

Evangelism from Heaven

Luke 2:8-14

December 6, 2015

We're continuing this fascinating study, the infancy narratives, which tell us the story about how God sent his Son, how the Son of God entered the world as a newborn baby, swaddled, laid in a manger. And as you're turning there to Luke 2:8, let me just read a couple of verses from John's gospel. Some of the themes flowing through the current of our text this morning, John highlights in his prologue: themes of light and glory and incarnation. That's a theological focus on the story of Christ. John 1:4 starts with this theme of light. He says, "In Him," that is in Jesus Christ, in Him "the word was life and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." And then down in verse 9 John writes, "The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world." The end of the prologue, verse 14, "The word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace

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and truth.” That’s what we’re seeing here in Luke Chapter 2, especially in verses 8 to 14, the climactic section of this narrative that spans from verse 1 to verse 20. “Jesus Christ is the light of the world and whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” And as the light of the world, Jesus Christ is the incarnation, the very embodiment of the glory of God the Father. No one has ever seen God at any time, but the incarnate son of God. He has made him known.

And that begins right now here in our text. Look at Luke 2:8, “Mary wrapped her newborn baby in swaddling cloths, laid him in a manger,” which is a feeding trough for the livestock. Hardly an appropriate place, it would seem, for the glorious Son of God to be laid, but there he was. And then Luke 2:8 says this, “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 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!”

We’ll stop there for this morning. As we noted last week, as I just said, we’re looking at the climactic portion of this narrative. This section right here, this is more than a birth announcement. This is a Gospel announcement. Heaven itself has come down to evangelize these shepherds. Angel of the Lord is giving them the news of salvation there in verse 11. “For unto us is born this day in this city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” Everything else in the narrative is either a build up to or a reaction to the angelic announcement of this good news. The Gospel is what sends the shepherds into Bethlehem to find the sign of the child, verse 15. It’s what causes everyone to wonder, verse 18. It’s what causes Mary in verse 19 to hold these words deep within her heart, to ponder them, to think about them. It’s what causes the shepherds in verse 20 to go away glorifying and praising God. This is the same message that’s changed hearts and transformed the lives of all kinds of people from all kinds of places throughout history around the entire

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world. It's a message that transcends time and space. It's a message that reaches every location, translates into every culture, every language, affects every single heart; affects ours, as well, doesn't it? It's exactly what you'd expect from the word of the living God, able to penetrate, to get into the heart. And here, at the very beginning of the Gospel story, God has really telegraphed his intent to save sinners in Jesus Christ and sinners of all kinds.

The story is, on the one hand, it's utterly sublime. There's an angel, there's divine glory, there's the heavenly host, but it intersects with normal, very normal, mundane human reality. This happened 2,000 years ago in an actual place on earth, at an actual time. The town of Bethlehem, the time of Caesar Augustus, the Roman Empire was just getting its foundation, just getting its start. It involved normal issues of the administration of government, regional politics, even as something as, as mundane and normal as a fundamental staple in an agrarian economy, shepherds in a field.

And that's where we're going to start this morning. Notice your first point in your outline there in your bulletin: A dramatic visitation. A dramatic visitation, verse 8, "And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field keeping watching over their flock by night." Now, we don't know who these shepherds are, frankly, there are no names, not even ethnicities here. We might assume they're Jews, but we don't know that for certain; these guys are anonymous. And unlike the previous angelic visitations, to Zechariah first and then to Mary, both of them parents of the child that was announced to them, these shepherds have no relational ties to the child at all. They're outsiders, really, to the story; they're strangers. A couple things to note in that verse: first of all it says, "the same region." That indicates this location. These are the pastures surrounding the town of Bethlehem where the shepherds took care of their sheep. And, then secondly, the shepherds are outside, it says. It says they're in the field, out in the field, away from the comfort of the town. And notice it's nighttime, they're "keeping watch." The word translated, out in the field, really provides a pretty good picture of how the shepherds were situated on this very night. The verb is formed from two words, the word, field, and then a word that is sometimes translated,

courtyard, referring to an open space within a surrounded location, like a sheepfold, really. It could be translated that way, as well.

Basically, the picture is this: The shepherds would lead their flocks to local pastures during the day for grazing all around the hills, and then in the evening as it started to get dark, they would bring the sheep back home into these enclosures that kept the sheep sheltered from the weather, the elements, protected from wild animals or even thieves. These sheepfolds, they were constructed around an open space. They were surrounded by rock walls, sometimes high walls. And then sometimes they were covered over just to protect from the weather and the rain. Sometimes they were open to the sky. Not always, especially in winter, not always the warmest or the most comfortable lodging, but it provided the shelter and the safety and the protection that was needed for the sheep. Some think, because of how this verse describes shepherds sleeping out of doors, that it's, that it's unlikely that Jesus was born in the winter months, let alone December 25th. Their spending the night in the sheepfold during this time of year is not necessarily conclusive evidence against a winter birth of Christ. Now, I will say this, we don't

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know for certain the date. Many people have tried. Many people have attempted to go back, try to reconstruct this and get the precise date of Jesus' birth, but I, I think that's a difficult, difficult task.

