

The Angelic Word

Luke 2:8-20

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Storytelling

We have some of our children joining us for a little story telling time. You all need to listen because this is the first part of our sermon which we will get to later in the service.
Children, welcome to big church. Can you wave at everyone here?

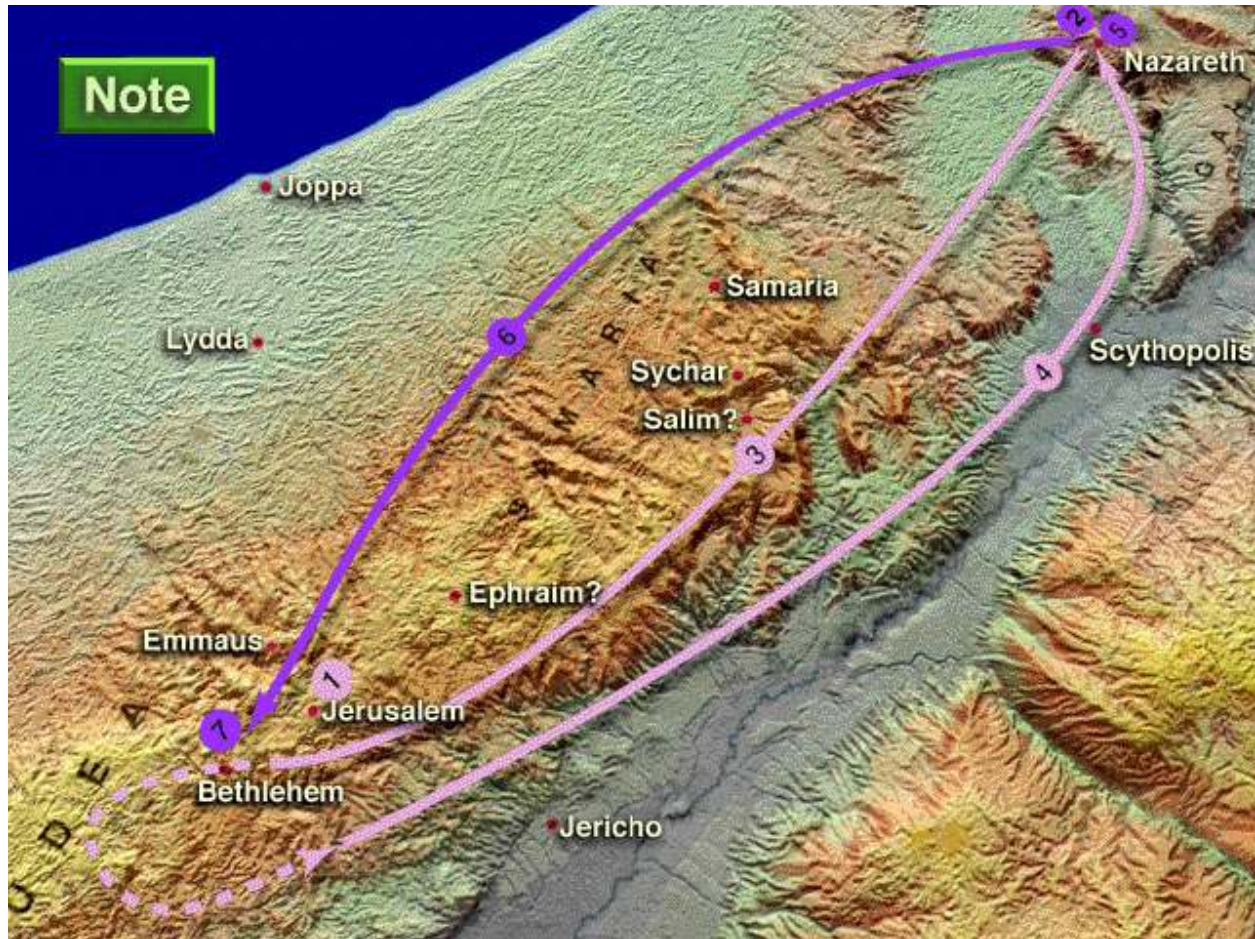
We are going to have a storytelling time. It's the story of what happened when Jesus was born. Here's the thing. I am pretty confused about some of the details and need your help to get the story straight. When I tell it, sometimes I mess up! So if you hear something that you don't think is quite right, raise your hand and if I stop, that means I may have that detail wrong and I can call on one of you to set me straight. If I call on you, speak as loud as you can so everyone can hear you. So here we go.

