

The Christmas Miracle

Luke 2:1-20

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The first Christmas was the night-of-all nights. There has never been a night like that first Christmas night. The shepherds were gathered in the fields, and the angels appeared and sang their song. We're going to see that in our text. It was a night of miracles. It was a night when the light of the world would come to dispel darkness. It was the light that would come into this dark world that would bring an everlasting light. Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. He who follows Me will not walk in darkness but have the light of life."

We're going to look in this narrative passage at the three miracles of Christmas. The first miracle is that Jesus was born in Bethlehem or the miracle of the Incarnation, Luke 2:1-7. In verse 1, Luke says, "And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered...."—or "taxed"—"...This census..."—or "tax"—"...first took place while Cyrenius was governing Syria. So all went to be registered, everyone to his own city. Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child. So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn Son and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn."

This is the Christmas story according to Luke. It's so simple but simply profound. It is so beautiful in its simplicity but so beautiful in its majesty. It never grows old. All these 2,000 years, we've been reading about this glorious event. We still love it and delight when we read this story.

There actually are a couple of miracles that took place in verses 1-7. The first miracle is God turning the heart of Caesar Augustus to make a decree that all the world should be taxed. You say, "Well, what's so miraculous about that?" The fact that it took place at just the right time. The Bible says in Micah 5:2 that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem.

By the way, that prophecy took place over 500 years before Jesus was born. Five hundred years before He was born, the prophet said, "But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall He come forth unto Me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose going forth have been from of old, from everlasting." He makes clear that the Messiah was God, Who is everlasting. He would be the everlasting God Who was to be born in Bethlehem.

Why Bethlehem? Because Bethlehem was the home of David. Why David? Because God promised to King David that through his lineage, the Messiah would come. Messiah would sit upon the throne of David and would reign forever and ever. We know that will take place at Christ's second Advent or Second Coming. Christ will return and sit upon the throne of His

great-great grandfather, David.

This was the first Caesar, verse 1, who had ever taken the title “Augustus.” He has two titles. His name was Octavius. He took the title Caesar, and then he took the title Augustus. The word “Augustus” means “of the gods” or “the august one.” He would be the first who would actually be venerated and worshipped as a god. He would be the first to be considered divine. What a paradox that at the time of a man who thought he was god, God came to be born of man.

Caesar, sitting in his palace in Rome, gives this decree. Little does he realize that he is just a puppet in the hand of a sovereign God. The Bible says, “The king’s heart is in the hand of the Lord, and He turns it whatever way He will.” So God put it in his mind. We see the providence of God in fulfilling the prophecies of God. God put it in the mind of Caesar that everyone had to be taxed.

This was an enrollment for the purpose of taxation. So the people had to go to their ancestral birthplace, they would enroll and the authorities would be enabled, with this census, to know how many people they could tax. Luke says it was when “Cyrenius was governing Syria.” So Mary and Joseph went from Nazareth all the way down to Bethlehem. The first miracle is God turning the heart of the ruler to fulfill His Word. God always keeps His promises. What God has spoken cannot be broken. God keeps His Word.

The amazing thing to me is that Joseph and Mary, in the last stages of pregnancy, would take this 90-mile donkey ride from Nazareth down to Bethlehem. What husband, in his right mind, would put his wife on a donkey when she is nine-months pregnant. “We’re going for a 90-mile donkey ride.” That might work well if you wanted to induce labor. That might get things started.

The miracle of the Incarnation or that God was born in the flesh was a fulfillment of prophecy. The Bible tells us in verse 7, “And she brought forth her firstborn Son...”—“firstborn” meaning He was the heir—“...and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths...”—these were long strips of cloths that were wrapped tightly—“...and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.”

This poor innkeeper always gets a bad rap. Someday when we get to heaven, he’s going to point his finger at a lot of preachers and ask, “Why did you cap on me?” There’s nothing in the text that indicates he was a bad guy or a mean guy. He was trying to do his best to accommodate this young couple and give them a place to stay.

The inns in those days weren’t Ramada Inns or Westin hotels. They weren’t luxurious or nice. They were just an open enclosure. They would have the animals there, but it seems that it was full. It could be that in the center of this open enclosure where the animals feed was where Mary and Joseph had to stay. Some feel that outside the inn there may have been a cave-grotto. There are these limestone caves around the hills of Bethlehem. So maybe in one of those caves, where there was a stable in which they commonly kept animals, Jesus was born.

