

THE TRUE MEANING OF CHRISTMAS

Luke 2:10-14 (ESV)

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INTRODUCTION

Read Luke 2:8-20—focus on vv.10-14

Luke 2:8-20 ⁸ And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. ¹⁰ And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹² And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!” ¹⁵ When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.” ¹⁶ And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. ¹⁷ And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. ¹⁸ And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. ²⁰ And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

2nd week of Advent: prepare our hearts to celebrate God coming down to dwell with man.

Last week: began a Christmas series: vv. 8-9.

Tonight: focus on vv.10-14.

This passage is the quintessential passage for Christmas. You can't get more Christmas-y than this one. It's what it's all about. If you had to distill Christmas down to one passage, it would be this. In vv.10-14, we have the most Christmas-y Christmas passage in the Bible.

Increasingly in our culture, the true meaning of Christmas is obscured. I've been surprised how even churches in Athens that believe the gospel obscure the true meaning of Christmas. Even for us, though probably all of us would be able to articulate the true meaning of Christmas, our priorities, our time, our thoughts could tell a different story.

It's important that we are reminded of truths in God's word. We don't always need new truth, just the old truth repeated:

2 Peter 1:12: “Therefore I intend always to remind you of these qualities, though you know them and are established in the truth that you have.”

Right thinking precedes right worship. In these verses 10-14, I want to remind you of the true meaning of Christmas so that our hearts will be attuned to worship this Christmas. The true meaning of Christmas has three essential parts. In this passage we find:

- the MESSAGE of Christmas
- the PERSON of Christmas
- the PURPOSE of Christmas.

Let's look first at the Message of Christmas found in v. 10

I. THE MESSAGE OF CHRISTMAS (V.10)

v. 10: "And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people."

Fear Not

Shepherds: afraid because in the night, out in their field, an angel appeared and the glory of the Lord shone around them. Luke doesn't give us a lot of details that we'd like to know:

- How many shepherds were there?
- What did the angel look like?
- What color was God's glory?
- When it says God's glory shone around them—was it only in the sky or everywhere?
- What did the sheep do?

The main point for Luke, though, is not what it looked like, but the very fact that it *happened*. God's glory, which had been absent from Israel for nearly 600 years, returned to the land of Israel.

The last anyone had seen of God's glory was in Solomon's temple. But God removed himself from the temple because of Judah's disobedience (Ezek 10-11) and then the Babylonians moved in and destroyed it.

Generation after generation. Century after century. God's presence as manifested by his glory was absent. Faithful Jews would have longed for God's return—to have him present again. When an angel appears along with God's glory, things are about ready to get really good or really bad, but it's never neutral. The sight itself must have been terrifying. Startling, for sure. It came out of nowhere. They may have been sleeping or sitting around a campfire.

The shepherds must have had some comprehension of what they were seeing. As far as we know, neither the angel nor God identify themselves. Perhaps just as terrifying as the sight, was the terror of anticipating what might come next. Was God coming for judgment? I wonder: were the shepherds immediately aware of their sin? It seems like every time God's majesty is put on display, those who see it start to confess sin.

Isa. 6:5: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!"

Lk 5:8: “But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.””

We don’t know what the shepherds were thinking, but we know what they were feeling: “they were filled with fear” (v. 9).

Good News

Angels are frequently used by God as his messengers. That’s one of the meanings of the word *angelos*. And this angel has perhaps the best message any angel has ever given. The angel isn’t bringing a message of judgment, but a message of good news—“Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news...” “I bring...good news” is one word in the Greek. Same root word for gospel. The angel is gospeling over them. Proclaiming good news. Heralding an announcement fitting for the occasion.

The magnitude of the occasion is marked by a magnificent and magnanimous (noble, generous) announcement. Some things deserve a little announcement. Other things deserve a grand announcement. This is the grandest of announcements with a fitting procession of dignitaries: the angel, the glory of God, and (we’ll see) a host of other angels.

The only thing odd about it—the only thing seemingly unfitting—is the audience. The angel comes with good news to shepherds. The announcement is made to the lowest, the least educated, the poorest in society. Even though Abraham, Moses, and David were all shepherds, Jews of this day despised Jews who were shepherds. They were with unclean sheep 7 days a week: so they couldn’t observe the Sabbath according to the Jewish customs and other man-made rules that the Pharisees pushed on people. Shepherds were shunned socially. Often considered as unreliable, dishonest, and thieves. Such a grand occasion and the only ones to see it were ordinary shepherds, so insignificant in society, they aren’t even named.

Consider the beauty in that:

- Those with no privileges and no rank, received God’s favor.
- Apart from any merit or status or any wise steps they took along the path of life, God came to them.
- Doesn’t this demonstrate the incomparable grace of God?
- Doesn’t it show that God is for his own and not against them?

All who are truly saved are found by God in the same condition as the shepherds. The same grace-incomparable finds us. The angels brings good news to the shepherds.