Suffice it to say, I think that a winter timeframe and why not December 25th? A winter time frame is very close to the truth. In fact, the fact that these shepherds are keeping their sheep closer to town actually argues in favor of a winter birth. The commentator Joel Green writes this, he says, "In general, shepherds spent warmer, drier months like March through November, spring all the way to early autumn, further afield, and colder, wetter months, November to March, nearer to towns and cities. Proximity to Bethlehem, then, could speak for a winter birth of Jesus." Now the climate in that region, it's remarkably similar to cities of the same latitude as San Diego, California. I don't know if you've been to San Diego, California in the winter; trust me, it's not harsh. It's not like Michigan, okay, or something like that. It's, It's pretty mild winter. So it's not like the shepherds are trudging around in snow, drenched with rain. And they, even if it did rain, they had the means of staying dry, of keeping warm, perhaps even in those times,

especially in a heavy period or season of weather, they could rent pen space in town, sheep space in town, sheepfolds, stay themselves in temporary rented quarters. That wasn't normally necessary. In fact, weather permitting, the shepherds would want to keep their sheep out grazing, wandering around. They wanted happy, well-fed, you might say range-fed sheep, right, free-grazing because they were preparing them for lambing season around February. So they kept them outside in the fields, sleeping in the sheepfolds with them, taking their own turns to keep the watch at night.

There's good evidence that the regions around Jerusalem, within a circumference around Jerusalem, that would include Bethlehem, that these people around there, the shepherds around these regions supplied lambs for the temple sacrifices. So a February lambing season could provide lambs, which were definitely within the time span of a year younger, er, er, a year old or less. Those lambs could be provided for sacrifices that were required at Passover that came in March or April. Listen, this lamb providing business, big business at the temple, huge business, a huge, huge moneymaker. In fact, it became corruptly so. Chief priests and the Sadducees would only

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approve certain lambs for sacrifice, that is, the ones provided by regional livestock brokers with whom they'd made deals, ones sold at exorbitant prices in the temple courts. This was price gouging in the extreme.

Just as an example, a pair of turtle doves, if you look at Luke 2:24, a pair of turtle doves that Joseph and Mary were required to offer, that was the sacrifice, the poorest sacrifice of the poorest people, who would have to offer the sacrifice for the firstborn, if they bought that pair of turtle doves, there, in the temple complex, even though those small birds were worth together only about a nickel, they could pay in today's prices as much as \$4. That's how steep these charges were in the temple. And before they could buy the birds, by the way, they may have had to change their local currency into the Tyrian coinage that was required by temple officials for paying the temple tax. Add another 12.5%, which was the exchange fee that was charged by the moneymakers to convert that foreign coinage into the required coinage and you get the picture. The temple was big business. The priests, the Sadducees, the Herodians, they were all making money off of those who, get this, were required by the Law of Moses to offer sacrifices at the temple to pay the

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temple tax. So it's no wonder in what Bret read in Isaiah Chapter 9, that God says, at the end of that chapter, after giving good news, at the end of the chapter, "I'm going to judge you." It's no wonder that this incited the indignation of Jesus. In anger, Jesus came in and cleared out the animal vendors, the money changers, out of the temple and he did twice in his public ministry, once in the beginning and once at the end. Because they turned the house of God, which is supposed to be a house of prayer for all the nations, for all people, they turned it into a den of robbers.

Believe me, none of that was lost on these shepherds. These are working-class guys. They know the deal. Even though their own industry was a part of the of whole temple racket, they knew what was going on. They worked for a living after all. They're at the beginning of the supply chain, so they knew the corruption of the temple officials. They knew the collaboration with Herod. They knew the business relationships that had been created as some guys got contracts and other guys got shoved out. They saw the business relationships and the collaboration of the tax collectors, the money changers, the animal vendors and on and on there. The whole system depended on the people's

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religious fidelity, following the law of God. And that required shepherds to provide lambs for sacrifice. That's not an indictment, by the way, against the law of God. It's not the law of God that gave rise to the corruption. It's just another illustration of man's sinfulness, to pervert all that's good and holy. Unintentionally, without their own involvement, really, the shepherds found themselves complicit in this corrupt system. Even if they didn't agree with it, they were a part of it. But they were at the purest end of the supply chain, they're at the beginning. They just raise the sheep; then they sold the sheep; they sold the wool; they sold the lambs. Just a hard working group of men trying to make a living providing for their families, which is all a good, good thing. The shepherds may have not registered high on the social scale throughout the land of Israel, but they did make an honest living. They did contribute to society. They were involved in noble work.