The “manger” mentioned in verse 7 was actually a feeding trough. They were carved out of stone, and they would put the grain in them. That’s what the animals would eat out of. So Joseph had to clean the trough and put fresh straw in it.

Then Mary “brought forth her firstborn Son,” all alone. She had no one to help her or assist her. What an amazing thing. I see the humility of His birth. When God was born on earth, He wasn’t born in a beautiful sterile hospital, and He wasn’t born in a palace. He wasn’t born in the royal city of Jerusalem. He was born in a small town in a very humble place called Bethlehem. The name “Bethlehem” means “house of bread.” How interesting that the Bread of Life would come down from heaven and be born in Bethlehem to bring life to those who trust Him in faith.

So I look at the miracle of His humble birth in Philippians 2:6; that Jesus, “...being in the form...”—or “essence.” It’s the word “morphe”—“...of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, and took upon Him the form of a servant.” This is the Incarnation, and the word “incarnation” means “becoming flesh.” It means Jesus took on full humanity; in a human body with a human mind and with human emotions. God contracted to a span and comprehensibly made man. We can’t even fathom the idea that the eternal God would become a finite creature; that the omnipotent God would become a weak, little baby or that the God, Who was omniscient and knew all things, would have to grow “in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man.” What a mind-blowing thought.

This is the greatest miracle that ever happened in the world, and it happened on that first Christmas when God left glory, laid aside His splendor, laid aside His majesty and came incognito, so to speak, “veiled in flesh, the Godhead seen.” Jesus came and took on skin and became a human. What an amazing thought!

In 1 Timothy 3:16, Paul says, “Great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh.” In 2 Corinthians 8:9, Paul says, “For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that ye through His poverty might be rich.” So these passages are basically saying that Jesus was God in heaven, rich in glory and majesty and splendor, but humbled Himself and came through the womb of the Virgin Mary and took on humanity.

Why did He do that? He did that, number one, to redeem us or to be the Savior; number two, that He might reveal God to us; and number three, that He might reign on the throne of David as “King of kings and Lord of lords.” There is a fourth reason, and that is that He might be a sympathetic and compassionate High Priest Who was touched with all the feelings of our infirmities.

God understands your weaknesses. God knows when you’re lonely and tired and fearful and afraid and sad and grieving. God knows and understands, because He took on a fully-human body. Jesus had all the human emotions that we have. He died on the Cross, rose from the dead, He is in a glorified human body at the right hand of the Father. So when we pray, “Lord, I’m tired,” He understands or “Lord, I’m lonely,” He understands or “Lord, I’m sad,” He

understands. All those emotions He understands.

When Jesus went to the grave of His friend, Lazarus, “Jesus wept.” It is the shortest verse in the Bible, but it says so much. God isn’t far off or unconcerned or uncaring. He actually left glory, came to earth and took on our humanity so He could relate to us. Christmas brings God near; He’s called Emmanuel or “God with us.” So we marvel and wonder at the glory of his Incarnation; that He could sympathize with us.

The second miracle in this story is in verses 8-14. It is the miracle of the angelic visitation. The story gets so amazing here. At the very moment that Jesus was born, verse 8, “Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. And behold, an angel of the Lord...”—It doesn’t say, but my guess is that this is Gabriel, who has been so involved in announcing the Savior’s birth—“...stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid.” That’s King James for totally freaked out. “Then the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, Who is Christ the Lord. And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger.’ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!’”

Someone has pointed out that this is the first Christmas service that ever took place. The congregation was the shepherds “keeping watch over their flock by night.” They were probably outside the city of Bethlehem in the hills. It was a starry night and cold, so they probably were gathered around a fire.

Shepherds were the lowest on the social ladder. You could not get lower than a shepherd. Why? Because they were considered ceremonially unclean. They were out in the fields with their animals, so they couldn’t do the ceremonial washings and cleansings. They couldn’t go to the temple because they were unclean, so they were considered very common. Yet when God announces the Savior’s birth, He announces it to the very lowest, the most common, those who were outcasts. Shepherds couldn’t even testify in a court of law. They were considered thieves and liars and low-lifers. Yet God comes to the humble and to the lowly.

The preacher of that first Christmas service, verse 9, was an angel. “And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them.” I believe the whole area lit up with the glory and splendor of this majestic angel, created by God. “And they were greatly afraid.” Then the message comes. This was the first Christmas sermon ever preached. “Then the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid...”—Christmas is the dispelling of our fears—“...for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which will be to all people.” Notice that: It was good news and great joy for all people. Why? “For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, Who is Christ the Lord.”

