

How It All Began

Luke 2:1-20

Saint Paul's Memorial United Methodist Church
1001 W Colfax Ave., South Bend, Indiana 46616
December 24, 2017 — Christmas Eve
Pastor Tom Thews

Luke 2:1-20 (KJV)

¹ And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. ² (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.) ³ And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. ⁴ And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:) ⁵ To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child.

⁶ And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. ⁷ And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.

⁸ And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. ¹⁰ And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. ¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. ¹² And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, ¹⁴ Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.

¹⁵ And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us. ¹⁶ And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger.

¹⁷ And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. ¹⁸ And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds. ¹⁹ But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.

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In a child's letter to God: "Dear God, Did you think that Christmas would turn out like this when you started it? Love, Wendy, (Age 7)."

That is a very profound question. Did God foresee crowded malls, raucous office parties, people congratulating themselves on giving and receiving extravagant gifts — people acting much like Little Jack Horner sitting in a corner, eating his Christmas pie. You remember the rest of the poem, don't you?

“He stuck in his thumb and pulled out a plumb and said, WHAT A GOOD BOY AM I.” It’s difficult, isn’t it, to separate some of the gift-giving at Christmas from fragrant self-aggrandizement?

Did God foresee all that — and did He send His Son in spite of it all? That really tells us how much God loves us. So much of our current celebration of Christmas is so out of alignment with the spirit of that first Christmas. Let us simply savor this beautiful story for a few moments on this Christmas Eve. In the wisdom of God there are so many beautiful elements to this wonderful story. Before this special day slips away from us, let us consider some of these elements that are so precious, so meaningful.

LET’S BEGIN WITH THE HUMBLE COUPLE AND THEIR BABY.

Joseph and Mary, Joseph’s betrothed wife, make their way to Bethlehem to register in a census. This census was decreed by Caesar Augustus, emperor of Rome. The writers of Scripture want us to know, however, that Rome was but an unwitting instrument of God’s plan for the salvation of humanity. In Micah 5:2, there is a prophecy that reveals that Bethlehem would be the birthplace of the Messiah and so, thanks to this census, it was.

Bethlehem was a small town only 6 miles from Jerusalem. You could walk that distance if you needed to. Bethlehem had nothing to recommend it except that this is where the Messiah was to be born. Bethlehem means, “House of Bread,” so it is appropriate that He who would be the “Bread of Life” should be born there and placed in a feeding trough. The important thing is that Bethlehem was the “City of David,” and the Messiah was prophesied to be a descendant of David.

So Mary and Joseph make their way through the crush of people seeking a place in Bethlehem to stay for the night. Finding no proper place to stay, they take shelter in a stable. Probably a cave. And while they are there, their baby is born. There in the stench and unsanitary conditions of the stable lay the babe in the manger. This was quite obviously an insignificant incident to the world of that time, but for those who know that babe as their Savior, it was the most important event in the history of the world.

On a plaque marking Abraham Lincoln’s birthplace near Hodgenville, Kentucky, is recorded this scrap of conversation: “Any news down t’ the village, Ezry?” “Well, Squire McLain’s gone t’ Washington t’ see Madison swore in, and ol’ Spellman tells me this Bonaparte fella has captured most o’ Spain. What’s new out here, neighbor?” “Nuthin’ nuthin’ a’tall, ’cept fer a new baby born t’ Tom Lincoln’s. Nuthin’ ever happens out here.”

Well, the birth of Abraham Lincoln turned out to be a pretty significant event after all. Sometimes big things happen in small places. But, even Lincoln’s birth pales dramatically in comparison to the birth of the Son of God.

Nevertheless, at the time, most of the residents of Bethlehem would echo that refrain from Hodgenville: “nothing ever happens out here.”

However, something did happen in Bethlehem and the entire world was forever changed. So our story begins with this young family seeking shelter in a stable and a baby being born who would change the destiny of humankind.

THEN THE STORY MOVES TO A GROUP OF SHEPHERDS ON A HILLSIDE WHO ARE THE FIRST TO FIND OUT ABOUT THE BIRTH OF THE MESSIAH.

This certainly proves that God has both a sense of humor and a sense of irony. If there is a more humble occupation in the world than that of shepherding, I don't know what it is. Their role in life was to be guardians to a bunch of dumb smelly sheep. I doubt that any special training was required — just some common sense and a degree of courage. Only God would have so glorified such a lowly occupation.

Pastor Doug Goins paints a vivid picture of how shepherds were viewed in that day. He notes that “the Judean shepherds were the lowest of the low socially — common men, a despised class with a bad reputation. Shepherds were known as thieves because they were nomadic, and as they moved their sheep around the country, sometimes they got confused about what was ‘mine’ and what was ‘thine.’ They were all tarred with the same brush — untrustworthy, dishonest. They were not allowed to give testimony in a Jewish court of law. Their work made it impossible for them to observe the Jewish ceremonial laws and temple rituals, so they were considered religiously unclean and unacceptable.”

