

*I want to share a story that appeared in the Washington Post on August 11, 2007 and it goes like this: “He emerged from the Metro at the Plaza Station and positioned himself against a wall beside a trash can. By most measures, he was nondescript: a youngish white man in jeans, a long-sleeved t-shirt and a baseball cap. From a small case, he removed a violin. Placing the open case at his feet, he threw in a few dollars and pocket change as seed money, swiveled it to face pedestrian traffic, and began to play. It was 7:51 a.m. on a Friday.*

*For the next 45 minutes, the violinist performed six great classical pieces. During that time, 1,097 people passed by. No one knew that the violinist was Joshua Bell, one of the world’s leading classical musicians, who fills concert halls. On this Friday morning, Bell played on one of the most valuable violins ever made – a Stradivarius valued at \$3.5 million. The train station provided good acoustics for his performance and his beautiful music filled the morning air.*

*Over the time that he played, seven people stopped to listen for at least a minute. Twenty-seven people gave money, and just to give a frame of reference, Bell was accustomed to getting paid \$1,000 per minute in his concerts. This day, in total, he received \$32.17. At the end of each piece, there was no applause – just silent indifference. The master musician was ignored. People walked past musical glory without giving it a second glance – with the exception of two people.*

*The first was a postal worker named ‘John’ who had learned the violin as a youth. He recognized the quality of Joshua Bell’s performance and stood enjoying it from a distance. And then there was a woman named ‘Stacy’. Stacy had seen Bell in a concert three weeks earlier and recognized him. She had no idea what was going on, but whatever it was, she wasn’t about to miss it. She moved closer, positioning herself front and center. She had a huge grin on her face and she stayed until the concert was over.*

*Later Stacy told the reporter: ‘It was the most astonishing thing I’ve ever seen in Washington. Joshua Bell was standing there playing in rush hour, and people were not stopping, not even looking, and some were flipping quarters at him! Quarters! I was thinking, what kind of a city do I live in that this could happen?’”*

For the most part, Joshua Bell was completely ignored. Only a few gave their attention and experienced the amazing performance by this master musician – and at another time long ago, in another place far way – only a few would experience something so amazing, that would not only change their lives, but it would also impact all of humanity.

We have been working our way through the Gospel of **Luke**, which for all practical purposes is a God-inspired investigative report, and in the first chapter of his gospel, Luke shared what he learned through his investigation regarding the events surrounding what we know as *the Christmas story*.

If you recall, Luke told us about the birth announcement given by the angel Gabriel to a couple named *Zacharias* and *Elizabeth*, who being well past their child-bearing years – probably in their 80's, maybe in their 90's, were going to have their first child – a miracle son named *John*, who would be the forerunner of the Messiah. We know him as *John the Baptist*.

Then, Luke told us about a second birth announcement given six months later – again by the angel Gabriel – this time to a young virgin girl around the age of 14 from the backwoods town of Nazareth. Her name was *Mary*, and she learned that God had plans for her – plans that would dramatically change her life – she would deliver the long-awaited Messiah whose name would be *Jesus*.

This morning, as we continue, I want to take a traditional approach to the Christmas story, so, if you have your Bible turn 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.**

So, these first five verses give us the setting for this very familiar story, and in these verses, once again, Luke drives home the point that this is not a fairy tale, it's not a fictional story – it's investigative, it's historical – it's based on real historical facts.

Here in his report, Luke introduces us to **Caesar Augustus**. His birth name was *Gaius Octavian*, and he has the nephew of Julius Caesar who had been assassinated some 25 years earlier. Well, after a divided empire and some serious infighting, Octavian emerges as the emperor of Rome and he becomes the most powerful of all the Caesars. He ruled the known world, he set up a centralized government, he regulated trade and commerce, and he began all sorts of building

programs and projects. Under his rule, the military was unmatched, and during his reign, Rome was at peace.

Well during his reign, Luke tells us that Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a **census** be taken for the purpose of collecting taxes. This was done every 14 years – it was a means of governmental control, and as was the case, each Jewish male had to return to the city of his forefather to record his name, his occupation, his property, and those in his family. We are also told that this census was taken while **Quirinius** was in **Syria**, which at that time was a Roman province that also included the region of Judea.

