

## “THE SHEPHERDS’ ANGEL.”

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First Christian Reformed Church

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Scripture Texts: Luke 2:1-20

### The Humble Birth: Bethlehem’s Manger (Luke 1:1-7)

The Christmas story begins with a decree of Caesar Augustus, the ruler of the vast Roman Empire spreading all around the Mediterranean Sea and beyond. At this time in history Rome was at its greatest, at the height of its rule and success, and Judea was at its lowest, the most subject, now being taxed by Rome.

He was the great emperor, when he issued a decree, everyone submitted and obeyed. If all we had of the birth story was the first seven verses, we would think this is a political headline, a political story about Emperor Augustus.

But when Luke tells the story, it is incredible how Caesar Augustus became just a bit player quickly moved to the wings of the drama,. He only has a cameo appearance in the divine drama, and he is never heard from again in Scripture. The only reason he is known in Scripture is he is the one God used to move Joseph and Mary from Nazareth to Bethlehem.

Augustus like all kings was only a pawn on God’s chessboard. Think about it, merely a pawn.

This is true of President Biden, President Trump, Benjamin Netanyahu, the head of Hamas, Kim Jong Un, Vladimir Putin. They make their executive orders and issue their decrees, but every one of them is subject to and submitted to the sovereign decrees of God who is working all things for His glory and His redemptive purposes; for the glory of the kingdom of His Son who is King of kings and Lord of lords.

Never forget the words of **Proverbs 21:1** The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will.

Christmas puts Caesar in his place. Don’t be impressed with rulers, kings, presidents, rich and famous and powerful people. No matter who is in power, God will prevail. Don’t be fooled, don’t make a big deal about what is not a big deal. They are nothing compared to the Christ.

The times belong to God, the times are in God’s hands.

Let us never be anxious about events all around us.

God orders and rules all things in heaven and on earth.

Little does Caesar know that he is being used by God to lay the foundation of a new kingdom before which his kingdom and all the kingdoms of earth will bow down.

The political purpose of the decree was for a census and taxation. God used it for spiritual purposes to fulfill what He promised in prophecy, to accomplish His plan for salvation.

Everything in this story is humble and great at the same time.

A baby has been born in Bethlehem. So what? Lots of babies were born in Bethlehem, before and after this. What is the significance of this event?

Luke's *narrative of the birth* of Jesus on earth takes seven verses. Seven verses. That's it. The same number of verses for Isaac, Jacob and Moses. What if Luke had just stopped there?

This event is the greatest event that has ever taken place on earth, *it's the turning point of history*, but it has no meaning unless God reveals the meaning to us. We must be told; it requires explanation. The *announcement of the birth* of Jesus Luke takes twice as many verses. This is the most important part, pay attention to this.

What this means is all human historical events and experiences are penultimate, secondary, second to last in their significance. There is always something more, something above them, something ultimate. Their ultimate significance lies in the reality that transcends what we see and know here.

Don't miss this, this world is created and ruled by God, there is always more to every story, more than just what our five senses pick up. There is more to your story than what's on the surface. God is always at work working out your salvation. Watch for it, look for it, notice the grace all around.

What those in authority say or do, what people say or do is never the last word. God always has the last word. Remember another Joseph who said what you meant for evil, God meant for good.

### **The Humble Audience: Shepherds (Luke 2:8-12)**

The divine meets the mundane, glory in the highest comes to the lowest. The announcement is not to rulers, or royalty, or religious rulers, priests, scribes or Pharisees.

Don't make the mistake thinking fame, popularity, wealth, success, all the worldly trappings are the path spiritual benefits and blessings.

**James 2:5** Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him?

If you are a working man, a manual labor man, a blue collar type, one who works outside, one who works with his hands, one of those who take a shower after work, the kingdom of heaven belongs to you. God often calls the least in the eyes of the world before He calls the great.

Moses was tending sheep, so was David. Gideon was threshing wheat, Elisha was plowing a field. Amos was a herdsman and working in an orchard. Some of the disciples were fisherman. And of course, Joseph was a carpenter.

If you were going to compare the shepherds to our day, what occupation would you pick? Who today are most like the shepherds? Farmers, dairymen, factory workers, nurses working 12 hour shifts.

How about *long-haul truckers*. Truckers sleeping in their cabs, watching over their truck and load, guarding what was entrusted to them by their boss, spending days away from home. Humble sinners working hard.

Don't miss what is going on here, don't miss where God has broken in, to the lowest, the least. You cannot be too insignificant to be important to God and used by Him.

Suddenly, without warning, out of nowhere an angel appears surrounded by the glory of God and the shepherds are terrified, frightened, scared out of their wits. Mind you these are men not easily frightened, they have dealt with wild animals, and sheep thieves. But this angel reduces them to shaking in sheer terror.

Lots of people think it would be cool to see an angel, but they don't have a clue. Do you want to be scared out of your mind? Every human being who met an angel in Scripture was terrified, reduced to a trembling mess falling to the ground. Holiness undoes them every time.

Angels stand in the presence of the holy God, their holy presence makes us aware of our unholiness, and unholiness in the presence of the holy is terrifying. In fact, it is deadly, for no sinner can stand in the presence of God and live. Isaiah said, "Woe is me, I am a dead man." When Gideon saw an angel he literally thought he was going to die (Judges 6:23).

### ***Listen to the announcement:***

The first word every angel says to every human being is fear not. We are told in Scripture to fear God and then those who do are told not to fear. Isn't this an expression of the kindness and mercy of God, He comforts us in every encounter with the holy. Fear not.

Could this not sum up the message of Christmas, fear not.