Another writer, Michael Frost, notes that “the term ‘sinner’ was employed by the religious authorities to describe several types of people who failed to maintain a conventional, acceptable lifestyle: tax collectors, prostitutes, lepers, Gentiles, and, of course, shepherds.” Then Frost adds this important observation, “It becomes obvious in any study of Jesus’ life and teaching that He had a strong preference for being with such people. It was rumored that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute. Certainly the disciple Matthew was a tax collector. Jesus touched and healed lepers and even valued the faith of a Gentile Roman centurion above anyone else’s in Israel. How fitting, then, that at His birth He should be attended by such ‘sinners.’” Those should be comforting words to anyone in this room who considers himself or herself to be a sinner — which at my last count, includes all of us.

Pastor and author Bruce Larson makes the interesting point that when it came to delivering the greatest message on earth, God chose amateurs and nobodies instead of professionals and VIPs. “The priests and religious classes were not the first to learn about the Messiah’s birth. One would think that they would be the ones with all the appropriate knowledge and social clout to interpret the message to the people. But God chose to share this message with the shepherds first, members of an outcast and untrustworthy caste. And that is how God chooses to operate even today.”

In that sense, these lowly shepherds give us hope. As Daniel J. Dyke reminds us, “From every standpoint, the shepherd was the least likely person to receive the announcement of the birth of our Lord. From every standpoint except one. From the heavenly standpoint, they were the most appropriate ones to receive the news of Christ’s birth. For the One coming into the world was the Great Shepherd, the Good Shepherd who would lay down His life for His sheep.”

Imagine that! God takes the lowliest of people and glorifies them. I wonder if that could happen to us? That God could take us in spite of our weaknesses and use us to His glory?

When they laid the first transatlantic cable across the bed of the Atlantic Ocean to Europe they wondered: What should be the first message to send over this cable to see if it is working? They chose a verse familiar to us all. They chose to send across that cable the words of the angels' song high above the field in which shepherds knelt in wonder that first Christmas: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men." What an appropriate message for all the world to hear.

Can't you imagine one of those shepherds sitting in a crowd of people who are world travelers? One man boasts, "I have seen the pyramids of Egypt." Another says, "I saw Caesar ride through the streets of Rome in all his splendor."

I wonder if the humble shepherd would dare speak up and say, "I beheld the King of Kings, the mighty God Incarnate, Savior of the World in the manger of Bethlehem."

That is the Good News for the day. Even the humblest of lives can be touched by the hand of God. That includes our life, of course, but it also includes the lives of the people we see and work with every day. Be careful this Christmas whom you shut out and ignore. Be careful whom you turn away from your door. Be careful whom you snub at school, in the neighborhood or on the job. Christmas teaches us that you never know. God chooses the strangest places and the most unlikely people to do His work.

The Christmas story teaches us that even the lowliest of persons has a place in God's kingdom. But there is one more thing about Christmas with which we need to deal.

IT IS THE ESSENTIAL MEANING OF THIS SACRED DAY. THROUGH THE BABE OF BETHLEHEM GOD HAS MADE HIMSELF AVAILABLE TO US ALL.

We no longer have to worship God from afar. He is now available to us in the person of Jesus Christ.

There is a significant truth there. Millions of people across the earth are celebrating Christmas this evening and all day tomorrow. Presents are being exchanged. Greetings are being extended. Perhaps even a few carols will still be sung. Of those millions, however, only a small percentage will make their way to a church to pay homage to the Christ child. Regretfully, however, an even smaller proportion than that will take the Christmas message into their hearts and lives.

It's so sad. We have available to us the majesty and glory of the eternal God. We have available to us an inward assurance and peace which extravagant gifts never produce. We can experience not only Christ's birth but our own re-birth as well — as new persons, Christmas persons. But only if we open our hearts to the Lord of Christmas.

Even the humblest people take on a new significance when touched by the hand of God. He is available to us all. But not if we stand at a distance and merely tip our hats. We must welcome His Spirit into our lives. He must become part of our very being. We must be able to say with St. Paul, “I live, but not I, but Christ Jesus lives in me (Galatians 2:20).”

Pastor Martin Niemoller affirmed this truth in Dachau prison on Christmas Day, 1944. You might recall that this servant of God was imprisoned by Hitler because of his continuing declaration of the Christian faith in the face of demands that he tone it down.

On this holy day he was permitted to hold services for some of the prisoners. Few of them were to emerge alive from their imprisonment; many of them had been tortured by their captors. Others would be tortured and die without doubt. What does he say to people living in a situation like that?

Niemoller preached on the text, “And His name shall be called Emmanuel, which means God with us.” His message was that they were not alone in their days of suffering and imprisonment. God was with them, even there, to comfort and strengthen them in persecution. They could be certain about this, he said, because in Jesus Christ, God is with us. That is a message we need to take into every prison, every nursing home, every hospice, every addiction recovery center in this land. We also need to take it into every home — from the finest mansion to the lowliest shack. Emmanuel, God is with us.

That’s what Christmas is all about. That is why we are here this evening — to affirm a message that is absurd to the world, but is the great objective truth that those of us who follow Jesus affirm. That God can touch ordinary people and turn their lives into something beautiful. Why? Because a baby was born in the little town of Bethlehem who is Emmanuel — God with us.

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