Now, I want to point out something out while we're here. Some English Bible translations – like the one I use, say that Quirinius was the *governor* while other translations say he was *governing*. In this case, I think *governing* is a more accurate word, for history suggests that Quirinius was on a military mission for Caesar Augustus – he's wasn't the governor just yet, but he was *governing* – he was providing leadership so as to bring the province of Syria under the direct control of Rome.

So, Luke drops the names of Caesar Augustus and Quirinius as a historical point of reference, during which time, a decree was given that a census be taken, and as a result, **Joseph** along with a very pregnant **Mary** travel some 80 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem to register as they were ordered. That's where their forefather King **David** grew up. That's the setting – a setting that involves real people, at a real place, during a real time in history.

At that time, Roman Emperor Caesar Augustus was ruling the known world, but make no mistake – God was on the throne, and all along He was setting the stage for a promise that He had given some 700 years earlier through the prophet **Micah** and it goes like this:

***“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)***

Caesar Augustus didn't know anything about God, but he unknowingly becomes a pawn in God's hand, as God used the emperor's command to move Joseph and Mary from Nazareth to Bethlehem to fulfill the promise that the Messiah would be born there. Then, beginning with **verse 6**, Luke tells us what happened next. He says,

**<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.**

In these two verses Luke gives us the details of the Lord's birth. Joseph and Mary get to Bethlehem to register for the census – just like so many others had also done, and as a result, there was no place to stay – there was no room for them anywhere.

Now, here's a question. **Did they have family there?** They may have – they're in the city of their forefathers, but remember – Joseph and Mary are only engaged – Mary is very pregnant, and her condition prior to her wedding day would be considered disgraceful in that culture. So, maybe they couldn't reach out to family in the absence of vacant rooms, and therefore, as tradition suggests they likely had to stay in a dark and dingy limestone cave where animals were typically sheltered.

We are told, **“she gave birth to her firstborn son.”** That's it – nothing else. No one in the city of Bethlehem knew that the Messiah had just entered their world. No one – and speaking of *no one*, it also appears that Mary had *no one* to help her. 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 I'm not sure what kind of help he was, and I only say that because we are told it was Mary who gave birth, it was Mary who **wrapped** Jesus in swaddling cloth, and it was Mary who **laid** Him in a feeding trough.

Surprisingly, this is how the Son of God, the King of kings, the Lord of lords was to come into this world – not privileged or pampered, but lowly – into a world of lowly people that God desired to save – it's surprising, but the surprises are not over, and beginning with **verse 8** we are told this:

**<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.”**

Isn't it amazing that when God chose to announce the birth of the Messiah, He didn't inform the rich or the famous or the powerful of that day. God didn't share the news with the religious leaders. It was not given to the priests. It was not provided to the kings and to the dignitaries. It was not given to the elite or to the popular – rather the announcement was given only to a few – shared with shepherds who were tending their flocks at night, and from a cultural point of view – that was all wrong, and let me explain.

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 this story, in this culture, shepherding had lost its luster. Shepherds were now considered among the lowest class of people – at the bottom of the social ladder. They were the poor, the forgotten, the broken, and the hopeless – they were outcasts. The Talmud, which is a collection of written interpretations by 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 and habitual sinners. Their line of work prevented them from worshipping at the temple 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 participate.

They were outcasts, always moving from place to place like gypsies to find good pasture, looked upon as anything but worshippers of God – and yet, God chose only these few to hear this birth announcement from heaven.

So, the shepherds are out in the fields watching their sheep at night and *poof*, an angel – maybe Gabriel again, unexpectedly appears in God's **glory**, **and what do you suppose these guys are thinking?** Well, given their reputation, they're probably thinking that one of them had really screwed up, someone had gone too far this time, and God Himself had sent an angel to take care of business – surely someone is going to die – they were terrified – but the angel tells them not to be **afraid**, but to listen because he has some amazing news for them and for all people – a **Savior** has been born – and we know from that one single word – *Savior* – we

must connect the Lord's birth to His death. Jesus was born to die on a cross for the sins of mankind. That's why He came. That's why He was born – to live a perfect life among us – to reveal the true character and nature of God in a world that had Him all wrong – to love the unlovable – and then to prove the full extent of His love by offering Himself as a once-and-for-all sacrifice for sin so that those who believe might be saved.

A Savior has been born in Bethlehem and the shepherds were given a sign as to where they can find Him. He's 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 – and if you really think about it, no other king – ever – anywhere would be found lying in a feeding trough.

