

Good news of great joy that will be for all the people

Luke 2:1-20

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As we draw near to Christmas, with the Covid-19 pandemic hanging over us like a dark cloud, you may have thought about what kind of Christmas 2020 we are likely to have. We can say with certain confidence it will be a different one, although there are at least two things that will remain the same. They are diametrical opposed:

a) On the one hand, we live in a society that appears to make every effort to distract us from the real meaning of the Christmas celebrations. It emphasizes the celebration itself (parties, gatherings, presents, lunches and dinners with family and friends –all good in their proper context), making every effort to erase the ultimate reason for such celebrations. It's like attending someone's birthday party with an attitude of total indifference towards the person whose birthday it is! We can be certain, unfortunately, that this will be the same this Christmas, as every effort is made to take Christ out of Christmas.

b) On the other hand, the Christmas message has stood as a beacon of hope to men and women for the last couple of millennia. We can also be sure, most fortunately, that this will be the same this Christmas. Let us move beyond the outward trappings of Christmas and remind ourselves once again this morning what lies at its core.

But, first, a word of caution. How many times have you listened to the reading from Luke 2:1-20? If we are honest with ourselves, we must admit we are prone to switch into the “overfamiliar”, “heard it all before” mode. This is a dangerous place to be, as there is a greater risk of being taken up with the outward trappings of Christmas, or taken up by our responsibilities, and we become careless, neglecting to center our thoughts and heart on the real meaning of Christmas.

So, if we have ever devalued it (however slightly), or neglected it (however briefly), forgotten it even, let us now center our thoughts and minds on the true and real essence of the Christmas story, as narrated by Luke in chapter 2, verses 1-20.

What is the general impression that comes over you when you hear this passage? There is quite a lot of movement, everybody is on the move! You may have noticed that Luke describes 3 distinct

journeys, and our objective this morning is to consider each one of them, for they point us to God, to his character and his interaction with humanity. These 3 journeys contain the essence of Christmas.

But before diving into these 3 journeys, we must first pause on verse 1: ***"In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world."***

As we know, the story is told by Luke, a man of considerable culture, a doctor by trade, and a historian who has done his homework and research. He roots his narrative firmly in world history and real events. This is an important fact we should not overlook, as it is not just a passing reference, it is absolutely fundamental in setting the stage for what Luke will then describe.

The story of Jesus' birth is set during the reign of one of the most powerful men of ancient history. Much could be said about him, but the following is sufficient: **a)** Following the death of his great uncle Julius Caesar, Gaius Octavius and two Roman generals split the Roman Republic amongst themselves and ruled as de facto dictators. **b)** After years of bitter rivalry and battles, Gaius Octavius became the sole ruler of the Roman world. **c)** His authority, political and administrative skills changed the chaos of that time in a dramatic way. Where there had been wars and economic collapse, destruction of wealth and the spread of poverty, Gaius Octavius brought peace, law and order and prosperity. He initiated an era of relative peace known as the *Pax Romana* (Roman Peace). **d)** He arranged for the Roman Senate to give him the title of Augustus, which means "exalted" and "sacred", up to then applied to holy objects or places. This is the title by which Luke refers to him: Caesar Augustus.

From historical records, therefore, we learn that the world Jesus was born into was living under the reign and authority of a political saviour, who had sent out word that everyone should go to his own city and be registered –a census for tax purposes! It was a very expensive business running, expanding and maintaining an empire!! Caesar Augustus, exercising his supreme authority by means of a decree, sets in motion the first of the 3 journeys described by Luke:

Joseph & Mary's journey (Luke 2:3-5)

So Joseph and Mary hear the emperor's order and set out on about an 80-mile trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem.

But careful here! We would do well to remember that this was not simply a journey caused by the historical circumstances of those days. Yes, Joseph and Mary carry out their civil duty, but there is a greater dimension to all this: Above Caesar Augustus and all earthly authority is God Almighty's word.

Many centuries before (around 700 years), God had announced through his prophet Micah that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, not Nazareth where Joseph and Mary lived:

"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times." (Micah 5:2)

Once again, God, as He had done in the past with Pharaoh (in the times of Moses) and Nebuchadnezzar (in the times of Daniel), just to mention a couple of occasions, engages with world

history to accomplish his sovereign purposes. Caesar Augustus had sent out his word, but a superior and vastly more authoritative word had gone out centuries earlier, and now the word of God was coming to pass, was being fulfilled. Caesar Augustus' word was subordinated to God's word.

