

Manger, Shepherds, and Angels
Luke 2:1–21

Turn to Luke 2 please. Our text has two announcements, and one birth. Two announcements, from two different rulers. Both were announcements for the whole world. The first announcement brought one humble group to Bethlehem, not a trip they asked for. The second announcement brought a different humble group to Bethlehem, a wonderful trip.

The two little groups met each other in Bethlehem and spoke together. They met around an animal feed trough, and a one day old baby was lying in the trough, wrapped in strips of cloth.

The first announcement was from Caesar Augustus, and the second announcement came from God himself. The first announcement was that everyone had to be listed so they could be taxed. The second announcement, from God through angels, was good news of great joy for everyone: a Saviour had been born that very day, Christ the Lord, in the city of David. The first humble group was Joseph and pregnant Mary. The second humble group was the Bethlehem shepherds guarding their sheep at night. Let's read.

Luke 2:1–21 - In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register.

So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those he favours."

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these

things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise the child, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he was conceived.

The Census and the Journey – Luke 2:1–3

“*This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.*” The Bible always ties God’s actions to real human history, to real places and real times. All the way through, the Bible tells us where things happened, and when they happened. This makes the Bible an entirely different kind of holy book than any of the others. Real history.

The writer Luke is particularly helpful. Apparently there was more than one census while Quirinius was governor of Syria. Luke wants his readers to know that this was the first census, so that his readers would know just when the Savior of the world was born. It was not once upon a time. It was “the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.” That tells us *when* they went to Bethlehem, and it also tells us *why* they went.

The Baby in a Manger – Luke 2:4–7

While they were there in Bethlehem, it says, the baby was born. No frills in that line. We sometimes add drama to this story and have Jesus born their first night in Bethlehem. But it does not say that. While they were in Bethlehem, that is all it says. Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months, so she’s at least three months pregnant when they travel, but it could be anywhere between three and nine months.

She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them. What kind of a place are we supposed to picture here? The commentaries puzzle over this. Are they staying at an inn, or are they staying at some other place? The traditional translation says that there was no room in “the inn,” and quite a few translations still read that way.

But the Greek word for “inn” is very general. It just means lodging of some kind. In Luke 22, we find the same word used for the room where Jesus had the Last Supper with his disciples. “Guest room” or “lodging” are also common translations. Every commentary that I read doubted that “inn” was the right translation.

Think about this: Joseph is going to his ancestral town. His family has lived there since King David was a boy, a thousand years earlier. Bethlehem is the last town in the world where Joseph needs an inn. That town is full of relatives. But he and Mary do need lodging.

In those days, a peasant house had a dirt floor, and they brought the animals into the house at night. The house would have a raised platform, and the people would live on this raised platform. So picture a simple home and a family living a simple life. They take Joseph and Mary into their home. There's room for Joseph and Mary to sleep on this platform, but where to put that baby? The manger is only a step or two away. So they wrap the baby up nice and snug, and put it in the manger, because otherwise there was not room for all of them.

It really does not matter if Joseph and Mary were at an inn, or in a home. But here is what happens: if there was no room in the inn, then we imagine an innkeeper who turned them away, or sent them into the barn. And then preachers like me talk about this poor innkeeper. How sorry he would be, if he knew who it was that he had turned away. And then we go to Matthew 25, where Jesus says, "I was a stranger and you took me in."

And all of a sudden the birth in the manger becomes sermon on hospitality to strangers, so we will not be like this innkeeper. This story often gets told that way. Not good, people. It is more likely that Mary and Joseph were in a peasant home with relatives, and that the relatives had been entirely hospitable.

I know that this is a rant, and I will stop soon. These things do irritate me. It never occurred to Luke the writer, when he wrote that Mary and Joseph putting Jesus in a manger because there was not enough room where they were staying, that he was teaching us to be hospitable to strangers. Hospitality is good. But it is not in our Scripture. If we are preaching what is not in the Scripture, then we are ignoring what is there. My rant is over.

Luke wrote our Scripture today in a peculiar style. The first seven verses, up to Jesus in the manger, are written with no drama at all. No expression. We can imagine all kinds of feelings and responses going on in Joseph and Mary, but Luke does not give us any of that. He just reports basic facts. Luke wants us to know why Mary and Joseph are in Bethlehem, and he wants us to know why the baby is nicely wrapped up in a manger. Then we're ready for the rest.

The rest of our Scripture, about the shepherds and the angels, is full of feeling and responses. Lots of drama! Lots of expression! Great fear, great joy, singing, amazement, treasuring in her heart, praise. But there is nothing like this in this first part, the verses that we've already covered. The shepherds and the angels are the high point of the story. The census and the birth and the manger get us ready for the juicy part, which what the angel tells the shepherds.

Angel Announcement to Shepherds: Good News of Great Joy – Luke 2:8–11

Why did shepherds get heaven's announcement? Why them? Who knows. Perhaps because David was a shepherd. Being a shepherd was menial work. David was the youngest of eight sons, so he gets the job his brothers don't want. He takes care of sheep while his brothers do important things. Being a shepherd was a job for those who could not get a good job. In the Bible however shepherds are treated honourably. Including this story.