Mary and Joseph came to Bethlehem and Jesus was born there. They wrapped baby Jesus in swaddling cloths and laid him in a **bathtub** (manger). And in the same area as Bethlehem, there were men out in a field keeping watch over their **donkeys** (flock) by night. And they were called **donkey-herders** (shepherds). *And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with **coffee** (fear). And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy that will be for all the people. 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 **aluminum foil** (swaddling cloths) and lying in **the backseat of a car** (a manger)." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of [other angels] praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!" When the angels went away from them into heaven, the **donkey-herders** (shepherds) said to one another, "**Let's not go to Bethlehem, let's go over to Jerusalem. I hear it's fun there!**" ("Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.") And **the donkey-herders** (shepherds) **decided to take a nap and wait until morning** (they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying on a **merry-go-round** (in a manger). And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the **donkey-herders** (shepherds) returned, **but they were very sad and depressed**, (glorifying and praising God) for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. (Luke 2:6-20; "wrong" words in bold followed by correct words in parentheses; words substituted to aid the children's understanding in brackets)*

How many of you have a parent that asks you what you learned at church today? I am going to explain what all this means to your parents after you leave. I want you to promise me something. Promise me that on the way home today, you will ask your parent, "What did you learn in church today?" That way, your mommy or daddy or grandma or grandpa will have to listen very closely to the message.

The Angelic Word

We went over the story with the children. It was not a careful exegesis by any means, but we told the story of Luke 2:8-20. Let me quickly fill in the gap in the story between what we studied last week (the angel's shocking word to Mary) and this week's angelic word to the shepherds.



The angel Gabriel told Mary that she was going to give birth to a miracle son, the Messiah. She willingly submitted to God's will in this. The angel told Mary that her aged cousin Elizabeth was also pregnant. So Mary leaves Nazareth and goes south to the hill country of Judea where Elizabeth lived. Their mutual amazement at what is happening to them is in Luke 1:39-56. Mary stays there for 3 months.

She then returns to Nazareth and by now is showing her pregnancy. She no doubt tried to explain to Joseph, but that's a tough story to sell, *God made me pregnant*. Joseph, to whom she is betrothed but not yet married, is devastated but being a righteous and kind man decided to break the betrothal quietly which required a divorce. Before he does this, an angel appears to him and tells him to marry Mary because indeed God had done this. Joseph obeys and immediately marries her but the text is clear that they did not come together sexually until after the birth. No doubt tongues were wagging around Nazareth about Mary's increasingly bulging belly and the sudden marriage to Joseph.

Not too long after that, the emperor of Rome, Caesar Augustus, issued a decree throughout the entire Roman Empire that a census of all the people would be taken. Everyone was to return to their hometown to be recorded in the census. Joseph was of the house of David so the family hometown was Bethlehem. Can you imagine what Mary and Joseph thought when that decree was read in Nazareth? They no doubt had previously wondered, *If we are the parents of the Messiah and the prophecy says the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, how is that going to happen since we live in Nazareth?* God worked providentially on a global scale to get one couple to one little town to fulfill the prophecy of where the Messiah would be born. So off they went. This also gave them some gossip cover as the Nazareth citizens would not know when Jesus was actually born nor realize it was only six months after their wedding.

It was most certainly an uncomfortable trip for Mary. They arrived in Bethlehem. This part of the story is famous. *The Bethlehem Inn* had no vacancy and the only available shelter was a nearby cave used for animals. That very night, Mary gave birth to the Son of God, in the most unlikely of places. Ever been in a cattle barn? All the unpleasantness of a barn of animals were there, yet this is the context into which came the holy one of God, the Christ-child.

This brings us to the moment we read with the children. The angelic word. Luke 2:8-20. This story is extremely familiar to most. The list of characters are as famous as any; angels, shepherds, manger, baby Jesus. What is often lost in the drama of the story is what it means, and specifically, its importance to each of us personally. To find that, we begin with the angels.

