

Luke 2:8-20
The Messiah Announced

What is the best news you ever received? That big promotion at work? The time she said “yes.” When the pregnancy test was “positive.” All of these are “good news,” but there is news so profound that the very angels who are at the throne of God, Himself, came to tell us about it.

Scripture reminds us that Christ “emptied Himself, taking the form of a bondservant, and being made in the likeness of men,” Philippians 2:7. We cannot fully understand that. And why He chose to do so in the most humble of circumstances - to be born into the family of a common laborer, in an undeveloped part of the world, to an unmarried woman, who was spending the night in a shelter of animals far from her home - is even more unimaginable. And yet this birth was announced by angels! Surely this speaks to the irrelevance of circumstances.

The announcement of the birth of the Messiah is almost as strange as the circumstances surrounding His birth. Surely a good public relations man would have first briefed the political and religious leaders of the day. God, instead, chose to reveal the birth of the Messiah to some men out watching their flocks of sheep. We cannot help but be reminded of James 2:5, “did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him?”

God revealed Himself to shepherds, not to kings or priests. In our humble daily tasks God calls to us. Moses was shepherding (Exodus 3:1), Gideon was threshing wheat (Judges 6:11), Elisha was plowing (1 Kings 19:19). Christ, Himself, would call Peter and Andrew while they were fishing (Matthew 4:18), and Matthew while he was sitting in his office (Matthew 9:9). We can never know when the Lord might call on us.

The Recipients

Shepherds were not important people. They were generally uneducated, stereotyped as lazy and dishonest, and could not testify in court according to Roman law. Since sheep required daily attention, they were unable to keep the Sabbath regulations and thus offended the Pharisees and other strict followers of the Law. This meant that according to the contemporary interpretation of the Jewish laws, they were perpetually unclean. Still Moses had been a shepherd, as had David. Jesus described Himself as the best of shepherds, “I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep.” John 10:11.

It is fitting that the announcement was made to lowly shepherds. Christ would focus His earthly ministry on the lowly. The religious leaders would be offended by Him, and the wealthy found His standards too rigorous (Luke 18:18-25). Instead He devoted His attention to people possessed by demons, the blind, and outcast from society.

These shepherds were “staying out in the fields” (v.8). More commonly done in the spring, winter, and fall months, it was not inconceivable that there would be shepherds managing their flocks in the winter as well. Sheep were needed year round of the sacrifices in Jerusalem, and the surrounding area was used by shepherds for this very purpose. Sheep would graze during the day, but at night be herded into pens where they could be better protected from thieves and predators.

“The glory of the Lord shone around them” (v.9). This was the glory that God had shown Israel in the wilderness (Exodus 24:16), at the dedication of the tabernacle (Exodus 40:34), and most emphatically, in the temple, “¹⁰It happened that when the priests came from the holy place, the cloud filled the house of the LORD, ¹¹so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of the LORD filled the house of the LORD.” (1 Kings 8:10). It will be seen again at the second coming of Christ (Matthew 24:30).

That the shepherds were “were terribly frightened” (v.9) ought to surprise no one, since that is the typical response of anyone upon seeing God’s glory. And the angel responded understandingly, as he had done to Zacharias and Mary with the comforting words “do not be afraid” (v.10).

The Announcement

But more than not being afraid, the angel was actually bringing a message of “good news of great joy” (v.10). The word *evangelizo* is a favorite of Luke as he uses it some two dozen times in Luke and Acts. It is a news that produces joy “inexpressible and full of glory” as Peter says in 1 Peter 1:8. And this news is “for all the people” (v.10). Salvation is no longer limited to the Jews. Israel is no longer the only favored nation. Not all are to be saved, but God has sovereignly chosen from all peoples of the world to save some.

“There has been born for you a Savior,” (v.11) is the heart of the gospel message. God has always been about saving His people. In Deuteronomy 20:4, Moses said, “for the LORD your God is the one who goes with you, to fight for you against your enemies, to save you.” David echoed this in 2 Samuel 22:3,

“My God, my rock, in whom I take refuge,
My shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold and my refuge;
My savior, You save me from violence,”

The coming of the Messiah was the completion of a long process of salvation. Before Christ could redeem mankind by His death, He had to be born in the flesh. He could not be a phantom, or a representation of a man. He had to be as completely human as He was completely God. This was because His purpose in coming was not to be a good moral leader or a great philosopher. He came to be a Savior.

