

“The Glory of Christ’s Birth”

Luke 2:1-20

December 24, 2016 (Christmas Eve)

By David A. Ritchie

I. Introduction

Welcome and Merry Christmas Eve! My name is David Ritchie, and I am one of the pastors here at Redeemer Christian Church. Tonight, we welcome our church family, out of town friends and family, and all those who have come to celebrate the birth of our Savior with us. *[(5:30 service only) I particularly want to thank the volunteers who helped serve in our children’s ministry in the previous service. By your humble service, the gospel is going for from this church.]*

If this is your very first time at Redeemer, I want you to know that we are so honored that you are here tonight. To let us know that you were here, I would ask you to please fill out a Connect Card, which you will find on the back of the pew in front of you and turn it in in one of the offering boxes in the back of the sanctuary or in the lobby. Let us know if you have any questions about our church or any way we can be praying for you.

Likewise, *as this is the last time we will be gathering as a church family in 2016*, I would encourage you to make a special year-end financial gift toward supporting the ministries of Redeemer Christian Church. You can do so by placing a check or cash in a giving envelope and placing that envelope in the offering boxes before you leave tonight. 2016 has been an amazing year in which we have been able to have a larger impact for the sake of the kingdom than ever. Together, we’ve been able to support the training of pastors, the planting of churches, the building of houses for the poor in Mexico, and giving of clean water to those in extreme poverty in Kenya, as well as all the ministry that we do here in our own city.

At Redeemer, we give because we serve a generous God. We give because God has given us Jesus. And it is that gift of Jesus that I want to talk about this evening.

I want to share some Scriptures with you that are very well known. *My aim is not to teach you something new, but rather to celebrate something that is ancient and true.*

But the ancient truth that I will talk about tonight is so powerful that it has split history in two pieces. I am of course talking about the *incarnation*; the truth that the God of who created the heavens and the earth – the God in whom we live and move and have our being – has become flesh, entered history, joined himself with his creation. This is the **“The Glory of Christ’s Birth.”**

So without an further ado, turn in your Bibles to the gospel according Luke, chapter 2, verses 1 through 20.

“In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths

and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!” When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.” And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them” (Luke 2:1–20, ESV).

II. Summary and Context

I’ll briefly summarize the narrative of the Scriptures we have just read. The most powerful man in the known world is Caesar Augustus. He is the first character we see in this story. He is the image of power, conquest, and wealth. He is the visible illustration of a life lived with the intent to pursue greatness and significance, even if you have to step on a few toes or oppress a few nations to get there. He is consumerism. He is materialism. He is imperialism. And now Caesar has sent heralds to decree his words. He wants to know how powerful he is by taking a census of his empire. But little does he know, the God of heaven is sovereignly presiding over and above the decisions and actions of Caesar Augustus.¹ For the end of this decree will not result in the glory of Caesar, but the glory of God.

In this climate of distraction, hurry, and haste, there is a lot of movement. A man named Joseph and his pregnant wife Mary have traveled about eighty-five to ninety miles from Nazareth in Galilee to the little town of Bethlehem.² There is no room for them to stay in the over crowded city, so they are given accommodations more fit for storage and livestock. And it is in this precise moment of busyness and human self-worship that *God enters into human history completely unnoticed as a little baby born to a poor couple in a forgotten corner of the world.*

An army of angels surprises a group of unsuspecting shepherds, sings a song of heaven, and proclaims that *God was just born in a barn.*

The shepherds come to see this baby, and they leave as awestruck, worshipping heralds, proclaiming the true King – a king far greater far more powerful than Caesar – has arrived.

This first thing I want you to pay particular attention to is how rapturously amazed the angels are in this scene. Can you think about how hard it is to surprise an angel? Angels are essentially eternal beings that stand in the immediate presence of a God in heaven! What would it take to cause them to have wonder? The Apostle Peter picks up on this theme of angelic wonder and has this to say in another place in the New Testament. *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead...Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, inquiring what person or time*

¹ I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1978), 97–98.

² Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, vol. 24, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 106.

the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look” (1 Pet. 1:3, 10-12).

The holy, transcendent God who has existed – uncreated – from eternity past loved us so much that he left his throne of infinite glory, folded himself into a human embryo, and was born into this world as a humble servant to live the life we should have lived, die the death we should have died, and defeat our sin by his resurrection. Angels still can’t believe that a God this holy could also be so good.

The great British preacher Charles Spurgeon had this to say concerning this miracle: *“And now wonder, ye angels, the Infinite has become an infant. He, upon whose shoulders the universe doth hang, hangs at His mothers breast. He who created all things, and bears up the pillars of creation, hath now become so weak that He must be carried by a woman! And oh, wonder, ye that knew Him in His riches, whilst ye admire His poverty! Where sleeps the new-born King? Had He the best room in Caesar’s palace? Hath a cradle of gold been prepared for Him, and pillows of down, on which to rest His head? No. Where the ox fed, in the dilapidated stable, in the manger, there the Saviour lies, swathed in the swaddling bands of the children of poverty!”³*

The only reasonable response to this truth is awe and utter amazement. But this amazement wasn’t the reaction of the majority of the world then, and it is not the reaction of the majority of the world now. Then, Christmas was just another day. And even in the Bible belt we can make Christmas — the very arrival of the Lord Jesus Christ into history — a common, unremarkable notion.