This is part and parcel of the very essence of the Christmas message, that God, creator and sustainer of the universe, engages with his creation, governs world history, and will fulfill his purposes throughout the ages, according to his word. God, therefore, is faithful to his word, and let us never forget that! Don't let the lights and presents cloud our hearts and minds to this wondrous truth.

As we journey through times of uncertainty, anxiety, ill-health, pain, sadness, worry (for whatever underlying reason), dealing with breaking or broken relationships, let us hold fast to the glorious fact that God is in control not only of cosmic and world events alike, but is also in absolute control of our own personal and particular history, and He will be faithful to his word, to his promises. These are just a few of them:

- God's goodness: *"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."* (Romans 8:28)
- God's companionship: *"The LORD himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged."* (Deuteronomy 31:8)
- God's provision: *"And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work."* (2 Corinthians 9:8)
- God answers prayer: *"He will respond to the prayer of the destitute; he will not despise their plea."* (Psalm 102:17)

When you think of Joseph & Mary's journey this Christmas, remember: GOD has spoken and is faithful to his word.

The Angels' journey (Luke 2:8-14)

We now turn our thoughts and attention to the second journey, the Angels' journey. It is rather different to the first one. It doesn't cover a distance of 80 miles, it transcends time and space: It starts in a dimension foreign to us, then bursts right into our own world, and finishes back where it started, in heaven.

Have you ever come across someone who tells you they believe in God, have faith, but cannot bring themselves to believe the nativity story, and certainly not that stuff about the angels? They seem to believe certain aspects of the nativity narrative are there to embellish the story, to sprinkle some magic on it, for the benefit of children perhaps. Well, it is exceedingly interesting that part of the scientific community, very clever people using their God-given considerable intellect, have been for more than 50 years, and continue to do so, searching for signs of extra-terrestrial life, hoping to detect through radio waves and infrared impulses a message from intelligent beings –that must surely be out there, for it seems reasonable to postulate that in an expanding universe, surely we humans cannot be the only ones around.

It is very interesting indeed that when history records a message from an extra-terrestrial being, most people on this planet dismiss it out of hand as quite fanciful, a "once upon a time story". One

wonders whether the root cause for their unbelief, in spite of the evidence, is an unwillingness to face a message that affects them very personally indeed.

Luke informs us that angels, heavenly beings, made a cosmic journey to deliver an extraordinary message. Before we turn to the extraordinary message the angels bring, please note to whom it was first directed to: the shepherds, not to the big wigs of Jewish social and religious life:

“And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night.” (Luke 2:8)

Did you know that, in the culture of the time that Luke records history, shepherds were at the bottom of the Jewish social and religious hierarchy? They were social and religious outcasts. They were despised. Their occupation was considered menial, degrading and identified with thieves and cheats. They were not considered credible witnesses in judicial proceedings, the implication being that they were liars. They were not allowed to participate in Jewish religious ceremonies, for they were considered unclean. They were in the same category as tax collectors and lepers: outcasts of society.

It is important to keep this in mind, because it is not a minor historical detail in Luke’s narrative. He has included the shepherds in his nativity narrative because in selecting and setting out his material, he wishes to highlight the width and depth of God’s grace and mercy in choosing to reveal himself to outcasts, to sinners. Mark 2:17 records the very explicit words of Jesus: ***“I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”***

As we think of the shepherds then, we can’t but think that we were in a similar position. See what God thinks of us in our natural state: ***“We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way.”*** (Isaiah 53:6); and ***“Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior.”*** (Colossians 1:21)

We were outcasts, ***“living under the dominion of darkness”***, Col. 1:13 tells us. But there is hope! ***“The glory of the Lord shone around them”*** and the angels bring the shepherds –outcasts and sinners– a most extraordinary message, to them personally.

What is the message, or better still, who is the message?

As we saw earlier, Luke has set his nativity narrative against the background of the reign of Augustus Caesar, a political saviour who provided for the physical needs of his people: law and order, peace and prosperity –all good things which we are also happy to enjoy in our day and age, but which do not satisfy the deepest needs of humanity.

The good news (the gospel) the angels proclaim is that God has provided us with a Saviour far superior to Caesar Augustus. A Saviour that can satisfy humanity’s fundamental need, which is peace with God: ***“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests”*** –sing the angels before popping back into heaven.

Who is this superior Saviour, who has ***“called us out of darkness into his wonderful light”*** (2 Peter 2:9)? The angels bring a message from God and it has been revealed to us that the good news has

entered our world: the Word has become flesh. Let us remind ourselves of the of the inspired words of the writer to the Hebrews, and those of the apostle John too:

“In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.” (Hebrews 1:1-2)

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.” (John 1:1-2)

“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” (John 1:14)

These verses tell us that God had spoken many times in various ways (through the spoken word, through dreams, signs and symbols), but the culmination of God’s revelation of himself, of his mind and his purposes, the climax of his message to humankind, his final expression of self-revelation, his last **word** is his Son, who is ***“the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being”*** (Hebrews 1:3), and John refers to the Son as **the Word**, God himself.