It's to these men that God sends a very, very important messenger; look at verse 9, "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." It's not hard to see how sudden and how shocking the contrast is here, right? Have you ever been in a

really, really dark room? Your eyes are completely adjusted to the dark, and all of a sudden someone flips on a bright light. It's blinding, isn't it? You wince and you, you shut your eyes. It's painful even, sometimes. Imagine these shepherds, they're sitting around after a hard day's work, it's nighttime, it's cold. They're gathered maybe around a fire, maybe making plans for tomorrow. They're talking about family, probably talking a little politics as guys tend to do. After all, this Roman census had been the cause of a, a lot of strangers to come into town. And all of a sudden, an angel of the Lord appeared to them. This is shocking. The Greek indicates that the angel stood by them, right next to them. The Greek scholar A. T. Robertson says, "the angel stepped by their side." That's how he puts it. Now, keep in mind the shepherds are here keeping watch, right? They're looking out for threats whether they be animals or bandits or something like that, and suddenly, there's an intruder not only in the camp, but right next to them; standing right there. That had to arouse the adrenaline somewhat.

But before the realization of the angel's presence can settle in, they're engulfed in blazing light. Their pupils are opened to let as much light in as possible, and that means as

the glory of God surrounds them, their retinas are seared by this blinding light. No wonder they're filled with great fear, obviously. Not only were they startled by the sudden appearance of a stranger in the camp and right next to them, by the way; not only are they blinded in his presence by this light, now they're terrified as the spotlight of divine glory shines with brilliant, searching light on their quiet, peaceful night, putting an end to that. They've been invaded here by the divine presence.

I should say this, Contrary to popular opinion, contrary to all the contemporary myths about how warm and comforting it is to be in the presence of God, you can see here and from other passages of Scripture, this is an absolutely unsettling experience. The text says they were filled with great fear, literally, "They feared a great fear." That's the literal translation. They were terrified. This is absolutely traumatic for them. At this moment, it was something that they hoped would end, not something that they were eager to repeat or continue for a long period of time. Somebody turn off the light!

This is the third of three angelic appearances in the infancy narratives. It follows a similar pattern as the previous two. The first one was when Gabriel appears to Zechariah in Luke 1:8 to 23. We talked about that. Then to Mary in Luke 1:26 to 38. There's a sudden angelic manifestation that causes fear. And then Gabriel commands both of them, Zechariah and Mary, he says, "Don't fear, I come in peace." And then he makes his announcement; then he gives a sign. It's repetition of that same pattern here, which leads a number of commentators to believe that this unnamed angel of the Lord is Gabriel. Back in Luke 1:11, the angel is called, an angel of the Lord, there as well. But then in verse 19, he gives his name. It's Gabriel. We understand that. So, it may well be Gabriel who visited the shepherds here in Luke 2:9, as well. But there are a number of significant differences between those visits and this one, which makes us wonder if this angel of the Lord, wonder if it's not someone else.

Whether or not we can arrive at a precise identity of the angel, that's really beside the point. What we're meant to see here are all the marks of personal involvement from God himself as he visits. Notice that unlike Gabriel's first two appearances,

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this angel arrived surrounded by the glory of the Lord. Surrounded, this is none other than the Shekinah glory of the Lord, glory of God. It's the same glory that covered Mount Sinai in devouring fire. It's the same glory that filled the tabernacle in Exodus Chapter 40. This Shekinah glory was the visible manifestation of God's essence. It was his character. And the light represented his holiness, his righteousness, his purity, his truth. It's that same glory that filled the temple that Solomon built, as a house for the ark of the covenant, which was the symbolic presence of God. It was the same Shekinah glory that appeared to Ezekiel when he prophesied in Babylon. You see that in Ezekiel Chapter 1; amazing, amazing sight that defies description. This is the glory, by the way, in Ezekiel's prophesy that had departed from the Jerusalem temple because of Israel's sin. The glory had not returned to the land of Israel ever since it departed during the days of Israel's divided kingdom when all its leaders, all its shepherds were utterly corrupt. God had written 'î-*kābôd* all over the nation. 'î-*kābôd* is a term, *kābôd* is the Hebrew word, glory. And it kinda has the, conveys the idea of weightiness, gravity, the, 'î-, in front of that *kābôd* has the effect of negativizing that word, so no glory. God had written, no glory, across the nation of Israel as he removed the manifestation of his glory and his light.