What is the worst fear? Is it not the fear of death. Isn't that the last and greatest fear. And that is what God sends Jesus to earth to take away and to comfort us in the midst of the valley of the shadow of death.

"For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."

Wait, what? The good news is a baby? Really? What do shepherds care about a baby? Why should they pay attention to that? The angel answers that. Because this baby is your Savior, He is your Messiah, He is your Lord.

He is the *Savior*, the one thing we need more than anything else. The gift of a Savior presupposes our need for a Savior. He alone is the one we need to deliver us and rescue us from sin and misery.

He is the Messiah, the *Christ*, the anointed one, the descendent of David, the one promised long ago. The one anointed to conquer sin and death.

He is the *Lord*. This is the most staggering name of all. This is the title used for God. This baby is God in the flesh. He has God's authority and power to do what He has come to do.

Through this baby God is going to do all His saving work on earth. Salvation is found in no other name on earth.

*This is the game changer, the turning point of history, the turning of the tide.* The seed of woman had come to strike down the serpent. The head of the serpent is about to be crushed, Satan is about to be defeated. The battle was engaged as never before.

Good news was about to come to the poor, liberty was about to be proclaimed to the captives.

Salvation was about to be revealed no longer through types and symbols and shadows and old rituals, but in person face to face. The knowledge of God was no longer going to be confined to the Jews but offered to the entire Gentile world.

And if that news was not enough, God sends more signs, more proof, more tangible evidence. You will find Him wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger.

And if that isn't enough, God sends a heavenly choir of a multitude of the heavenly host. Hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands. The window between heaven and earth is thrown wide open.

God sent an angel to explain what otherwise would be missed and misunderstood. This angel comes to us as much as he comes to the shepherds. We need to understand as much as they do.

We live in this same world, nothing is different. God is present and working out salvation, the signs and symbols are all around us. You have to be humble to see it, the proud never will.

### **The Heavenly Choir: A Multitude of Angels (Luke 2:13-14)**

Did you watch that incredible come from behind victory by the Seahawks last Monday night? Did that have any of you whooping and hollering? High fiving and fist bumping?

What a come from behind victory our salvation is, we who were dead in our trespasses, lost in our sin, facing certain death. If we had a true sense of our sin and death, we would certainly have a far greater sense of thankfulness, gratitude, and joy worth singing loudly about.

“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”

When we give glory to God in the highest, joy comes to those in the lowest. We find the most joy when we put God first and give Him the praise and glory.

Let God have the honor and we will receive the blessing. Why? Because that is what we are made for.

### **The Hasty Response (Luke 2:15-20)**

Notice the shepherd’s response. Really, I mean it, notice their response to this announcement.

No objection, no hesitation, no questioning or doubting, no what ifs or what abouts. No debating with each other. Benjamin, what do you think? I don’t know, Levi, what do you think we should do? How about you, Eli?

They said let’s go to Bethlehem and then they hurried to go as quickly as they could and track down this Jesus.

You wonder how many doors they had to knock on, but when they found Jesus there was no doubt in anyone’s mind.

What did they talk about when they found Jesus? The birth may have seemed very normal, very human to Joseph and Mary, very penultimate. The delivery, the pain, the body fluids, the little baby, all very ordinary until all of sudden a bunch of scruffy shepherds show up talking about angels and the glory of God and good news of a Savior who is Christ the Lord, who will be wrapped in swaddling cloths lying in a manger.

Everything that seemed natural, all of a sudden was supernatural. The ordinary was infused with the extraordinary. The universe was open, the invisible was real, the thin veil between heaven and earth was pulled back. Can you imagine the wonder and awe of it all?

Can you imagine how the shepherds’ words encouraged and strengthened the faith of Joseph and Mary? And consider how the stories Joseph and Mary told the shepherds strengthened their faith? This baby was the Messiah, their Messiah, their Savior from their sin and the Savior of the world.

They couldn’t stop talking about it and praised God and told everyone who would listen what they have been told. Everything they heard and saw was exactly as they have been told.

And Mary couldn’t stop thinking about these things and pondering them in her heart.

Oh that we would meditate on these things and consider what it all means for us. Oh that these events would capture our thoughts and imaginations. All of this happened and is recorded for us and our salvation, for us and our reflection and meditation.

May we learn to talk more about ultimate things than penultimate things.  
May we talk more about the good news and not just about the news.

### **Implications and application.**

Do you think life was ever ordinary for those shepherds again? Do you think they were still talking about it 30 years later?

Do we see Jesus the way the angels did?  
Do we see Jesus the way the shepherds did?

If you have any clue at all about who this Jesus is, then you should make haste to find Him and come to Him and know Him and tell others of Him.

There is not a single person on earth or in this room or watching to whom this message of salvation in the Gospel of Jesus Christ is not directed. It applies to the entire human race and to each one of us in particular. It requires a response from each one of us.

There has been born unto you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

Do you know you need a Savior, or are you your own savior? Can you be honest and humble enough to admit you need help, you need a gift? Can you look into your heart and see your sin, your selfishness, your pride, lust and greed, and say you need a Savior?

Don't stand around doubting or questioning or making excuses or putting it off.  
Make haste, come quickly to Jesus. Run, give Him your sin, give Him your heart.

Let this stunning display of the sovereign God breaking into our world turning Caesars into servants of His salvation give you confident assurance He is at work in our world and in our lives, ordering the details of our lives for His glory and for our good and our salvation.

Let this stunning display of God's great love give you greater boldness to live by faith, to live for Jesus, and even to sing a little louder. If long-haul truckers can glorify and praise God so can we.

There has been born unto you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.  
Glory to God in the highest who has stooped down to us who are the lowest.