus—the Roman Emperor—the most powerful person in the world—flexing his political muscle, demonstrating his unrivaled authority.

Caesar Augustus issues a decree that a census is to be taken throughout the entire Roman Empire. For us, a census just involves filling out a boring form and sending it in to the government. But in ancient Rome, when the Emperor called for a census, the entire world was set into motion. Everyone had to return to their ancestral homeland to register.

Caesar speaks; the world moves. That's power.

Speaking of power, if you were a Roman Emperor, there would only be two reasons you'd call for a census:

- 1) To expand your economic power by counting up all your people so you can make sure everyone's paying their taxes.
- 2) To expand your military power by counting up all your young men and requiring them to serve in the army.

It's in the midst of this display of imperial power and the worldwide commotion it stirs up that Luke focuses our attention on one poor Jewish family.

In order to register for the census, Joseph— along with his very pregnant fiancée, Mary— travels from his residence in Nazareth to his ancestral hometown of Bethlehem, where his family roots trace back to Israel's King David.

It's at this point that Luke tells us about the birth of Jesus, but he does so in this remarkably understated way. Luke's taken a few verses to tell us about Caesar Augustus and the census, and a couple more verses to tell us about Joseph going to Bethlehem to register with Mary, who's expecting a child.

¹ Luke 2:8-20 (NLT)

² Luke 2:14 (NLT)

Finally we get to the birth itself in verse 6—which you think would be the climactic event—but Luke, in this understated way, simply says:

And while they were there, the time came for her baby to be born. She gave birth to her first child, a son.³

It's almost as if Luke brushes by the birth of Jesus. He seems to treat the greatest event up to that point of human history like a passing detail. Why?

Luke is using a subtle and brilliant literary technique. One of the things Luke is trying to show us in the way he contrasts these two kings—Augustus and Jesus—is that we can become so distracted by the world's power games—so caught up in all this world's hype—that we tend to brush by or even miss altogether the most profound things that God is quietly doing in this world, and in our lives.

I'm originally from the US, but you don't have to be from the US to have taken an interest in the latest presidential election. Before, during and after the election, I can't tell you how many times I Googled the names "Trump" or "Biden" just to see what the latest news was.

Did you get caught up in US election news too? If so, type Y for yes into the chat.

I don't think we're much different than the people in Jesus' day. It's so easy for us to get caught up in and distracted by the world's power games as well. And in the midst of all the hype, do we brush by or miss what God is quietly doing in this world, and in our lives?

If you think back to that first Christmas day, the way Luke tells it, you'll begin to pick up on this sense that the vast majority of the world woke up that morning, and just went about their business—rushing to and fro—unaware that the God of the universe, the Creator of time and space, had stepped into his own creation, so unassumingly, in the person of this little baby.

By unfolding the Christmas story in this way, Luke shows us something about your heart and mine. Author Henri Nouwen, in his reflections on this passage, writes:

Somehow, I keep expecting loud and impressive events to convince me of God's saving power. But over and over again I'm reminded that power-plays, spectacles, and big events are the ways of the world, and our temptation is to be distracted by them. The small child of Bethlehem, the unknown young man of Nazareth, the rejected preacher, the naked man on the cross—he asks for my full attention. The work of our salvation takes place in the midst of a world that continues to shout,

³ Luke 1:6-7a (NLT)

scream, and overwhelm us with its claims and promises. But the true promise is hidden in the gift that hardly anyone notices.

In the midst of all of the world's clamour and claims and shouting, Nouwen says that:

When God came, it was embarrassingly insignificant. We almost passed right by it.

That morning the world woke up, went about their business, and had no idea that they were being visited by God himself. I wonder if this isn't often the case for you and me today.

And because the world equates power with the dramatic, with the spectacle, with the "wow" factor—we expect or maybe even demand the same in our experience with God.

Now don't get me wrong—God is certainly well able to "wow" us and often does when we truly open our hearts and lives to him. But when it doesn't happen as often as you think it should, or in the ways you had hoped it would, you can get disappointed, disillusioned with God. You might begin to doubt God's love or even his reality.

