

*Two men went to the train station with a friend. The train was late so they sat down for a cup of coffee while they waited. They talked and drank and forgot about the train. Suddenly they heard the last announcement – the train was departing. They all got up and started running as fast as they could. They ran down the tracks as the train was pulling out of the station. Two of the men made it to the last car, but the third man was just not fast enough and slowed to a stop and started laughing. An onlooker went up to the laughing man and said, “What are you laughing about? You just missed your train.”*

*“You’re right,” was the reply. “I did miss my train, but what’s so funny is that those two men who got on the train – had only come to see me off.”*

In some respects, I think many of us are just like this guy who missed the train – we can get so distracted and so absorbed in other things that we miss Christmas. Now we don’t miss the day, we don’t miss the *what*, but we miss the *why* – we miss the real meaning of Christmas.

We have been working our way through the first chapter in the Gospel of Luke, highlighting portions of the Christmas story – looking at the events leading up to that special day when Jesus was born. If you recall, we considered a birth announcement given by the angel Gabriel to Zacharias and Elizabeth, who being well past their child-bearing years, were going to have their first child – a miracle son named John, who would be the forerunner for Jesus.

Last week, we looked a second birth announcement given by the angel Gabriel – this time to a young virgin girl from the village of Nazareth named Mary, where she learned that God had other plans for her – plans that would dramatically change her life – as she would deliver her Deliverer.

This morning, it is my desire to take a traditional approach to the Christmas story, and to be completely honest with you, I’m a little stressed over doing this because the Christmas story is so familiar to everyone. If I tell you there was no room in the inn in Bethlehem – **is anyone going to be surprised?** If I tell you that Jesus was laid in a manger – a feeding trough for animals, **will that be breaking news?** No – everyone seems to know the birth story of Jesus, because every December, since 1965, in between stories of the “*Grinch Who Stole Christmas*,” “*Frosty the Snowman*”, and “*Rudolf the Red Nose Reindeer*”, we have heard from Linus who explains to Charlie Brown and to others the true meaning of Christmas as he tells the story from the King James version of the Bible.

*I want to play that movie clip for you. [Linus christmas story \(high quality\).mov](#) - Bing video*

Linus only read a portion of the Christmas story, but I want to share a little more with you this morning. So, turn with me to **Luke 2**, beginning with **verse 1**.

**<sup>1</sup>Now in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth. <sup>2</sup>This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. <sup>3</sup>And all the people were on their way to register for the census, each to his own city. <sup>4</sup>Now Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, <sup>5</sup>in order to register along with Mary, who was betrothed to him, and was pregnant. <sup>6</sup>While they were there, the time came for her to give birth. <sup>7</sup>And she gave birth to her firstborn son; and she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.**

I want to stop here for a moment, as there are a couple of observations I want to make before moving on. Once again, the writer drives home that this is not a fairy tale, it's not fictional, it's not a Golden Book story – it's historical – it's based on real historical facts. Luke tells us that Caesar Augustus, who was the nephew of Julius Caesar, was the Roman Emperor at the time who had ordered a census to be taken for the purpose of collecting taxes for Rome. This was done every 14 years, and in this case, each Jewish male had to return to the city of his father to record his name, his occupation, his property, and those in his family. So, this was a real account, with real people, at a real place, during a real time in real history.

So, at that time, Rome was ruling the known world, Caesar Augustus was the emperor, but make no mistake – God was always in charge working behind the scenes. Caesar didn't know anything about God, but he unknowingly becomes an instrument in God's hand, as God used Caesar's command to move Joseph and Mary some 80 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem to fulfill His promise that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. The prophet Micah spoke of this promise some 700 years prior, when he said,

***“But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity.” (Micah 5:2)***

So, Joseph and Mary get to Bethlehem to register for the census – just like so many others had done, and as a result, there was no place to stay. They traveled some 80

miles, either by walking or by a donkey, Mary is very pregnant, and there is no room for them anywhere. **Can you image the panic and the stress they were experiencing?** Joseph wants to take care of his new young bride, he's desperate to find a room, all the while Mary is doing her Lamaze breathing exercises – which I personally know don't work with kidney stones. It's completely useless.

Anyway, it had to be a frantic time trying to find a vacant room, but nothing was panning out – they were homeless, and tradition suggests they likely had to stay in a dark and dirty cave where animals were being sheltered.

Last week we talked about God's plan and one would think that with all this time to plan for the delivery of Jesus, at least 700 years according to the prophet Micah, God could have at least reserved one single room for them. Just one room. But no, that was not part of God's plan. Instead, it was as if God deliberately chose the humblest and lowest circumstances imaginable to bring His Son – the Son of God, into a world of people He desired a relationship with.

