

“For Unto You is Born, A Savior Who is Christ the Lord”

Luke 2:1-20

Introduction: (Read Luke 2:1-20) – This text is Luke’s telling of the events surrounding the birth of Jesus. *I love everything about Luke’s story of Jesus’ birth.* When I say I love everything about Luke’s story of Jesus birth in these verses, what I mean is that it is all comfort, encouragement and hope for me. This passage creates absolutely no dissonance in my soul.

Admittedly some of my affection for this passage comes from its place in all of my Christmases past. But the fact remains, it is a story filled with wonderful and glorious paradox. There is the awesome “otherness” of the God who is Creator, who is beyond all things and in every way transcends His creation. Yet we see this Transcendent Creator at the same time wondrously “imminent” and moving sovereignly and with great care, into and over every page of human history. He is masterfully and lovingly working to shape its every sentence and fill every moment with love and grace in the most unexpected ways. We find that surprisingly, even shockingly, all along, from before the first word of creation was spoken and certainly, from our perspective, since Genesis 3, He was directing all of human history – not simply as Creator but as Redeemer – not simply as distant or transcendent but as immanent/present - to this very moment.

There is a sort of a sense that Luke has written us – people and governments and even impersonal natural forces – into the story. Our present lives are a sort of continuation of this story in application. Our lives and the decisions which direct them impact the events that make up the story of redemptive history which is the theme of Luke 2 - on a personal level and on a grand level and in often unknown and unexpected ways. *And yet, the theme of the story, the main storyline and the outcome is thankfully determined by this divine author who is admittedly driven by an unparalleled love, an incomprehensible love for you and me.*

The events of this story scream from heaven – “I have not left you alone!!” “Be at peace for I have come!” “I have come not only to pay the debt left by sin – and to justly destroy the curse and death – I have come so that I can sympathize with you in your broken humanity in a fallen world and so that you can come to me in your times of deepest need” (cf. Hebrews 2:14-18; 4:14-16.)

[**This is the reason**] Paradoxically, this passage, which is so simply written and is steeped in such humility, explodes with glory. *My fear for both you and me is twofold – first* that we are so familiar with the passage and so grounded in such a westernized, affluent, and up to now, culturally accepted Christianity that the wonder of this story is dulled in our reading. *Second* I fear that I will take away from the simple and powerful, compelling beauty of the passage as I attempt to touch just a little bit of its depth, its glory. As I mentioned in the Newsletter – Dawson, in his book on the ascension of Jesus, alluded to “*The sweet breaths of the far country*

of heaven” in the truths that speak of Jesus. I want that “sweet breath of heaven” to blow into our lives from this passage.

The Decree of Caesar – 2:1-7 – In 2:1-7 Luke is faithful to his stated purpose (cf. 1:1-4) by providing for us a series of verifiable historical/geographical “markers” for his narrative. I believe his intention is to mark these historical events as the sovereign work of God as He moves in history to accomplish the work of redemption in Jesus.

A Word About the “Census” – There is much discussion about the details of this census and its timing within Roman history. When all of the dust of the discussions among scholars and historians settles we are left with the fact that the purpose of this decree was to register the population for taxation purposes. ***Luke wants us to know that that moment in human, Roman history was itself a moment in Divine history.***

- 2:1-3 – In verses 1-3 Luke effectively places God in the halls of power, in Caesar’s imperial government. Luke’s readers would have known that by this time Augustus had already reigned for about 27 of his 45 years. They would have known that such decrees were issued without consideration for the hardship caused the people and with no recourse offered them.

The Roman senate or Caesar certainly had no idea that they were being used of God to bring in the promised Messianic/eschatological King who would accomplish the salvation of everyone who would place their faith in Him. Caesar no doubt believed that his decree was based in his own unilateral authority and his wisdom. ***From our perspective he is understood to be simply a tool in the hands of God to bring His heavenly King – His Divine Son incarnate.***

- 2:4-5 – In verses 4-5 Luke shifts his focus to the personal history of Mary and Joseph. God moves from the halls of power to the humble lives of this Jewish couple whom He chose to be the earthly parents of this Messianic King.