The glory had departed, and it had not returned until this moment, until right here, now. To these humble shepherds, the glory of the Lord has appeared again. God returned. So, God's direct involvement, that's what we're meant to see here. That's what we need to focus on. His involvement is further confirmed in verse 13, where we read, "Suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising," whom? "God." The focus is on him again. Then after the host receded back into heaven, verse 15 says the shepherds were talking to one another and they said, Hey, let's go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that happened, "which the Lord has made known to us." Notice it's not what the angel has made known, but "what the Lord has made known to us." Mary, when she talked about Gabriel's visit, she made a distinction between Gabriel and the Lord in Luke 1:38. She said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." She distinguished between Gabriel, who had visited her from the Lord who had sent him, but these shepherds, they don't do that. They've understood this whole experience is an encounter with God himself.

So what if this is Gabriel, which it may be? He's incidental to them in their own mind. I don't want to be too dogmatic here, but from a strictly grammatical point of view, there is no rationale in the Greek grammar here for making a distinction between this angel of the Lord and the same angel of the Lord who appeared in the Old Testament. The angel of the Lord who appeared in the Old Testament was called *the* angel of the Lord, a definite article. Those were theophanies, those are the visible manifestation of God himself. And in many cases, they were christophanies, like a pre-incarnate appearance of the second person of the Trinity. So this angel of the Lord, while it may be Gabriel; it's possible, this is a manifestation of God himself visiting, standing by. As I said earlier, the dramatic visitation doesn't focus on the identity of the angel, though. It's the bright glory of the Lord that dominates this scene that totally floods out and eclipses everything else. It's the presence of God himself that, that heightens the significance of the words that are about to be spoken.

The scene was set for us earlier when Luke recorded Zechariah's prophecy, Chapter 1 verses 78 to 79, which said, "The sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who

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sit in darkness and in the shadow of death.” Bret read something earlier out of Isaiah 9, “light is coming to those in darkness.” And what’s pictured here when the glory of the Lord shines around these shepherds is the trauma of God’s holiness. Just as physical light hitting our retinas in full force on a dark night would cause searing, blinding pain, divine truth hitting our minds, our consciences, our lives, it can cause the very same kind of trauma. Isaiah 6:5, Isaiah said this, “Woe is me!” when he saw the glory of the Lord in the temple. “Woe is me, for I am undone; I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell among a people of unclean lips, for my eyes have seen the king, the Lord of hosts.” The blazing light of God’s holy truth, it can burn at first exposure, cause turmoil.

It can bring difficulty, but that’s at first exposure. As our eyes become adjusted to the light, we learn to see again. Our mortal flesh, for our mortal flesh, holiness hurts until God heals us. Isaiah continues describing the scene in verse 6. It says, “Then one of the seraphim.” Seraphim is a word that means, literally, burning one. One of the burning ones, a special class of angels, one of the burning ones “flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar.

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And he touched my mouth and said: ‘Behold, this has touched your lips,’ and, “your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.’” Can you imagine? A searing pain coming from a burning coal that is so hot that a seraphim, a bright burning one, has to take with tongs from the altar, it’s so hot, even he doesn’t hold it. He touches one of the most sensitive parts of the body, the lips, filled with nerves that are designed by God to experience and detect sensations of hot and cold and pull away from things that are hot. This seraph, this burning one, touches the burning coal to the lips. That, beloved, is the pain of atonement. That is the pain of holiness. And as our eyes become adjusted to the light of holiness, we also become accustomed to the burning fire of holiness. We don’t want to flee, for all of us who’ve been drawn near, by God, we don’t want to flee anymore, we want to draw near. And that’s why when Isaiah heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send? Whom will go for us?” What was his response? “Here am I! Send me!” Send me! God was gracious in providing atonement for Israel’s sin, for Isaiah’s sin personally, making him a fit vessel to become his prophet. Folks, that is grace. That’s as significant as what we’re seeing right here as well.

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This is very, very significant. Our God is both holy and transcendent. At the same time, he's merciful and immanent. Though he's high above us, he draws near to us. We couldn't reach him; he has to come to us. And here, the transcendent God has drawn near to visit these common shepherds, just simple guys hard-working. Though they are simple guys, he's come close to them. He involves himself personally with them. He draws near to make this first Gospel announcement. And what we're seeing here is God as the first evangelist. These shepherds, they've been blinded by the light of God's glory. They're fully awake now, though. And they're ready to hear God's Gospel.

