

CHRISTMAS EVE

“The True Glory of Christmas”

Luke 2:1–21

Saturday, December 24, 2022 (Christmas Eve)

By David A. Ritchie

Scripture Reading

Please remain standing as we honor the reading of God’s Holy Word. Tonight’s Scripture reading is from the gospel according to Luke 2:1–21.

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. And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb (Luke 2:1–21, ESV).

This is God’s Word. Thanks be to God. You may have your seat, this evening.

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.

Tonight, we gather to marvel at one of the most momentous miracles in history. The theological term for this miracle is the *incarnation*. Incarnation means that divinity has taken on humanity. The eternal Word has become flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14). The God who created the heavens

and the earth—the infinite God in whom we live and move and have our being—has entered history and joined himself with his creation.

In the words of the ancient Nicene Creed: *“The Lord Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God, begotten of his Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of very God; Begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father; By whom all worlds were made: Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, and was made man.”*

This is a truth so profound that we now divide human history into two eras—before and after the arrival of Christ. So tonight, we celebrate the birth of Jesus, for this is *“The True Glory of Christmas.”*

Exposition

Here in Luke's gospel, we have a vision of the very first-ever Christmas.

The most powerful man in the known world is Caesar Augustus [show **1Image of Caesar Augustus**]. He is the first Emperor of Rome, and he is the first character we see in Luke 2. He is the image of power, conquest, and opulent wealth. He is the very embodiment of the vaunted empires and pride of men [show **2Image of Caesar's Coin**]. Caesar Augustus will even go to great lengths to depict himself through laws and coinage as a son of a god who hails from divine ancestry.¹

And now, Caesar has sent heralds to decree his words. He wants to know just how powerful he is by taking a census of his empire. But little does Caesar know that the God of heaven is sovereignly presiding over and above these very decisions and actions. For the end of this decree will not result in the glory of Caesar but instead the glory of God.

A man named Joseph and his pregnant wife Mary travel by foot about eighty-five to ninety miles from Nazareth in Galilee to the little town of Bethlehem. There is no room for them to stay in the overcrowded 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—almost completely unnoticed—as a little baby boy born to a poor couple in a forgotten corner of the world.*

Then, a literal army (στρατιᾶς) of angels surprises a group of unsuspecting shepherds [show **3Angels and Shepherds**]. They sing a song of glory and proclaim that *the Messiah—God's promised liberator king—has been born.*

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.

The angels themselves seem amazed. And think about what it would take to amaze 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 and awe?

The reason for their wonder is this: the holy, transcendent God who has existed—uncreated from eternity past—loved his people so much that he left his throne of glory. This infinite God folded

¹ Augustus (previously known as Octavian) was the adopted son of Julius Caesar. When Augustus convinced the Roman Senate to apotheosize Julius, Augustus was consequently made the son of a god. Moreover, the Julio-Claudian Dynasty claimed to be descended from the ancient Trojan prince Aeneas, who was also the son of Venus. Augustus commissioned Virgil the Latin poet to commemorate this heritage in his masterpiece *The Aeneid*.

himself into a human embryo to rescue his creation from the power of sin. Angels marvel 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 mother’s 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 newborn 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!”*²

I pray this Christmas, we will be a people who see the uncommon beauty of God becoming man and dwelling among us (John 1:14). And in beholding this beautiful truth, I pray we will 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 in three ways: *God is glorified 1.) by his gospel, 2.) in his people, and 3.) through his saving mission.*

1. God is glorified by his gospel.

Let’s take a 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” (Luke 2:10).*

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 the angels bring is not about self-improvement, self-determination, or behavior modification. This is a message of gospel, which means *“good news”* (εὐαγγελίζομαι).

Good advice is about what you can do for God. Good news is about what God has done for you through Christ.