And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy that will be for all the people. 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." 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 among those with whom he is pleased!" (Luke 2:8-14)

Exultation (Angels)

First there is one angel. We are not given a name but it is likely Gabriel as he seems to be the chief spokesman. He announces that a Savior has been born! There have been lots of declarations of greatness made over children, mostly by their parents. Read Christmas cards and letters and you know what I mean. The children look angelic in their pictures and the report on them in the letter is that they have all A's and are wonderful, wonderful children all the time. Parents declaring greatness doesn't mean much, but an angel doing it certainly does. Add thousands or millions of angels declaring it and this is convincing.

Look at verse 13, *and suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host.* This might have been every angel in heaven. No doubt they all wanted to be there. The sky was filled with angels singing. Blinding light. Deafening sound. This is a sight and sound event! It doesn't technically say they were singing, but the Greek word allows for it. It would sure be appropriate. Singing. Rejoicing. Total exuberance. We tend to picture this scene too stoically. I am reminded as I study this every Christmas that everyone seems to be singing.

- Elizabeth's Song – Luke 1:42-45
- Mary's Song – Luke 1:46-55
- Zechariah's Song – Luke 1:68-79
- The Angels' Song – Luke 2:14
- Shepherds' Song – Luke 2:20
- Simeon's Song – Luke 2:29-32
- Anna's Song – Luke 2:38

Why announce to Shepherds? He could have announced it to anyone in the world. Shepherds would seem to be a bad choice. First of all, they were at the bottom of the social ladder. Shepherding was menial work. Dirty. It kept them from regular temple worship. They were reputed to be thieves. Why shepherds? *God knew who would listen*. Not everyone would have responded like they did.

The magi make a similar announcement in the rich capital city of Jerusalem. Jerusalem was where the movers and shakers lived. The rich. The educated. The influential. The wise men told them of a star and the birth of the king of the Jews. Did any of them go with the wise men to check it out? No. How about King Herod? Shouldn't he have been the first to know? Why not tell him? When he heard of it, Herod felt threatened and his first thought was to kill the boy. So Herod is a bad choice. Why not the Romans? They were the world leaders. Shouldn't they have known? The Roman soldiers at Jesus' tomb see an angel and hear what he says but they can't handle either the sight of the angel or what he said and later accepted a bribe to lie about the whole thing. This brings us to the shepherds.

Only the hobbits could carry the ring of power and only the shepherds could handle the glory of the announcement. It's the same point as last week. God works in ways we wouldn't expect and often uses the most unlikely kind of people to accomplish His purposes. The proud were too sophisticated. The powerful were too threatened. But the shepherds were neither proud nor powerful and responded beautifully and famously to the angelic word.

Be encouraged, my friend. If God can use shepherds, then God can use you. If we are not too high and mighty and open to hearing and obeying Him, God can and will do great things through us.

The content of the angels' announcement is important. *For unto you is **born** this day in the city of David a **Savior**, who is **Christ** the **Lord**.*

Born – This was not a ghost. This was not a costume. This was a real baby with real flesh and blood. A genuine down-to-the-DNA human being. He was one of us.

A Savior – A Savior insinuates somebody is in need of saving. Since it says "For unto you is born this day," it means that we are the ones in need of saving. The rest of the Bible fills in the picture of our moral and spiritual bankruptcy before God, our impending judgment and eternal punishment, and our inability to do anything about it. We have real need. Just like a fire station means people need to be saved from fires and a jail means people need to be safe from criminals, the presence of a Savior means there are people needing saving. Us.

Christ – means "anointed one." This is the New Testament term for the Old Testament Messiah. Chosen One. By whom? God. Divinely chosen and sent. The source of this salvation is God Himself.

Lord – speaks to the majesty and authority of His person. He wouldn't seem to be Lord of all lying there in the manger, but this child is Lord of the universe. Wow! Birth. Savior. Christ. Lord.

When we get what those mean and that he is born "to us" Christmas becomes personal. As I embrace Him by faith, the byproduct is exultation. Joy.