Have you ever been there? Have you ever been disappointed or disillusioned with God because he didn't work or move in the outwardly dramatic way that you hoped he would?

If so, would you be honest enough to say so by typing, "I've been there" into the chat?

This Christmas, and throughout the New Year, maybe you need to ask yourself: "Is it possible that God *is* meeting me, and I've just been distracted by all these other events and the anxieties of the hard times we're living in? Is it possible that God has been right here working in unassuming but profound ways, and I just haven't had the eyes to see it?"

When the God who was born in Bethlehem's manger comes to meet with you— might he do so in a way that seems almost embarrassingly ordinary? Are you cultivating eyes to see the ordinary means by which God so often does his most extraordinary work?

The irony and the contrast Luke strikes in our passage couldn't be sharper. He begins chapter 2 by speaking of Caesar Augustus, who was the first to declare himself Emperor. He also declared himself to be the son of god—beginning the ancient Roman belief that the Emperor had divine status. Augustus also proclaimed himself to be lord of all the earth, and the ultimate bringer of worldwide justice and peace—the one who was going to establish what was known as the *Pax Romana*—the peace of Rome.

So Augustus established all these promises and expectations that the entire world would be set right under his mighty rule and reign. But by the time Luke writes his gospel, which

most scholars date around 80 A.D. — some 50 years after Jesus lived— the Romans were already on their tenth Emperor.

And when you contrast the grand spectacle of who Caesar Augustus was and all he promised with how history actually unfolded following his reign—you realize that Luke was writing his gospel into a world that had been left utterly disappointed with all the claims and all the declarations and all the displays of power that they had heard and seen over the years.

I mean, when you look at today's world, and all that political spin doctors and financial power brokers and technological kingpins and commercial marketers and viral videos promise us—aren't you also left utterly disappointed more often than not?

If you can relate to that, go ahead and type "I can relate" into the chat.

It is into the Roman world with all its spectacle and yet disappointment—and also into our world today, with all its spectacle and yet disappointment— that Luke says, "There is good news. There is an entirely different kind of King—the true Son of God, the true Lord of all the earth, the true Prince of Peace has come."

But the world is so preoccupied with the power game, with spectacle— that God's announcement of the birth of the Saviour is entrusted to simple Jewish shepherds, tending their flocks by night in the fields, away from all the hype.

It's the shepherds who hear the song of the angels:

Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased.⁴

The angels sing of God's *glory*. "Glory to God in the highest!" To speak of God's glory is to speak of God's excellencies on display.

The angel armies are singing because God's glories—the highest excellencies and perfections of God's being and character—are on full display in this passage—so much so that all heaven stands at attention.

But it was a glory noticed by few on earth, because it was not the glory of spectacle. It was not the glory of power. It was not the glory of glitz or grand display. It was the glory of humility. It was the newborn glory of meekness and majesty, lying in a manger.

⁴ Luke 2:14 (NLT)

The manger. Luke specifically mentions it three times in this passage, which means he wants us to take special notice of it. The manger, you see, is a divine sign:

And you will recognize him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger.⁵

Signs are extremely important in the Bible. When God was about to do something big, he wouldn't just act—he also provided signs that pointed toward the meaning or intention of why he was acting.

For example, in the book of Exodus, the plagues were signs that God was judging the false and powerless gods of Egypt, and was rescuing his own people from slavery.

Jesus' healing miracles are another example of signs. They weren't just random displays of God's power, but they were signs pointing to God's ultimate purpose of one day healing and restoring the entire world through Jesus.

So in the Bible, God's actions are accompanied by signs. And in our passage, Luke is very careful to point out that the manger serves as a divine sign. How would a wooden feed box for animals serve as a divine sign?

Well, for one thing, the manger would have served as a sign to show the shepherds *which* baby born in Bethlehem that night was the one that the angels were talking about. Such a sign gave the shepherds something quite distinct to look for, because feed boxes for animals didn't usually double as cribs for newborns.