But this fact is not common. I pray that this Christmas we would be a people who see the uncommon beauty of God becoming man and dwelling among us (Jn. 1:14). And in beholding this beautiful truth, I pray we would see the glory of God. From this text, I want to show that by God becoming man in the person of Jesus Christ, God is glorified. *God is glorified 1.) by his gospel, 2.) in his people, and 3.) through his saving mission.*

III. The Glory of God

1. God is glorified by his gospel.

Let’s take look back at our text, particularly the words of the heralding angels: *“And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!’” (Luke 2:10-14).*

Notice that the angel does not say, “Behold I bring you good advice about how to live a better life and become a better you. The hope that legion of angels brings is not about self-improvement or behavior modification. This is a message of “Good News.”⁴ This is the gospel of Jesus Christ the messiah. You see, good advice is about what you can do for God. God news is about what God has done for you. Because this good news is primarily about God and not about you, God is the one who receives glory. And what do we receive? We receive joy, peace, and grace.

³ Spurgeon, Charles H. “The Condescension of Christ.” Sermon 151.

⁴ “This translates the Greek verb *euangelizō*, which means *to preach the good news*. The noun (*euangelion*) is translated by the word “gospel.” This verb is found eleven times in the Gospels, and ten of these are found in Luke.” Stein, 108.

Moreover, there is a massive significance that this gospel is announced – not to the wealthy, not to the powerful, not to the religious – but to lowly shepherds. In ancient Middle Eastern culture to be a shepherd was to automatically be considered an abomination to polite society. It was a shameful, dirty occupation. Yet, is a group of shepherds who are serenaded by a heavenly choir. This is saying something big. God is saying, *“My gospel is for the humble. My gospel is for the dirty. My gospel is for your shame. My gospel is not something you clean yourself up to receive. My gospel is what makes you clean.”*

You could even say it is a necessary precondition to receive the gospel is to know that you cannot be your own Savior. But Jesus has come when we could have never saved ourselves. Jesus is our Messiah. Jesus is our Lord. Jesus is our peace. And because of this Jesus receives all the glory.

2. God is glorified in his people.

We'll continue our reading: *“When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.’ And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger” (Luke 2:15-16).*

This verse is saying something huge about what the God intends for his people. This text shows us that, contrary to individualistic American expectations, the good news of the born Messiah has not created privatized spiritual experience. Instead the gospel has created a gathering. It has created a motely community of outcasts and aliens. It has created a church. Dirty blue-collar shepherd, a carpenter, an unwed mother, and soon the party is even going to be crashed by a foreign wise men from the East. And you know what? I'm sure this was a little awkward. You want to know why I know that? Because I know my wife, and she didn't want strangers coming into the room after she had just had a baby, much less dirty shepherds who probably needed to be baptized in hand-sanitizer!

Nevertheless, through his gospel, God is creating a new people. And he is glorified by a socially and ethnically diverse community that loves one another. This good news of hope that is very much relevant in our own society that is marked by strife between races and social classes. We need the transforming, community-creating love that only Jesus can bring.

3. God is glorified through his mission.

Look at the final verse of tonight's text: *“And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them” (Luke 2:20).*

The shepherds do not leave their encounter with Jesus and remain the same. They glorify God. They praise God. They, as a result of this experience, become heralds of what they have heard and seen!

In the same way, the gospel requires a response of us. We cannot respond to Jesus with nominal adherence and lip service. He is worthy of our worship, our allegiance, our adoration, our submission, and our obedience. He is worthy of *proclamation*. We are called to be ambassadors of good news and the good kingdom that is to come through Jesus! By this truth our lives are given meaning and purpose. Theologian N.T. Wright says it this way, *“The point of following Jesus isn't simply so that we can be sure of going to a better place than this after we die. Our future beyond death is enormously important, but the nature of the Christian hope is such that it plays back into the present life. We're called here and now, to be instruments of God's new creation, the world-put-*

to-rights, which has already been launched in Jesus and of which Jesus' followers are supposed to be not simply beneficiaries but also agents.”⁵

IV. Conclusion

Now before we conclude our time, I want to point your attention to something that is easy for us to miss, but was nigh impossible for the shepherds to miss. It was *the sign of the manger*. This was so important that the author Luke even mentions it three times.

The angels have just announced an astonishing claim. The Messiah, the long awaited, anointed, liberator-king of God's people has finally arrived, and the shepherd had been commissioned to find him. And what was it that was to designate this newly born baby as the Messiah? It was for this baby to be lying in a manger.

Why was this significant? It was significant because it was unexpected, and scandalous. While Caesar sits on his throne in Rome, God has stepped down from the throne of the universe in great humility to be born as a baby. *And this baby was God-incarnate lying in a filthy feeding trough.*⁶ For the shepherds and for the readers of Luke's gospel this should signify that God intends to save his people, but he plans to do this in a shocking scandalous way.

Yet even more, behind the manger looms the shadow of the cross. The reason Christ came to this earth was to live the live we should have lived and die the death we should have died. The light of the world came into the world and for a brief moment his life was extinguished.

But that is not the end of the story! On the third day after Jesus died upon the cross, he rose again unto newness of life and has victoriously overcome sin, Satan, death. And one day, just as he already came once, he will come again to rule and to reign for all time!

The light of his kingdom is dawning. The true light is already shining. And we are all called to be bearers of that light.

So this Christmas season, let us be a people who marvel at the glory of God. Let us be amazed with the angels at this amazing grace. And like the unworthy shepherds, let us go forth to bear the light of Christ's birth.

AMEN.

⁵ Wright, N.T. *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense*. (New York, HarperCollins, 2006), xi.

⁶ Stein, 107.