So, Christian, how's that exultation in the Christ-child going this year? *Pastor Steve, I understand it but I am not that excited about it.* No. Maybe you used to understand it but apparently you have forgotten. What you have likely forgotten is how much we/you need a Savior. It's like people that drive by a fire station. Most hardly notice. They have no real emotions about it. Do things change when your house is on fire? What does the appearance of that shimmering red fire truck feel like? Is there pride and joy in firemen rushing into the fire to save you or your house? *They're here! Yea!* What changed? My perception of my need. The more we perceive our need of saving, the happier we are about the Savior arriving. So how's the exulting this Christmas? *Joy to the World! The Lord has come!*

Investigation (Shepherds)

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." And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. (Luke 2:15-17)

They immediately wanted to go find this child but identifying babies is kind of hard to do. Have you noticed that they often look a lot alike? This week I was speaking to our MOPS ministry which is a ministry to mothers of preschoolers. There were about 100 of them. One of the moms was holding a baby dressed in red. During my message I made a reference to the child and called the baby a "him." I was quickly corrected; the baby was not a him, it was a her. It's hard to tell when the baby is in red. Blue or pink helps. Red can go either way, can't it? I needed a clue. I needed a sign.

The angel wanted the shepherds to find this child. So he gave them an identification sign: a baby lying in a manger. This is a great sign. Why? It was a sign because of where he was. A manger was a feeding trough for animals. You don't lay babies in mangers. He wasn't the only baby in Bethlehem that night, but he could guarantee that he was the only baby lying in a manger. So off they went. What else could they do? The claims about Him were too big and too wonderful to be ignored.

People have been spiritually investigating the glory in the manger ever since. We have wanted to know, *Could what the angels said about Him be true?* I was recently at a local elementary school. They had asked me to come and tell a class the Christmas story. Then there was time for questions. One of the children raised her hand and asked, *How do we know that this happened?* Here was a fourth grader asking what philosophers call epistemology or what we call the search for the truth. I asked her, "How do we know Abraham Lincoln lived?" "People who were there wrote about him," she replied.

That's what we have here. People who were there wrote about what happened. If you are investigating Christianity, this is a great place to start. Eyewitness accounts of the life of Christ. There are four of them: Matthew, Mark, John, and here, Luke. Investigate the claims they make and see if believing them is reasonable.

I quote this a lot but Larry King's quote captures it. He was asked if he could interview anyone on his show from history, who would it be and what would he ask. "*I'd interview Jesus Christ,*" he said. "*I'd ask him if he was born of a virgin because the answer to that question defines history.*" This either happened or it didn't. If it didn't, then there is no fire truck to save us. If it did, this is the greatest thing that ever happened and the answer to your search for life's meaning.

Contemplation (Mary)

And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. (Luke 2:18-19)

The word in the Greek there for "treasure" means "to keep close. To preserve." A modern idiom might be she "scrapbooked them" in her heart. Remember the whole story I used at the beginning? Angelic announcements everywhere. People singing everywhere. A sudden marriage. Providential movement on a worldwide scale to get them to the city of David. A difficult journey and a birth without any medical assistance. All this and she's only 14. It must have been overwhelming.

But it's a little like all mothers feel after the hoopla of marriage and pregnancy and birth is over. The parties are done. The presents are put away. On the other side of a birth, there's a little baby that needs to be fed, burped, changed, and napped, over and over and over again. The angelic word is supernatural but everything else for Mary was as normal as any mother here has experienced. What did she do? She contemplated it all. What could all this mean? Why her? What will this child become?

Threaded through this story is the spiritual journey of all who come to faith in Christ. Somebody tells us (announcement). Probably not an angel, but you heard it from someone. Somewhere along the way your heart said, *I want to investigate this thing I have been told.* The gospel of Christ and His cross is sobering and wonderful. To understand it requires contemplation – my sin, Christ's death in my place – is this reasonable, believable?

For those who believe the angelic word that "born to us in the city of David, was a Savior, Christ the Lord," the freedom from sin's guilt and the relationship with God through Christ, creates an enduring joy. An exultation. Not that we are always flying high but we are always flying hopeful. Information leads to investigation which produces contemplation and joyously, exultation. Do you know this joy? Do you know this Savior? This is deep but simple, *He is the Christ the Lord!* You can know Him and His salvation today if you turn from your sins and turn to this Jesus and believe. Investigation leads to contemplation which can lead to exultation. It did for the shepherds who left the first nativity....

And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. (Luke 2:20)

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