So look at the second point, verse 10, an ecstatic proclamation. "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.'" Look at the contrast there from verse 9 to verse 10. It hits us immediately. The shepherds feared a great fear; that's the most literal translation of the Greek. And the angel says, Fear not, or Stop fearing because I don't want you to fear a great fear because I'm bringing you good news of great joy. There's a contrast there between great fear on

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the one hand, but let's put that aside because there is a great joy that eclipses it, that sends it away. The first command here is for calm. Isn't that kind of God? Fear not: It's a tender indication of the tender mercy of our God, like it says in verse 78, in Chapter 1 verse 78 or, as Mary said in Chapter 1 verse 50, "His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation." Listen, it doesn't matter who you are, for those who fear the Lord, God will draw near to calm your fear. He'll draw near to overcome inherent weakness; to overcome blinding, confusing sinfulness; and he'll communicate with us. This is yet again a dramatic indication of the heart of our God. He cares.

That translation of the verb, I think I told you this last week, that verb, "I bring good news," single word in the Greek, just one word, *euangelidzo*, which means, I preach the Gospel. I proclaim good news. This here, like I said, is a record of the first evangelism encounter in the New Testament, and it's coming from Heaven, evangelizing common shepherds. You hear people all the time talking about strategies for evangelism. Today you hear them talking about going into major population centers, those places that are most strategic, evangelizing the powerful, the wealthy, the influential. There was actually a church that was

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looking to hire me as their pastor, and as I went in to find out about the beginning of their church, they said, Yeah, we have actually, we met, our first meeting was in a country club where we charged everybody \$100 a person to get in and they had to agree to provide a certain amount of money. We, so we invited all the wealthy, the influential, and the powerful of our city so that we could form this church and reach and be significant and strategic and influential. So I said, You mean to tell me that you began your church in direct violation of James, who says, "Show no favoritism?" They kind of looked down and that was over. After all, if it's influential people who get saved that's what they were reasoning, they can use their influence to get a whole bunch of people saved. We can use the money, we can use the influence, we can use the power.

Listen, that denies the condition of every sinner, poor and rich and everybody in between. It denies the condition of sinners, who are completely dead before God. We don't target certain people. What do we do? We cast the seed on all kinds of ground because we don't know whom God has chosen. That's the second thing; it's, it denies God's sovereignty in salvation. We can't approach people with a strategy like that. The Gospel is

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for all people, great and small. And we see that because God, when he first preached the Gospel, God himself manifesting his glory, his Shekinah glory, returning to Israel and by the way, it wasn't to the temple in Jerusalem, it was to the true city of David, Bethlehem, a no-name town by that time. He came to lowly, common, uninfluential shepherds, who were in the insignificant, the low-population village of Bethlehem. Why? Because God absolutely delights to glorify himself, to put his own power on display by working through what men consider weak, insignificant, base, lowly. Kind of like working through all of us, right?

In fact, notice that very connection between verse 10 and verse 11. There in verse 10, "Good news of great joy for" whom? "all people," right? And indicated most immediately in verse 11 by, "For unto you," right? That is, even unto you lowly, common shepherds. Shepherds aren't family. They aren't influential, they're not related to Joseph and Mary. They're not significant. They're not influential friends. They're not even named in this text. They have no claim whatsoever on God. They have no claim on this baby. They have no claim on the news about him. And yet,

God tells them such a gracious message: This Savior was born for them.

Don't miss the personal element here; personal element featured in the previous two birth announcements, as well. Zechariah learned about his son, that he'd be named John. And then Mary learned about her son. He'd be named Jesus. Here, the shepherds don't learn his name. They'll get to that in time. Here, they learn about the significance of who he is. And then they go to visit him. Then they go to see him. Then they go to meet him and to see him personally. But the entire focus of God's Gospel announcement, to them anyway, is on the significance of this baby. Look at verse 11, First he's born, which means what? He's human, right? He comes like everybody else, he comes into the world, everybody else since Adam and Eve. He's comes into the world through a womb, through a mother's womb, in the natural way of birth. He's swaddled in bands of cloth and he's lying helplessly there in a manger. It's the way we're all brought into this world, all of us dependent, all of us human, all of us weak.

But secondly, he's born this day. The shepherds would not have known this, but the word there, today, or this day, it's *semeron* in the Greek. That word shows up as a motif in Luke's Gospel to indicate fulfillment. The next time, I won't go through all of them, but the next time the word shows up is in Luke 4:21, and Jesus had just read in that context from Isaiah 61 verses 1 and 2. And he refers to himself in that passage and then he says this, "He rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of everyone in the synagogue focused on him. And he began to say to them," today, 'today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'

The significance of this birth that God is preaching to the shepherds is in his humanity, first of all; also his prophetic fulfillment and then third, in his connection to David. This is the city of David, after all. These shepherds recognized the difference. David was the local boy, the hometown hero, so they didn't ascribe the city of David to Jerusalem; they knew it was Bethlehem. That was Bethlehem's claim to fame. This is the city of David. They probably had little plaques, little statues, baseball trophies, all that kind of stuff in town. So, when they said, verse 15, "Let's go see," you know where they didn't go?