When Joseph and Mary were introduced in verse 4 the readers would have easily felt the weight of a pregnant young woman and her husband displaced and facing the hardship of travel away from family and home. They would have understood the struggles of Mary and Joseph going through the birth of their first baby - perhaps without the help of a midwife and in a place intended for animals – with only a manger in which to lay the baby. ***The story is real! The hardship for them would’ve been palpable!*** (As an aside – one author wrote that the census may well have been controversial and very difficult but Joseph and Mary were obedient to the Roman government and were likely not zealots or nationalists. They were just doing life the best they could.)

However, something else would likely not have been lost on those first readers – certainly it is not lost on us. In 2:4-7 Luke makes it clear that these events were connected to an ancient prophecy of Messiah. He is careful to give details about Joseph’s lineage because he wanted to

establish that this baby was from the line of David and that He was indeed the promised Messiah (cf. 1 Samuel 17:12, 58; 2 Samuel 7:8-16; also Ruth 4:17).

What this means is that the decree of Caesar Augustus, *on a superficial level*, was the decree of an emperor of a sovereign nation with no consideration for the God of Israel or His promises to His people. Certainly he had no knowledge of the identity of these two travelers or the baby soon to be born. However, *at the level of the will and workings of the Sovereign Lord over all nations and over all of humanity and over creation itself* – Caesar did not know that his entire reign, and certainly this decree, was part of the plan of the One who alone is the God – so that He might bring forth His Son, conceived in the “power of the Most High” and born of this virgin young woman. The One to be born to Mary and Joseph that day in Bethlehem would be called the Son of God and He would sit on the throne of David and reign forever. Every rule, power and authority – including that of Rome - would ultimately bow before this baby who was born the King. That little baby born to such humble parents and in such humble circumstances would be King Jesus and He would establish an eternal and unshakeable Kingdom (cf. 1:26-37). He alone would be the hope of all mankind!

- 2:6-7 – In a paradoxically simple/succinct statement of the actual birth moment, Luke emphasized the very humble circumstances of Jesus’ birth – the birth of this One who was King of all kings. This provided a transition into the contrasting heavenly and glory filled announcement of His birth by angelic messengers. These angelic messengers/heralds have accompanied every key development in the Divine calendar of the birth and infancy narrative.

Note: Ironically and wonderfully, after this day, the task of announcing the glory of this moment, and its connection to the ancient promises of the Messianic King who would be the Savior of mankind, would fall, wonderfully to those whom He would save (cf. 2:15-20, 25-38).

The Announcement of the Angels to the Shepherds in the Field outside of Bethlehem – 2:8-14

- The angel’s words confirmed, in explicit terms, that God had sent him to declare that this One, whose birth he announced, was the promised Messianic King. He was the One about whom the prophets wrote (Note the allusion to both Micah 5:2 - City of David - and Isaiah 9:1-6 - the child whose birth he announced was the Incarnate King – who would bear the weight of an eternal reign on David’s throne and over the Messianic kingdom).

It is after a simple provided detail (cf. 2:8) that the narrative explodes with glory. First like with Gabriel’s visit first to Zechariah and then six months later to Mary, a single angel appeared to announce the birth of the baby Jesus and to explain who He was and the reason for His coming to the unsuspecting shepherds in the field. As soon as the angel appeared the glory of the Lord flooded the night sky and the shepherds were predictably terrified. As with Zechariah and Mary before, the angel told them not to be afraid. The announcement which followed was of the fulfillment of the covenant promise of God – a promise of almost unspeakable glory and unparalleled hope and joy. The angel had come to announce that this baby boy was God’s

provision/offering of peace/reconciliation, salvation, of eternal life and unending, unshakable hope – it was the promise of the coming of the true King (cf. Isaiah 9:1-7).

The words of the angel/herald to the frightened shepherds recorded in 2:9, 10-12 are perhaps the most hope filled and paradoxical words ever spoken. It is important to note that though these words are given voice by an angelic herald they originate in the heart of God!!

Do not fear (this is the fear that is the experience of so many in Scripture when the glory of an angelic visitor sent from the presence of God – the fear of one alienated from such glory by sin and fallenness; “Woe is me...”) – Good news of great joy ***for all the people - A Savior*** has been born to you ***he is Christ, the Lord*** – you will find ***a baby!*** Angels were sent from the presence of God to proclaim salvation, hope and peace from God in the birth of a baby – the coming of the Son of God as a human baby – “Veiled in flesh the Godhead see.” I want to include reflections on the incarnation from two men who were contemporaries of one another – Dietrich Bonhoeffer and C.S. Lewis – who were both believers living during WWII.