Great Joy

But it’s not just good news—it’s good news of great joy. This is the climax of history up to this point. It is a joyous celebration that reaches into heaven. Though the rest of the land was sleeping—and the rest of earth unaware—heaven was clued in. God’s angels realized this importance of this good news. Verse 13 says there was “a multitude of the heavenly host praising God” and giving him praise. We aren’t told an exact number of angels—the Greek language only counted up to 10,000—but they must have been uncountable—filling the sky. It’s

as if heaven itself cannot be contained in its enthusiasm—it spills over into the sky above the shepherds. What did it look like? What did they sound like? So many angels at once is unprecedented in Scripture. As rousing as Handel’s Messiah—which so often brings people to tears in their joy—this heavenly announcement is

- Unparalleled in Israel’s history
- Unmatched in its splendor
- Unrivaled by any announcement from any human king
- Unsurpassed in its importance

The heavens erupted with good news of great joy for a people unrestricted—“I bring you good news of great joy for all people”

All People

True, the angel probably first meant for all the Jews, since the gospel (Paul says) came to the Jews first (Rom 1:16). But we know that the One who was born truly came for all people—Jew and Gentile, sultan and shepherd, prosperous and poor—all people would be offered this good news. The true meaning of Christmas is based on a message of good news of great joy for all people. There is no Christmas without the gospel. And there is no gospel without Christmas. So what is the good news?

That brings us to the second essential part of the true meaning of Christmas—the PERSON of Christmas.

II. THE PERSON OF CHRISTMAS (V.11-12)

The good news is about a person.

v.11-12: “For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.”

The good news is that a Savior, who is Christ the Lord, is born. “This day”—so it just happened. No delay here in the birth announcement. It’s no ordinary birth because this is no ordinary baby. The true meaning of Christmas isn’t about Jesus’ infancy, but about Jesus’ deity. He is God in a manger. The identity of this baby is what sets him apart. The identity of this baby and what you think of him sets heaven and hell apart.

Lk 2:34: “Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed”

Jesus is identified two ways. First, by his titles.

A. HIS TITLES

Notice that the angel refers to Jesus by three titles: Savior, Christ, and Lord. This is the only place in the Bible where all three of these names are ascribed to Jesus in one place.

1. Savior

That's what Jesus' name means. An angel had told Joseph in a dream that the baby in Mary's womb would be a son and would be called Jesus, Matthew 1:21: "for he will save his people from their sins." Man's main problem is sin.

As Isa 59:2 says: "Your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear."

Our rebellion against God deserves punishment. And God, being a just God, must punish someone. We need a Savior. Jesus saved his people by growing up and becoming the one who took the full wrath of God for all of our sins by dying on the cross. Christmas happened so that Good Friday would happen. This baby was born to die. That was this baby's mission.

2. Christ

Christ is the Greek version of the Hebrew word Messiah, which means "anointed one." Anointed One means that he is deserving of high honor. He's the One Israel has been expecting—

- born in the birthplace of David (Bethlehem)
- born in the line of David
- he's the King they've been expecting.

3. Lord

One who is lord is in a position of leadership and authority. Jesus is sovereign... because he is God. So the meaning of Christmas centers on the person of Jesus—our Savior, Christ, and Lord.

Given Jesus is all of these, we should consider our response to him this Christmas:

- Because Jesus is Savior, we should come to him and confess our sins.
- Because Jesus is the Christ, we should bow before him and worship him.
- Because Jesus is Lord, we should submit to him and follow him.

Jesus is also identified by a sign so that the shepherds can recognize him when they go to find him.

B. HIS SIGN

v. 12: "And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger."

I love this: the angel doesn't command them to the shepherds to go see Jesus. The angel knows that at this announcement, they'll want to go see Jesus (see v.15). So he gives them a way to identify Jesus. "Swaddling cloths" were strips of cloth bound around a child to keep them straight and warm—like we do with blankets today. That wasn't unusual. But a baby lying in a manger would be unusual and give the shepherds a positive identification. A manger (as you

know) is a feed trough. This Savior, Christ, and Lord wouldn't be found with royalty but with animals.

Finally, the true meaning of Christmas must include the PURPOSE of Christmas.

III. THE PURPOSE OF CHRISTMAS (v. 14)

v. 14: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

The birth of Jesus had two objectives.

1. To Bring God Glory (v. 14a)

Our response to the good news about the birth of the greatest person should be the same as the angels. Recall that in the Lord's prayer, Jesus prayed, "your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." That is, we desire that God's will be on earth as it is in heaven. What is it that they are doing in heaven? A: Worshipping God. So the purpose of Christmas—the purpose of us remembering Jesus birth—should be to glorify God—to worship. Worship isn't optional when you think of Jesus.

2. To Bring Man Peace (v. 14b)

Without a Savior, there can be no peace between man and God. This is far more important than any lack of peace between nations or between people. Christmas happened to bring about peace between man and God. Jesus was born the Prince of Peace. This peace rests only on those "with whom [God] is pleased." God's favor or God's pleasure rests on those he freely chooses—not because of any good works we've done—but only on his wise will. And the peace comes through believing the gospel—it comes through salvation

Rom 5:1: "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."

CONCLUSION

So that's Christmas in a nutshell. That's the true meaning of Christmas. The true meaning of Christmas must include the right MESSAGE, the right PERSON, and the right Purposes.