Jerusalem. They didn't go to Jerusalem. They went to Bethlehem, directly there to find the child. He's connected to David.

Fourthly, in this announcement in verse 11, he is born for them as a Savior. A Savior. Which what? Indicates the grace of God, right? It indicates his tender mercy, and it also means, by implication, if he is a Savior and it's a Savior sent to them, guess what? They're in some sort of danger. The shepherds need to be saved from something. They require saving, but what's out in front? God has made provision for them in this child with his birth.

Fifth, he's born as the Christ. That means anointed one. He's been anointed. He is the Messiah. Again, that connects him with prophecy. Again, it connects him with David, but it also points to something in his essence. This is a royal person. This is no ordinary baby. This is the promised king of Israel. This is one who ushers in renewal, ushers in all the restoration promises, all the prophecies about the millennial age of Israel. This is the one before whom the entire world will bow and pay homage. This is the one who commands the allegiance of every king and

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every subject from every corner of the earth from every kingdom on the globe. This is the significance of this great news of great joy.

The humanity, the fulfilled prophecy, the Davidic Dynasty, the tender mercy, the Messianic prophecy and finally, sixth, his sovereignty. He is Lord. He is Lord: The Lord. Now, it's the glory of the Lord that appeared to the shepherds, verse 9, and the shepherds, when they went away in verse 15, they acknowledged the Lord is one who had revealed something to them. Here the Savior is the Lord: The Lord. This here is at least a subtle emphasis on the Savior's divinity, but definitely an emphasis on his sovereignty. This is no ordinary man. What started with normal humanity has escalated with each subsequent term to reveal his full divinity. In fact, the bookends are his essence. Human nature, divine nature start to finish, this is the person of Christ. Absolutely remarkable. But listen, none of the significance of this newborn person would matter at all to them without the addition of those first two words at the beginning of verse 11, "To you." To you, this proclamation of good news of great joy is for all people, rich and poor, great and small, white collar, blue collar, shepherds and princes, all

kinds of people. But for these Bethlehem shepherds, they got the message. This Savior was born for them, and he was born for them personally. It's the Gospel, isn't it? It's the Gospel that we need to be sharing to everybody without discrimination, without favoritism. God has set an example here for us. God gave these shepherds an incredible announcement about something new, something unprecedented, something never before seen. The Son of God, the fulfillment of Davidic promises, the hope of Israel, the entire world, this person has come in human flesh.

The next verse anticipates the shepherds' eager desire because they want to meet him. So point number three: a didactic verification. A didactic verification. By didactic, I mean instructive. This verification, this sign is instructive to them. This sign has something further to teach the shepherds. Verse 12, "This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." Again, notice the tender mercy of God in the kindness of his condescension and his grace. Not only has a Savior been born for you, but, verse 11 there's a sign for you. Another thing to notice, this announcement anticipates a believing response. "You will find a baby," future tense. That prediction would be

fulfilled in just minutes as the shepherds immediately decided to leave the sheep behind, find the child in Bethlehem. Sheep? What sheep? What do I do for a living? I don't even know. What's my name? I don't know, it's not in the text. After, after what the shepherds just heard, this, this human baby who fulfills prophecy, who saves sinners, who descends from David, who's anointed by God to be Israel's king, who's incarnated as the sovereign Lord, one question: What in the world is he doing in a feeding trough? An animal's feeding trough, really? That the best we could do?

As the shepherds go, they find a baby swaddled, lying in a manger. A strange enough predicament for any human baby, any newborn baby. But as they find that strange predicament, they can be assured that this baby is the very one of whom the angel spoke. It's such a stark contrast, isn't it, to how a king should enter the world? He identifies with the lowly. Being born in a feeding trough, and he identifies at the end of his life with sinners being crucified between two thieves.