Being a preacher myself, I took note of this angel’s sermon. I want you to notice the points he

made in his sermon. Number one, he points out who came. Verse 11: "Christ the Lord" or Christos Kurios. He is the Messiah. The word "Christ" is not His last name. We think His name is Jesus Christ; His first name is Jesus and has last name is Christ. No. "Christ" is a title. The title means that He is the Messiah or "Moshiach." It means "the anointed one." He is the long-prophesied, awaited-for and longed-for child, Who would deliver Israel from their enemies and save us from our sins. He is the Christos and He is the Kurios; He is the Lord. In the Old Testament, by the way, that's actually Jehovah. So Jesus is the Messiah and Jesus is Jehovah God.

How did He come? Verse 11: "For there is born to you this day." This speaks of His humanity. When the prophet Isaiah spoke of Him, Isaiah said, "Unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given." "A child is born" speaks of His humanity, and "a Son is given" speaks of His deity. So Jesus Christ was born of a mother; He was born of a woman. He came under the Law to redeem those under the Law. This speaks of the fact that Jesus Christ was God incarnate or God in human flesh.

Notice where He was born, verse 11: "In the city of David." I've already pointed out that God promised David that in David's lineage would be the Messiah. So Jesus was born "in the city of David," the house of bread.

Why was Jesus born? Verse 11, to be "a Savior." Not a philosopher. Not a psychologist. Not a politician—praise God! Can you imagine? "For unto you is born this day..." I'll stop right there. Let's not think about politics right now. Thank God He didn't come to be a politician. He didn't come to be a military leader. He didn't come to be a scientist. But He came to be a Savior. I love that. Jesus came to save us from our sins—from the penalty of our sins, which is death, and from the power of sin. One day He'll save us from the very presence of sin—we'll be in heaven—and we'll be free from sin altogether. Man's greatest need is to be saved from our sins. God met our greatest need. Our need is for a Savior. Jesus Himself said, "I have come to seek and to save that which is lost."

The angel also points out who Jesus came to save. Verse 10: "all people." There's only one Savior, and He came to save all people—every boy and girl and every man and woman. Every human being, every race, every tribe, every kindred, every nation, every tongue. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him..."—"trusts in Him" or "puts their faith in Him"—"...shall not perish but have everlasting life." God loved the world, so He gave His Son to die for the world, for whoever believes in Him, and they wouldn't perish but would have everlasting life.

Notice what this Christ can bring. Verse 10, He takes away our fears, brings us "great joy" and in verse 14, He brings us "peace." In verse 13, it says there was "a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying..." A lot of people are quick to point out that the angels were "saying." It doesn't say they were "singing." I happen to believe they were singing, even though it doesn't say so. You go, "John, you're telling us something the Bible doesn't say?!" I'm not the authority; the Bible is. But we'll check it out when we get to heaven. I think I'm going to be

right. I'm thinking, Why wouldn't they be singing? The Savior has been born!

There are only two places in the Bible that say angels actually sang. In the book of Job, it alludes to them singing when God created the heavens and the earth; that God's angels sang at the first creation. Why wouldn't they sing at the new creation, when Jesus came into the world?

The second place where the Bible says that angels were actually singing is in the book of Revelation, but they're not singing the song of redemption. Only human beings have been redeemed, and only we can sing the song of the redeemed. At that time, I believe angels are going to fold their wings in silence and awe and watch the church as we sing Redeemed. I love to proclaim it: Redeemed by the blood of the Lamb. Redeemed by His infinite mercy. His child, and forever I am. We've been washed in the blood of Jesus Christ, and we've been redeemed.

So I'm thinking, Why wouldn't angels sing at His birth? Try to imagine it: These shepherds are out in the fields, it's a dark night, then one angel turns into a multitude of angels. Another thing we don't know—and the Bible doesn't tell us—is how many angels there are. I'm not going to guess at that, but there are a lot of angels. Lots and lots and lots of angels, all created by God. I believe they all had the assignment to show up in the hills of Bethlehem that night and that they filled the whole sky and drowned out the stars by their glory.

Notice what they said in verse 14: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!" Some translations have that, "Peace to those whom God is well pleased." So what does Christmas bring? It brings glory to God. It brings us into peace with God and brings us the peace of God.