We are told, **“she gave birth to her firstborn son.”** That's it. I can't get over how the birth of Jesus – the Savior of the world is described in such a simple, humble, and understated way. **“And she gave birth to her firstborn son.”** No formal ceremonies, no glitter, no confetti, no marching bands, no parades, no toasts – nothing. No one in the city of Bethlehem knew that the Savior had just entered their world. No one – and it also appears that Mary had no one to help her either. There was no doctor, no midwife to assist with the birth, her mom wasn't there, nor were there any family or friends to support her. I assume Joseph was there, but he was about 14 or 15 years old, so I'm not sure what kind of help he really was for Mary. I say that because we are told it was Mary who wrapped Jesus in swaddling cloth, and it was Mary who laid Jesus in a feeding trough. But whatever the case may be, surprisingly, this is how the Son of God, the King of kings, the Lord of lords – the Savior, was to come into this world – not privileged, not pampered, but lowly and meek as one of us. This was God's surprising plan all along.

But the surprises were not over. Let's continue beginning with **verse 8**.

**<sup>8</sup>In the same region there were some shepherds staying out in the fields and keeping watch over their flock at night. <sup>9</sup>And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood near them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened. <sup>10</sup>And so the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people;**

**<sup>11</sup> for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. <sup>12</sup> And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” <sup>13</sup> And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly army of angels praising God and saying, <sup>14</sup> “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among people with whom He is pleased.”**

From a religious standpoint, from a cultural perspective – this seems all wrong. The news of Jesus’ birth was not shared with the religious leaders. It was not given to priests. It was not provided to the government officials – the heads of state. It was not given to the elite, to the wealthy, to the “Who’s Who” of Bethlehem – rather it was first given to shepherds.

Throughout Israel’s history, shepherding was a respected and noble profession. Abel was the first to have this job, followed by Abraham, and Isaac, Jacob, Moses and David – all significant figures in the Old Testament. In fact, God calls Himself the Good Shepherd, but by the time we come to the first century and this story, shepherding had lost its appeal and luster. Shepherds were now considered among the lowest class of people, the bottom of the social ladder – like tax collectors and lepers. They were the poor, the forgotten, the broken, the hopeless and the helpless – they were outcasts. The Talmud, which is a collection of interpretations from Jewish rabbis, says this: *“No help is to be given to heathen or shepherds.”*

Shepherding had changed from a respected family business to a despised occupation, and they were the last people you would expect God to take notice of. According to Jewish religious law, these men were considered unclean. Their line of work prevented them from worshipping at the temple and participating in their feasts and holy days because somebody had to be with the sheep 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. When everyone else was going to Jerusalem to make sacrifices at the temple or to participate in one of the annual feasts, they were out in the fields, watching over the sheep. Ironically, although they were providing sheep for sacrifices to worship at the temple, they themselves were not allowed to worship at the temple. They were unclean religious outcasts.

They were also social outcasts. They were transients, always moving from place to place to find good grazing pasture and water for the sheep. They were like gypsies and people were very suspicious of them, and if anything came up missing or something was damaged – it must be those shepherds who have moved into the area. They were considered untrustworthy and unreliable, in fact, their testimony was never allowed in court. They were religious and social outcasts, considered

habitual sinners, looked upon as anything but worshippers of God – and yet, God chose them to be the very first to hear this birth announcement from heaven, the greatest news ever given, that the Savior was born.

So, the shepherds are shepherding and poof, an angel unexpectedly appears, and **what do you suppose these guys are thinking?** Well, given their crude and rude reputation, they were probably thinking that one of them had really screwed up big time and God has sent an angel to take care of business. Someone has gone too far, someone is going to die, and they were terrified – but the angel tells them to calm down, to take a chill pill, and listen because he has some news for them. The angel tells them the Savior has been born in Bethlehem and they are given a sign as to where they can find Him. He is wrapped in swaddling cloth and lying in a feeding trough, and my guess is Jesus would be the only child that night lying in a feeding trough for animals. If you think about it, these shepherds, these social and religious outcasts, were given special permission to approach the holy of holies – a feeding trough, because the Son of God was laid in it.

Then if the appearance of one angel isn't enough, the place explodes with an army of angels, and the dark night sky is turned into a worship service as the angels praised God. To see what they saw and to hear what they heard had to be an overwhelming, mind-boggling, life changing experience for these shepherds. They were the very first to hear this great news.

I want to explore this great news given by the angels a little further, and I going to get some help from Linus.

**When we think of Linus, what comes to mind?** Linus is known for his faithful and trusty companion – his blanket. He goes everywhere with it, and over the course of time, as he has gotten older, his friends have tried to separate Linus from his blanket, but he just doesn't want to give it up – except in very rare instances.

*Let's play that movie clip again.* [Linus christmas story \(high quality\).mov - Bing video](#)

I had seen that movie clip many times over the years and until it was pointed out to me this week, I had never realized that this was one of the very rare times that Linus willingly parted from his blanket, the blanket he clings to, the blanket that protects him from all harm, the blanket which gives him comfort and security and peace. Linus dropped his beloved blanket when he began to recall and recite the great news given by the angels to the shepherds.