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One of the early theologians of the Christian Church, Saint Jerome, he's known for translating the Bible into his native tongue of Latin, called the Latin Vulgate. Jerome was born in Italy in the year 347. His early days were spent in licentious behavior, frivolous pursuits, but after his conversion, he devoted himself completely and totally and utterly to the Lord and his work. He loved the Lord. He loved God for saving him, and he just wanted to devote himself to God's holiness and pursuing his holiness. And that pursuit of holiness informed a scholarly mind that God had given him. I mean he could've, think about it, he would have wasted that scholarly mind on frivolous living, but he devoted it to the Lord's service. He pursued diligent, diligent study, a hard, hard worker to understand Scripture. He spent time learning in Antioch and Constantinople and finally Rome before he relocated to Palestine for good. His residence in the Holy Land. You know where he lived? Bethlehem. That's where he did most of his translation work including the Latin Vulgate. He wrote commentaries; he interacted with the most significant theological minds in all of Christendom and most notably Saint Augustine. He died in Bethlehem in the year 420. But reflecting on this scene in the infancy narrative of Luke's Gospel, Jerome wrote these words, very insightful, he said "Jesus found no room in the holy of holies that shone with gold,

precious stones, pure silk and silver. He is not born in the midst of gold and riches, but in the midst of dung, in a stable where our sins were filthier than the dung. He is born on a dunghill in order to lift up those who come to him from it.”

Jerome ended his thoughts in that section, quoting a verse from Psalm 113 mentioning the dunghill, and in the King James, it comes across. I’ll read just that section in context. It’s out of Psalm 113 verse 5 and following, “Who is like unto the Lord our God, who dwelleth on high, who humbleth himself to behold the things that are in heaven, and in the earth! He raiseth up the poor out of the dust, he lifted up the needy out of the dunghill; that he may set him with princes, even with the princes of his people. He maketh the barren woman to keep house, to be a joyful mother of children. Praise ye the Lord.” And Amen. Who, indeed is like the Lord our God, and what could we do after all this but praise him? That’s what the angelic host decided to do.

Notice verses 13 and 14, our fourth point: An angelic affirmation. An angelic affirmation. “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!'" It's difficult to see how this scene could be any more dramatic even up to this point, but something happens here that takes it even beyond all pale of comparison. It's something that's both paradoxical and at the same time prophetic and prayerful.

First the paradox. Our translations call this company of angels "a multitude of the heavenly host and that's accurate, it's dead-on accurate biblically, but it's a bit misleading for us if we're unfamiliar with the term and the significance of the word, host. Folks, let me tell you, these are the ranks of an angelic army. That's what the hosts are, that's what the hosts of heaven are, that's what the host is. They're soldiers who carry out divine orders, executing the will of the commander of the heavenly host. The Greek word there is *stratia*, which is a military unit. And it's one massive regiment of the armies of the living God. As one commentator put it, "this army is huge, it's regimented and it's marshaled for the praise and purposes of God." Therein lies the paradox. When is the last time you heard of an army, assembling, lining up for muster to declare peace

instead of going to war? Look at verse 14 again, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”

This is prophetic also. Not necessarily in the predictive sense, a foretelling sense, even though there will come a day when this verse is consummated completely, fulfilled completely. But rather, it's prophetic in an exhortative sense. This is a prophetic, exhortative call for men to praise God on the one hand and on the other hand, it's a prayer for God to grant peace on earth. Notice two stanzas in verse 14, they're not exactly parallel, but in those stanzas, several pairs that correspond to one another. Notice the terms, glory and peace; God and men, and in the highest on the one hand, and on the earth. So, there's glory to God, there's peace to men, there's glory in the highest and then there's peace on earth.

We don't have time right now to pack, unpack all the significance of what we're seeing here, but just a few comments, just briefly. The angelic armies of heaven are first calling for these shepherds and by extension, all of mankind to join them in

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giving glory to God. There needs to be a, a verb understood there. Basically, it's the verb, let it be, as in "let there be glory to God in the highest." It's an imperative; it's assumed and it's calling people to praise God. Let glory be to God in the highest. "The heavens," already, "declare the glory of God and the skies proclaim his handiwork." The created order is already doing what it's supposed to be doing, what it's designed to do, exactly what it's designed to do in giving glory to God. The angels in heaven, they give glory to God.

Jesus said we should pray this way, "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." The will of God, the glory of God is already being proclaimed faithfully in heaven, but needs to be done so here on earth as well, right? We need to be drawn into that. He's already glorified by all the angels in heaven, Revelation 7:11 to 12. "All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshipped God, saying, 'Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.'"

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So the angels here in Luke 2:14, they are calling on us, calling on these shepherds, and by extension all of mankind, to give glory to God. Give glory to God in the highest. Ascribe to him the glory due his name. Let your praise arise to God. That's exhortative, that's prophetic. It's calling men to give glory to God, the glory due his name. But it's also prayerful, invoking God for the blessing of peace to descend, to come down from heaven and descend on all mankind, and the peace starts with the cessation of hostility between God and man. It's a hostility that the angels have observed among us since the beginning of time, since the fall of mankind in the Garden of Eden. Listen, these angels are warriors, right? They're soldiers, they're ranks of the heavenly host. No one like soldiers can comprehend the longing for peace. No one like soldiers can really appreciate the reality of peace. No one like soldiers can really appreciate what it takes to accomplish peace and keep peace and maintain peace, none like a soldier. These angelic warriors know what peace demands. It'll come in the most profound form of warfare, overcoming the most, the greatest opponents; it will win the greatest victory, and it will win it permanently forever. Paradoxically, that peace will be won on a cross. The cessation

of hostility, the laying down of arms, that's only the beginning of peace. Peace on earth indicates the fullness, the fulfillment of divine blessing showered down from heaven to communicate all the grace, all the mercy, every provision of joy on mankind. That's what the angelic *stratia* pray for; that's what they entreat God to accomplish. That's their prayer.