So we have the miracle of the Incarnation and the miracle of the angel's visitation. The third miracle is the miracle of the shepherd's proclamation in verses 15-17. "So it was, when the angels had gone away from them into heaven, that the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us.' And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the Babe lying in a manger. Now when they had seen Him, they made widely known..."—that's their proclamation; they testified—"...the saying which was told them concerning this child."

The expression in verse 15, "Let us now go to Bethlehem," indicates that the shepherds were outside the city and had to put some effort and energy into going from the sheep in the hills to find the Messiah, the Savior of the world. I've often wondered, Who stayed with the sheep? They couldn't bring their sheep into the manger to check out the baby Jesus. Did they play rock-paper-scissors to decide who gets to go? Did they draw straws? Can you imagine being the shepherd who had to stay and listen to "Baa, baa" while they went to see the Lamb of God?

There's another theory, too—and I think it's a good one. These shepherds might have been the ones who were watching the temple sheep, used specifically as the sacrifice in the temple rites and rituals. If that's true, they would have been the first to see "the Lamb of God who takes

away the sins of the world.”

The fact that the shepherds said, “Let us now go” indicates their faith. They didn’t say, “Ah, let’s go back to bed.” They said, “Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us.” I commend to you that we should follow the shepherds’ example; that we should believe God’s Word and respond in faith. We should believe what God has spoken and respond in faith and obedience.

“Now when they had seen Him, they made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this child.” They proclaimed the Savior’s birth. The first evangelist, the first witness of the coming of Christ were the lowly, humble, outcast shepherds. The Bible says that “God has chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise”; the weak things to confound the things that are mighty. The base things. The things which are not to bring to naught the things which are wise, so that no flesh will glory in His presence. Christmas is all about the glory of God, Who came from heaven and born of the Virgin Mary. We should proclaim His birth.

I want you to notice the response to the Christmas miracle. I’ve always loved this. Verse 18, “And all those who heard it marveled at those things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart. Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told them.”

Christmas is upon us. We’ve been anticipating Advent, and Advent is here. But, in closing, the response to the Savior’s birth is how we should worship and how we should worship at Christmas. Number one, we need to wonder at the event itself. Don’t miss Christmas this year. Despite all the lights, the tree, the eggnog, the gifts and the cookies, soon to be followed by the New Year’s resolution to lose weight, don’t forget to wonder in awe that God would leave heaven in the person of His Son, come down to earth and be born, take on a body so that He could go to the Cross to die for my sins and your sins. If you lose that, you lose the splendor and the wonder of Christmas.

The second thing we do to celebrate Christmas is to ponder its meaning, verse 19. “But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart.” The word “pondered” has the idea of “lay out in sequentially order” or “to think deeply in order.” So this is Mary writing in her baby book. Every mother keeps a baby book; right? If you’re a mother and you didn’t keep a baby book, we’ll pray for you.

I noticed that by the time we had our fourth child—the first one, six baby books. Photos everywhere. The second one, four baby books; third one, two baby books. Fourth one, two baby books and one photo; he’s here, and I’m tired.

But Mary kept a baby book, and she thought about the meaning of Gabriel’s visit: that “the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee”; “that which is conceived in your womb is of the Holy Spirit”; the promise that He would be the Messiah, the Savior; that He would be

Emmanuel, God with us; and that God had sent the angel to Joseph and gave him a dream not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife. And how God had orchestrated everything, including the forerunner's birth.

So Mary is writing all of this, and imagine the photos she put in her baby book. "Here's me with the shepherds, these gnarly dudes taking selfies with the baby Jesus. Here's me with Gabriel. It's all whited-out so you can't see him in the picture. That's an angel in the photo." Mary's writing in the book and thinking about it.

So when you celebrate Christmas, you need to think about it and ponder its meaning. What does it mean? It means that He came to redeem us and to reveal God. No man has seen God but the only begotten Son of God Who is in the bosom of the Father. He has revealed Him. He came to reign on the throne of David forever and ever.

What's the third thing we do to celebrate Christmas? You have to praise at Christmas. Verse 20, "Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told them." The spirit of Christmas is praise. Have you ever noticed in the nativity narrative that there are songs? Elizabeth sings, Zacharias sings, Mary sings, the angels sing. Simeon sings, Hannah sings.

Then we come to church and just kind of sit there. Let's sing. Let's open our voices and our hearts and worship Him this Christmas. Let's take the time to celebrate and sing of our Savior's birth.

If you don't know Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, if you've never turned from your sin and admitted to God that you're a sinner and have fallen short, if you don't believe that Jesus Christ has died for you, today is the day for you, in faith, to come and trust Him.