Who is this superior Saviour? It is God in human form, ***“dwelling among us”*** to reveal himself to sinners so that they be saved and reconciled to him. That too is the essence of the Christmas message.

We have seen how the angels informed the shepherds that a Saviour has been ***“born to you”***, and also that John tells us the Word was with God, was God, ***“became flesh and dwelt among us”***. This small phrase ***“born to you”*** points us to another cosmic journey, but vastly superior to the angels’. Do the inspired words of Paul to the Philippians come to mind?: ***“Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death –even death on a cross!”*** (Philippians 2:6-8)

Our Saviour, **THE WORD**, came a long way to save us, to save you and me! Being in very nature God, he put aside his majesty, power, honor and riches untold, takes on human likeness and as servant walked the path of obedience all the way to his death on the cross. ***“But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed”*** (Isaiah 53:5). Can you think of a greater journey?

As we draw towards Christmas, may we allow the Nativity scene –***“born to you”***– to point us to the Cross –***“by his wounds we are healed”***. The Christmas message is that God has taken human form to reveal himself to sinners so that they may be saved and reconciled to himself.

When we think of the Angels’ journey this Christmas, remember: God has provided a Saviour, **the Word**, who has made his dwelling with us, and by his wounds we are healed.

The Shepherd’s journey (Luke 2:15-18 & 20)

The shepherds had just witnessed the most amazing sight and heard the most wonderful news. Now it was time to decide what to do with the message from “the Lord” (not “the angel”). They believed it and responded to it, and so started on their journey, a short one perhaps down to Bethlehem, but

one that had the potential to take them all the way to eternity, to the very presence of God, not just to the manger, but to the very presence of God once this short life is over.

What is our response to the Christmas message of salvation and reconciliation? What is our response to **THE WORD**? Will it lead us to belief, will it lead us to peace, will it lead us to *“praise and glorify God”*? Will our response lead us to *“spread the word”* as the Shepherds did? The only condition to share with others the Christmas message is to believe it! Let us prayerfully determine in our hearts to share with someone/some this Christmas.

When we think of the Shepherd’s journey, remember: God has spoken and He expects a response to the Word.

During these uncertain times and this atypical Christmas, may we draw comfort from the glorious fact that God is in absolute control of our own personal history and is faithful to his word. Let’s rejoice in the fact that God’s good news is God himself, the Word, our Saviour. May we also be challenged to respond to God’s word.

As we draw to a close, please allow me to bring the angels and the shepherds (let’s put ourselves in their shoes) together once again. The angels announced the birth of the Saviour, they knew that much, but let’s listen to the inspired words of Peter in his first epistle, 1 Peter 1:10-12:

“Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of the Messiah and the glories that would follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things.”

Think of it, the angels who had a very active part in the coming of the Messiah (Matthew 1:20, Luke 1:26, Luke 2:9, Matthew 4:11, Luke 22:43, Matthew 28:2, Luke 24:5) long to look attentively into these things!! What things? Well, what these verses mention: the great truths with respect to the sufferings of Christ, the glory which would follow them, and the nature and effects of the Gospel on the redeemed.

Since our salvation, and how it is accomplished, is of such importance as to merit the attention of angels, how much more should it merit our attention, the recipients of God’s grace through the sufferings of the Messiah.

The Lord our Saviour has set us on a journey, too, from earth to heaven: Once we *“were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds”* ... but now we are *“are reconciled”* (Col. 1:21-22) so that we may *“have the mind of Christ”* (1 Cor. 2:16).

How is your journey –more to the point, how is my journey going? Whilst on this journey we are requested to work out our salvation with fear and trembling!! There is work for us to do, not to earn our salvation, but because of it.

May God impress on our hearts the value of the Good News, may He enlighten our understanding to see the greatness of the privileges we have in being made the beneficiaries of it, and may our lives be changed accordingly.

Discussion questions:

1. What did you find most interesting from this sermon?
2. Why do you think people are missing the true “reason for the season” at Christmas?
3. What is special to you about the Christmas story?
4. This sermon spoke of 3 journeys. How is your spiritual journey going? What is going well? What do you wish was going better?
5. What do you need to remember from this sermon?
6. What do you need to do about that?
7. How can we pray for you?