“A Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (v.11). Let us remember Who our God is. Christ did not come from heaven to provide fulfillment in our marriages, security in our jobs, good health, and a sense of purpose in life. He came because mankind had a problem only He could solve. We are sinners, every one. Romans 3:23 states it plainly, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” We do not need therapists, good bosses, competent doctors, or life coaches; we need a Savior.

This Savior is Jesus Christ. The name Christ, and its OT counterpart Messiah, both mean “anointed one.” Anointing was commonly done to inaugurate a king in the ancient world. Though many other rulers claimed the title, only Jesus Christ is the “King of kings” (Revelation 17:14), and only He will reign forever.

And He is Lord. In the ancient world this word, *kurios*, was often paired with *doulos*, which means slave. The connection was used to emphasize relationship and the place of each person in it. But more than that, in the context of Scripture this title conveys all that is implied in the tetragrammaton YHWH. In the Septuagint, YHWH is translated *kurios*. The first and most fundamental Christian confession is that “Jesus is Lord,” 1 Corinthians 12:3. Romans 10:9, “if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved,” is a fundamental principle of our faith.

The Angelic Host

We don't know how many angels there were, “multitude” is a bit vague. Nevertheless, the appearance of many angels at one time in one place is unique to Scripture. The angels are doing here what they do in heaven, “praising God” (v.13). The angels praised God for the Messiah being born even though they did not need a redeemer. They praised God because it is what those in the presence of God do when they see His work. Their praise is simple, (v.14)

“Glory to God in the highest,
And on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased.”

Their praise is that there is at last opportunity of peace with God. This is what must be meant by “peace among men” since mankind's sinful nature does not allow that in any earthly sense. It refers instead to the peace spoken of in Romans 5:1, “Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” This peace is only for men “with whom He is pleased,” as well. This is not to say that men can please God (Isaiah 64:6), or that God offers peace to those who please Him. Rather it means that God sovereignly chooses to rest His good pleasure on some people and those people have peace with God.

Response to the Announcement

“Let us go straight to Bethlehem then, and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has made known to us,” is an outstanding response to the good news announced by the angels. Perhaps they took some time to decide who would stay behind to guard the flock, or perhaps they just left the flock to whatever might come and all took off. In any case, the shepherds responded immediately to the call.

The shepherds heard and believed. This is the basic process of salvation. As Paul reminds us “how will they believe in Him whom they have not heard?” (Romans 10:14). The Gospel message must be preached, but then it must be believed.

We have no idea how they found Joseph, Mary, and Jesus. They were told to go to Bethlehem, and there they no doubt asked around. There could not have been that many babies born that night, even in a crowded village, so eventually their efforts were rewarded. Their only clue was that the baby would be lying in an animal's feeding trough, but that must have been sufficient of them to distinguish the Christ child.

Their arrival must have led to many conversations. The shepherds relating their witnessing of the angelic host singing praise to God; Mary and Joseph affirming their words with similar stories. The response of the shepherds to this new revelation was “they made known the statement which had been told them about this Child,” (v.17). Once they believed, they had to tell others.

This is the natural response of believers - at least at first. As time goes on and our hearts become more used to the idea, for many the passion and excitement lessens. Nonetheless a good barometer of our joy in the Lord is how often we share the gospel. Lack of enthusiasm in this area is a sign of indifference and ingratitude.

Not that all who heard the news that night believed. That “all who heard it wondered at the things which were told them by the shepherds,” (v.18) does not mean that all believed. Many would follow Jesus in the physical sense without following Him in the spiritual sense during His earthly ministry. Whether out of curiosity or genuine interest, many wondered but did not believe.

Mary, meanwhile, “treasured all these things, pondering them in her heart” No doubt she did. Much had happened to her in the last nine months. As the years passed and the Christ child became a young boy, and then a man, one can only wonder at how often Mary reflected on the events of that night.

Take Aways

No matter where we are in life, God can call us.

We ought to rejoice when we see God at work, even if that work does not particularly benefit us.

Our excitement to share the good news of the Saviour is an excellent measure of our spiritual health.