But they defer, here, notice, to his sovereign will. They acknowledge his peace is upon not all, but upon those whom he chooses. It's that final term in the text. In the Greek text it's *eudokia*. In our translation it's, "Peace among those with whom he is pleased." Another way to translate that term, "Peace upon those to whom he is pleased to grant it." Whenever this term is used in Luke's Gospel, 2:14 here, 3:22, 10:21, 12:32, term's always referring to God's pleasure; his pleasure. The idea here is that God's peace rests upon those whom he has chosen in accordance with his good pleasure, which is exactly what Ephesians 1 tells us. This is a strong, strong affirmation from the angels, from whom you'd expect it, on the absolute sovereign prerogative of God. It's a reality they experience themselves personally and rejoice in, every single moment in Heaven and they want that peace to come to earth.

Well, the sovereign will works through, as we know, individual choices of human beings. We've already seen that in our text in Quirinius, in Caesar, in Joseph and Mary. We're about to see it in the shepherds as they decide to go, leave their flocks and seek the sign they've been given. There's a lot more to unpack in this amazing section, as well. We've only scratched the surface of these verses, but we'll have more to say about these truths over the next few weeks because we get to celebrate Christmas together.

But that, folks, that's how God evangelized these shepherds. This is how he preached the Gospel to them, and guess what? It worked. What's the message for us? These shepherds, you know who they represent? They represent us. At this point in the story, they haven't seen Christ for themselves. They haven't met him personally. And even when they do, they have to take it on faith that this baby is indeed going to grow up into the one that's described in verse 11. That he's going to grow up to be the Savior, who is Christ, who is Lord. He didn't look like that now, though. For now, they must simply believe the report. They must

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believe the message of the Gospel. That's us, isn't it? That's the position we're in, as well. We've put our faith in a message. We trust these words that are printed in our Bibles. We believe these words to be the words of an eternal, living God. It's a holy Bible. It's a book like no other book, written by an author like no other author, a divine perfect author with no error; revealing a message from heaven itself. Yes, this message is imbedded in real history. It involves real facts, real people, actual places, historical events, a socio-cultural circumstance and setting for every story. There are physical geography marks of personal history, imperial history. But at the end of the day, we haven't seen any of this for ourselves, have we? Our hope is anchored to the report. It's anchored to the divine revelation. It's anchored to the account that we believe has come directly from God about how all this happened. This provokes us to ask questions of: Do we believe or do we not believe? If we believe, do we demonstrate that by obedience, by passionate, zealous obedience and worship of God? Do we believe it or not?

That's why Peter opened his epistle this way, this is how we'll close. As you listen to this, think about all we've learned this morning in what Peter has said here. He says at the

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beginning of his epistle, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!" Because, "According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you've been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. And this though you have not seen him," just like the shepherds, "you love him. Though you do not see him now," like the shepherds, "you believe in him and you rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory," just as was announced to the shepherds, good news of great joy for all the people, "rejoice with a joy that is inexpressible, filled with glory obtaining as the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls."

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You see, we're in the same situation as the shepherds. So the question is, will you believe the report you've just heard? Blessed on those who do. Let's bow in prayer.

We give thanks to you, Father, for such a beautiful text of Scripture, an amazing condescension on your part to come down to shepherds in a pasture among some sheep to announce to them good news of great joy, which will be for all the people, but particularly, "for you a Savior is born this day in the city of David who is Christ the Lord." That, for you, is such a precious promise coming from you because we belong in that category, unnamed, unknown, no claim on you, no right, strangers from the covenants of promise, and yet you bring us in through Jesus Christ.

We're grateful to you because you have become our Savior through Christ; you've delivered us from all of our sin and forgiven it. You've set us free from tyranny of sin and Satan. We're so grateful for that. And as we celebrate this Christmas season, let us not forget that message. Let us proclaim that message of salvation from sin, salvation of judgment, salvation

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from your wrath, that people could come to know Jesus Christ, that they could go, like these shepherds longed to do, go and see him personally. We are thankful that you have drawn us into a personal relationship with you, Father, through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. It's in his name that we pray. Amen.