Moreover, there is a massive significance that this gospel is first announced—not to the wealthy, not to the powerful, not to the impressive or the pious—but to lowly shepherds. In the ancient Near East, to be a shepherd was to be considered an abomination to polite society. It was a shameful, dirty occupation. Yet, it is a group of such 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.”*

And this announcement of good news isn’t just for people *out there*. It isn’t something reserved for the pretty and perfect. The angels proclaim, *“For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:11).* The gospel is for the unclean and the unworthy. The gospel is for the weak and the weary. The gospel is for the hurting and the heartbroken. If you feel like you could never measure up and can never be worthy of God’s love, the gospel is for you!

The gospel is the announcement that—despite our sin, despite our shame—Jesus Christ will make a way—and now *has* made a way—to reconcile God and humanity! For this reason, the angels sing, *“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased” (Luke 2:14).*

² Spurgeon, Charles H. “The Condescension of Christ.” Sermon 151.

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 text shows us that, contrary to our hyper individualistic culture, the good news of Christ's birth has not created privatized spiritual experience. Instead, the gospel has created a gathering. It has created a motley community of outcasts and aliens.

Dirty blue-collar shepherds, a carpenter, and a teenage mother all gather around Jesus. Later on, the party will even be crashed by several wise men from the East (cf. Matt 2:1–12). Even as an infant, Jesus has already gathered an unlikely and uncommonly diverse community of people from all walks of life.

Through his son, God is creating *a new people*—a people who are no longer primarily defined by their nationality or wealth or social status. Today, we call this gathering of people *the church*.

This vision of a radical new community centered around Jesus is profoundly needed in our own age. After all, our society is marked by strife and suspicion. We have been polarized by the powers and principalities into endless culture wars and divisions based on group identity.

Now, more than ever, we need the transforming, community-creating, hatred-healing love that only Jesus can bring.

3. God is glorified through his saving 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 become heralds of what they have heard and seen!

In the same way, the gospel requires a response from us. We cannot respond to Jesus with nominal adherence and lip service. Jesus is worthy of our worship and our adoration. Jesus is worthy of our submission and our obedience. He is worthy of our highest allegiance. He is worthy of *proclamation*.

We are called to be ambassadors of this good news and the kingdom to come through Jesus (2 Cor 5:20)!

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 particular sign was so important that the author Luke even mentions it three times in this one passage (Luke 2:7, 12, 16).

The angels have just announced an astonishing claim. The Messiah, the long-awaited, anointed liberator-king of God's people, has finally arrived. The shepherds 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 (show [4Adoration of the Shepherds by Honthorst](#)).

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 and lays within *in a feeding trough*.

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 so in a shocking and scandalous way*.

The reason Christ came to this earth was to live the life we should have lived and die the death we deserve for our sins. As theologian J.I. Packer once wrote: *“The Christmas message is that there is hope for a ruined humanity—hope of pardon, hope of peace with God, hope of glory—because at the Father’s will Jesus Christ became poor, and was born in a stable, so that thirty years later he might hang on a cross.”*³

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 victoriously overcame the powers of sin, Satan, and death. And one day, he will come again to rule and to make all things new!

The light of his kingdom is dawning. The light of this truth 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 along with the angels of heaven. And like the unworthy shepherds, let us go forth to bear the light of Christ’s birth. AMEN.

Prayer

God of our gospel, God of glory, we praise you and thank you for sending Jesus Christ, your Son, into our world. May your Holy Spirit fill us with wonder and awe as we celebrate this truth on this holy night. In response to your truth, may we worship and adore you as the shepherds and angels of old. Thank you that your light shines in our darkness. May we be faithful to shine that light unto the world around us. In Christ's name, we pray. AMEN.

Candle Lighting

On this Christmas Eve, we will light candles as a symbol of the light of the gospel, which the Holy Spirit has lit within our hearts. And as our candle-lighters walk through our aisle, we will spread this light throughout this room as a symbol of our role to shine the light of the gospel unto the nations. So let us sing with the angels and proclaim with the shepherds of old that Christ our Lord is born unto us!

³ J.I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1973), 63.