Then, as if the appearance of one angel wasn't enough, the place explodes with an army of angels, maybe thousands, and the dark night sky is turned into a massive worship service as the angels' praise God. For these shepherds, for these few, to see what they saw and to hear what they heard had to be unimaginable and overwhelming – and it's not over. Beginning with **verse 15**, Luke continues and he tells us this:

**<sup>15</sup> When the angels had gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds began saying to one another, "Let us go straight to Bethlehem then, and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has made known to us." <sup>16</sup> So they came in a hurry and found their way to Mary and Joseph, and the baby as He lay in the manger. <sup>17</sup> When they had seen this, they made known the statement which had been told them about this Child. <sup>18</sup> And all who heard it wondered at the things which were told them by the shepherds. <sup>19</sup> But Mary treasured all these things, pondering them in her heart. <sup>20</sup> The shepherds went back, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen, just as had been told them.**

So, the shepherds don't waste any time and they say, "*let's go right now to Bethlehem to see this thing that has happened*" – not to see if it was true – especially after all of that – but let's see the Savior, and just as the shepherds were told, sure enough, they find Joseph, and Mary, and the baby lying in a manger.

The shepherds – the outcasts, tell Joseph and Mary all that had happened to them, and then they left worshipping and praising God on their way back to the field – sharing the good news to all who would listen that this **Child** was born in Bethlehem. They were brought closer to God – changed by this Child.

*I want to share a story from a woman who was brought closer to God by a child and an outcast, and it goes like this: “We were the only family with children in the restaurant. I sat Erik in a high chair and noticed everyone was quietly eating and talking. Suddenly, Erik squealed with glee and said “Hi there.” He wiggled and giggled at an old man wearing a tattered rag of a coat. His pants were baggy, with a zipper at half-mast and his toes poked out of would-be shoes. His shirt was dirty and his hair was uncombed and unwashed. We were too far to smell him, but I’m sure he smelled. His hands waved at my baby and he said, “Hi there, baby; Hi there, big boy. I see ya, buster.” My husband and I didn’t know what to do, but Erik continued to laugh and say, “Hi, Hi there.”*

*Our meal finally came, and the old man began shouting across the room “Do you know patty cake? Do you know peek-a-boo? Hey look, he knows peek-a-boo.” No one thought the old man was cute. My husband and I were embarrassed, but Erik, on the other hand was running through his repertoire of tricks all of which were admired by the old man.*

*We finally got through the meal. My husband went to pay, while Erik and I headed for the door, but the old man was poised between me and the door. I uttered a prayer “Lord just let me out of here before he speaks to me or Erik.”*

*As I drew close to the old man, I turned my back trying to side-step him and avoid any air he might be breathing. As I did Erik leaned over my arm, reaching with both arms in a baby’s ‘pick-me-up’ position.*

*Before I could stop him, Erik had propelled himself from my arms to the man’s. Erik in an act of total trust and love laid his tiny head upon the man’s ragged shoulder. The man’s eyes closed and I saw tears hover beneath his lashes. His aged hands, full of grime, pain, and hard labor gently, so gently, cradled my precious baby and stroked his back.*

*The old man rocked Erik in his arms for a moment and then his eyes opened and set squarely on mine. He said in a firm, commanding voice, “You take care of this baby.” Somehow, I managed “I will” from a throat that contained a stone. I received my baby and the man said “God bless you ma’am – you’ve given me my Christmas gift.”*

*“I ran to the car. My husband wondered why I was crying and saying “My God, my God, forgive me. The ragged old man, unwittingly had reminded me “To enter the Kingdom of God we must become as little children.”*

In this Christmas story from Luke, only the shepherds – the outcasts – those who weren't even allowed in church to worship – only these few were let in on the secret and blessed by a Child lying in a feeding trough. **Why? Why did God do it this way?**

Well, I think by doing it this way, by choosing the shepherds of all people, God was saying something important to us – something we cannot ignore, and it's this:

Jesus came for you and me. You're not too low, too insignificant, too unimportant, too worthless, too forgotten, too lost, or too anything for God to love you, to search for you in your darkness, to find you, to draw you close, and ultimately to save you. I think that's why He did it this way. God made a statement, that no matter who you are, He's crazy about you and invites you to seek Him out so that you might enter into a loving relationship with Him.

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