An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and “they feared a great fear.” Middle of a dark night. Suddenly, no warning at all, they are in heaven’s floodlights. Terror! Absolute terror.

Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.

This is such loaded message. Good news. Great joy. They just finished “fearing a great fear,” and now they get a message that brings great joy. For all the people! Today, this very day. In David’s town. A Savior has been born to you. To you. Not just for *all the people*. This Savior is born to *you*. He is the Christ! He is Christ the Lord!

Isaiah 9 says, “*A child is born to us, a son is given to us, and the government will be on his shoulders.*” God tells Isaiah the prophet to write that down. “Isaiah, write down ‘a child is born to us, a son is given to us.’” Imagine Isaiah saying, “Lord, a baby? A baby boy? God, we have troubles, powerful and cruel enemies. We your people are a mess. We need help! You’re giving us a child? A baby boy?” God says, “Yes, I am, so write it down.” So Isaiah writes it down: “*A child is born to us, a son is given to us, and the government will be on his shoulders.*”

That is this angel’s announcement. “Today in David’s town a child is born to you, today a son is given to you, and the government will be on his shoulders.” *Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.* In a sense, the angel’s message summarizes all of Luke 1–2.

The Sign – Luke 2:12

This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. A manger is a humble resting place for a baby. You might think that a baby in a manger was being neglected. Just dump him in the manger. But babies like snug wrapping, and this baby is well wrapped. So it is in a manger, and being cared for. The angel tells them, “There is only one baby like that in Bethlehem. When you see a baby wrapped up and lying in a manger, that’s the one.”

Angel Choir: Glory and Peace – Luke 2:13–14

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those he favours.”

This is mind boggling. How many shepherds are out there together. Five or six? Enough so one or two could doze while others paid attention. They’re all paying attention now. After the one angel tells them the sign, a huge angel choir shows up and performs with all its might for half a dozen scruffy and startled shepherds. It staggers my mind. No one else gets any of this. But we do get the story.

Glory to God in the highest heaven. Heaven is so impressed with what God did that day. The first angel said, “*Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.*” Heaven exploded in praise to God when that child was born. The shepherds get to listen to the multitudes of angels give God glory for the birth of Jesus. *Glory to God in the highest heaven.*

On earth peace to those he favours. Glory to God in heaven, and peace to people on earth. “Peace” in the Bible means something a little different than what we usually mean. We think of “peace” as no war, no conflict between people, or else we think of peace as inner calm, a state of mind. “Peace” in the Bible means everything is going well. It means everyone is healthy and have all they need and all the basic relationships are good. God’s peace means every part of life enjoys God’s fullness. Everything is complete.

Here is a picture of peace from Isaiah 11. In Isaiah 11, this is the peace that Christ will yet bring:

*The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat,
the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them.
The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together,
and the lion will eat hay like the ox.
The infant will play near the cobra’s den,
and the young child will put its hand into the viper’s nest.
They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain,
for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.*

That’s peace. “Those he favors” means God’s covenant people, those who are his people, those he has chosen and brought near to himself. On earth, God’s peace to those he favours, to those he has brought near. *Glory to God in heaven, peace to his people on earth.*

The angel choir shows us how the angels respond to the baby Jesus. They are so impressed with God. Angel multitudes give God glory. And this is so good for God’s people on earth. This child will bring peace to God’s people on earth. The first angel said “good news of great joy.” The angel choir put that in one word: “peace.” Christ the Lord will bring God’s people peace, and that’s why it is good news of great joy.

Shepherds to Mary and Joseph and baby – Luke 2:15–20

It’s not clear how the shepherds were to find the baby, but they did. They found Mary and Joseph and the baby in the manger. Once the shepherds have seen what the angel told them they would see, the story pays no more attention to the baby Jesus. From then on, the angel message takes over. The shepherds told whoever was there what the angel had said, including the great angel choir.

The high points of today's Scripture are the angel announcement to the shepherds and then the angel choir singing in front of the shepherds. Our Scripture gives us three response to this. We get a bit of guidance in how to respond.

Amazement

“All who heard were amazed at what the shepherds said.” We've heard this story so many times. Do you still have any sense of amazement at what happened to those shepherds? I am fortunate. I lived in these verses this week, and the story amazed me again. If you're not amazed, that's fine; if you are, it is a gift to you.

Treasure these things and Ponder them

“Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.” We could learn from Mary. Let's treasure these things in our hearts. Make this story one of your treasures. The child was born to us, the son was given to us. A Savior has been born to us. The angel message is also for us. The angel choir sang also for us. We are here because we are among the people God favors, those he has brought peace.

Glorify God and Praise Him

“The shepherds glorified and praised God for all the things they had heard and seen.” We have been doing this during Advent and have done this today. We will not stop. That's what the multitudes of angels did, and then the shepherds too. Amen.

PRAYER: Father, thank you for the Savior that was born to us. Thank you for including the Gentiles in this good news. Thank you for what the angel told the shepherds. Thank you for the angel choir. Thank you that the shepherds went and checked it out. Thank you for giving us a window into the remarkable night. Amen.

BENEDICTION: To him who is able to keep you from falling, and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy—to the only God our Saviour be glory, majesty, power, and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.