But in conjunction with the manger, the strips of cloth that Jesus was wrapped in also served as a sign. In verse 7, Luke says of Mary that:

She gave birth to her firstborn son. She wrapped him snugly in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no lodging available for them.⁶

Just about every newborn would have been swaddled in strips of cloth in that time and place. So unlike the manger, there was really nothing distinctive about the cloths, and yet Luke bothers to mention them twice. Why?

Well, when is the next time in Luke's gospel that we see Jesus wrapped in cloths, and laid somewhere?

⁵ Luke 2:12 (NLT)

⁶ Luke 12:7 (NLT)

New Testament scholar Joel Green points out that if you look at Luke 2:7, where it says that Mary “wrapped [Jesus] snugly in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger” it looks as if Luke pretty much took that sentence and dropped it directly into Luke chapter 23 verse 53—which takes place after Jesus has been crucified.

Joseph of Arimathea goes to Pilate to ask for Jesus’ dead body. And here’s what the text says:

Then he took the body down from the cross and wrapped it in a long sheet of linen cloth and laid it in a new tomb that had been carved out of rock.⁷

Joel Green suggests that with the manger and the cloths, we see a divine sign that points to exactly why this baby was born—that from the very day of his birth, Jesus’ purpose was to march to a death—a death he would die for us.

In this baby, God was doing something for us—for you, for me— that we could not do for ourselves. He would give his own life in order to save us from our sins.

His humble birth already points to his death for us, and it is in the cross of Christ that God’s greatest *glory* is revealed—the fullness of his excellencies— his perfect holiness and justice, his unfathomable grace and love.

What does Jesus pray in John 17 just before he goes to the cross?

Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son so he can give glory back to you.⁸

Christ’s cradle points to his cross, which demonstrates the glory of God as nothing else does. And that cross he bore *for us*.

Pastor Abraham Cho speaks of how Jesus, born in Bethlehem’s manger, and wrapped in strips of cloth, would ultimately “be wrapped in our grave clothes, and placed in our tombs so that you and I could leap with life,” both now and forever.

Therefore, you and I have even better reason than the angels to sing, “Glory to God in highest heaven!” You and I have every reason to follow the lead of the shepherds in our passage, who went and told everyone who would listen about Jesus.

So my question to you is this: Have you ever specifically said “yes” to Jesus before? Do you know him as your own Savior? Would you like to become a follower of this humble King, who was born into this world to lay down his life so that you could leap with life, both now and forever?

⁷ Luke 23:53 (NLT)

⁸ John 17:1b (NLT)

Jesus a gentleman. He won't force himself upon you. He humbly offers you all of himself, and patiently waits for you to say yes to him.

If you've never before said "yes" to Jesus, I'd like to give you the opportunity to do so right now.

If you've never done so before, and would like to embrace Jesus as your own Saviour and King today, please join me in the following prayer:

Lord Jesus, I believe you are the Son of God
That you left the glories of heaven
Were born here on earth
As one of us
To give your life for us
To rescue us from sin and death
And restore our broken relationship with God.
I acknowledge that I'm a sinner in need of a Saviour.
I now give my life to you.
I receive your forgiveness
And ask you to take your rightful place in my life
As my Saviour and King.
With your help, I will follow you all my days.
Help me to grow in my relationship with you each day.
In Your Name I pray, King Jesus.
Amen.

If that's the first time you've sincerely prayed such a prayer—a prayer to embrace Jesus as your own Saviour and King— a prayer to become a follower of Jesus— then you've just received the best Christmas gift possible. You've received God's gift of Jesus into your heart and life.

If that's you, please feel free to reach out to us. In fact, I welcome you to contact me at the email address you see on the screen (steve@cornerstonechurch.ca) and I'd be happy to help get you connected here at the church and to recommend some next steps and good resources to help you in your journey with Jesus.

A very Merry Christmas to you all!