And what is this great news? That God in His glory sent His Son into a world that had rejected and rebelled against Him to make peace. Peace does not come from a security blanket – it comes through Jesus – who is the revealed glory of God.

*In his book “It’s Not About Me”, Max Lucado writes about the subject of God’s glory, and he asks this question: Why does God promote himself? His answer: for the same reason the driver of the lifeboat does. Think of it this way. You’re floundering neck-deep in the dark, cold sea. The ship you were on is sinking, and your life jacket is deflating. Your strength is giving out, but through the dark night comes the voice of the lifeboat driver. You cannot see him, so what do you want the driver of the lifeboat to do?*

*To be quiet? To say nothing? To sneak his way through the struggling and drowning passengers? By no means! You need volume. You want him to amp it up so you can find him. In biblical jargon, you want him to show his glory. You need to hear him say, “I am over here. I am able. I have room for you in the lifeboat. I can save you.” Drowning passengers need the driver of the lifeboat to reveal his glory for their good.*

It’s the same with God. God does not have an ego problem – if He did, do you really think Jesus would have come to us the way He did – lying in a feeding trough? In the Christmas story, God revealed His glory through His Son to rescue a lost and dying world that was drowning in a sea of sin, and Jesus is the only One who can save us and bring peace – and peace is our greatest need.

When most people think of peace, they think of freedom from inner turmoil, like having peace of mind, or they may think about peace in their relationships where there is an absence of conflict, and for sure, we need that kind of peace in our lives – and most definitely in our world, but that kind of peace is not our greatest need, and it’s not the kind of peace that the angels had referred to. In Hebrew, the word for peace is *Shalom* and it refers to harmony, and wholeness, and completeness, and it seems to have more to do with one’s character than one’s circumstances. The Greek word for peace – the word which Luke uses in our Christmas story is *Eirene* – very similar to *Shalom* but it paints this picture of joining together that which has been divided or separated.

The Bible is crystal clear – that for all of us, in our default human condition, we are naturally at odds with God – more accurately we are hostile against Him. We are born with a sin nature that attempts to rule over us and causes us to rebel against God – and that goes for all of us. Everyone one of us has sinned against God, and

as a consequence, our sin has separated us *from* Him and, therefore, there is no peace *with* Him. And if that's not bad enough, there is punishment for our sin – death and the eternal separation from God – the everlasting absence of peace.

Our greatest need is to have peace restored with God, and God desires peace with us, but we cannot reach that condition of peace on our own – we need a “peace offering” and Christ is that peace offering for us – a sacrifice for sin on our behalf.

*In the early 60s, Don and Carol Richardson worked as Canadian missionaries among the Sawi tribal people of Western New Guinea, Indonesia.*

*The Sawi were head-hunting cannibals, who were fascinated by these foreign missionaries – but the Sawi were unresponsive to the Richardson's attempts to share the gospel, and they continued in their brutal tribal ways.*

*The Sawi tribes regularly fought against each other, in fact, they battled within sight of the Richardson's jungle home. Eventually, fear and frustration led the Richardson's to make the decision to leave, but when tribal leaders learned of their plan, they promised to make peace in the morning.*

*The next day, Don and Carol witnessed an incredible ceremony. Two hostile tribes were positioned opposite the Richardson's house on either side of a clearing. Suspense filled the air. Finally, one man picked up his newborn child and dashed across the meadow. His wife ran after him screaming and begging for the baby to be given back to her. Unable to catch him, she fell to her knees and sobbed for her baby.*

*The child's father presented his baby to the enemy tribe. The child was called the “peace child,” and as long as the child remained alive – the two warring tribes were bound to each other in peace.*

*From that day forward, the Richardson's taught the Sawi about the ultimate Peace Child given to mankind by the one true God. Tribal chiefs who had once been unresponsive to the gospel now sat spellbound. First a few and finally hundreds of the once-cannibalistic Sawis received Christ as Savior.*

In a sense, Jesus is the Peace Child – the peace offering, the Lamb of God, lying in a feeding trough, wrapping in swaddling cloth – sent by God to pay for the sins of the world by later going to the cross, so that, peace with God can be restored.

Peace with God – this is salvation. As you place your trust in Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord, God forgives you of your sin against Him, He wipes out your sin debt because it was paid in full by Jesus, He restores your broken relationship, and you are made right with Him. You have lasting peace with God. It is the greatest news because it speaks to the greatest need.

Jesus told us in **John 3:16-17**,

***<sup>16</sup> “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish, but have eternal life. <sup>17</sup> For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but so that the world might be saved through Him.***

Jesus was sent to a lost and dying world, not to judge and condemn the world because it was already condemned, but rather to be the only acceptable offering to bring lasting peace between God and mankind – to bring salvation to a people who were separated from Him, and it’s freely given – a gracious Christmas gift from God to those who respond to Him by faith.

Linus understood that peace doesn’t come from a security blanket – it comes from the One wrapped in swaddling cloth – who would later be wrapped in burial cloth for you and me. That’s what Christmas is all about.

Source Material:

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