Speaking obliquely of our understanding of our hope in Jesus Bonhoeffer writes;

“This...rests on something infinitely deeper and more impenetrable, namely, that in the conception and birth of Jesus Christ, God took on humanity in bodily fashion. God raised his love for human beings above every reproach of falsehood and doubt and uncertainty by himself entering into the life of human beings as a human being, by bodily taking upon himself and bearing the nature, essence, guilt, and suffering of human beings. Out of love for human beings, God becomes a human being....It is really beyond all our understanding: the birth of a child shall bring about the great change, shall bring to all mankind salvation and deliverance.”¹

C.S Lewis gives some more clarity to Jesus’ incarnation and birth when he wrote;

“...the Christian story is precisely the story of one grand miracle, the Christian assertion being that what is beyond all space and time, what is uncreated, eternal, came into nature, into human nature, descended into His own universes and rose again, bringing nature (humanity) up with Him. It is precisely one grand miracle. If you take that away there is nothing specifically Christian left...The story of the Incarnation is the story of a descent and resurrection....The coming down, not only into humanity, but into those nine months which precede human birth...and going lower still into (death, the tomb) being a human corpse, a thing which, if this ascending movement had not begun, would have passed out of the organic altogether...”²

This message is central to the teaching of Jesus in the pages of the gospel of John. It is the glorious incarnational message of the author of Hebrews (cf. 2:5-14) and it is the essence of Paul’s gospel call issued to Timothy from prison (cf. 2 Timothy 1:8-10).

¹ Bonhoeffer, “God is in the Manger,” pages 50-51

² C.S. Lewis, “God in the Dock,” chapter 9, pages 80, 82

Second, it is no wonder that what followed the angel's words to the shepherds was Heaven's perspective on His birth. It was as though the angels of heaven who looked on could not remain silent – they burst forth in what seems to be a message of hope and spontaneous worship, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests” (Luke 2:14 NIV).

The Response of the Shepherds – 2:15-20 – The shepherds, in response to the angels' visit, occupy the very place in this narrative that you and I must occupy in the ongoing narrative within our generation.

- ***They went to see*** – Think of what they were told and what they saw and how Luke interprets their understanding of what they saw by the message of the angel(s) – cf. 2:15-17

Note: Luke reminds us in 2:19 that Mary was in somewhat of a “coming to understanding” process, which occurs throughout the gospel narratives. The shepherd's visit must've included some form of an explanation or interaction with Mary and Joseph which included questions the shepherds asked of them and included questions Jesus' parents asked of the shepherds. This gives a bit of perspective into how difficult it was for anyone on that side of the resurrection to fit all that was declared and took place into present categories of thought.

- ***They went to “herald” or declare*** – There is a perpetuation and deepening of wonder and glory in the “telling,” which the shepherds experienced – which awaits us. (Note: This is not unlike what took place in John 4 with the woman at the well.) ***I truly believe that this is axiomatic to depth and growth in the Christian life – growth in understanding and in wonder but also in desire to pursue Him more.*** Notice that what was an otherwise unimpressive or insignificant event and invisible to the world in which it took place, took on the air of wonder or the miraculous on the level of nothing ever conceived – God became man as a baby!!

- ***They returned to life “in worship”*** – Worship is a life posture that takes the “spiral of relationship with God” deeper and deeper – love received (experience and wonder); love shared (the multifaceted life experiences of the church emphasized in Ephesians 3:14-19 – 20-21); love reciprocated or given back in worship.

Note: This is the stuff that brings the capacity for indomitable hope and depth of joy to life in an unstable, fallen and failing world – this is the application of the truth that is Jesus heralded by the angels in the ongoing experience of the people of God (cf. 2:10-14).

It seems fittingly paradoxical that the birth of this unspeakably glorious King – this God-Man – would first be announced to humble shepherds at night and out in the Judean countryside as they tended their sheep and not to Caesar – not to an earthly King who felt himself to be beyond the need of such a Savior and likely offended by this baby's claim to the hearts of man. *Indeed, from what we can tell, these humble shepherds whose names were likely unknown to any government leader or among high society, were the first to look upon the face of the Holy Child – who would*

bear their sin and bring their salvation. These humble shepherds were intentionally made part of the story and they were the first to worship and bear witness to the King (cf. 2:15-20).

It is true that we live in somewhat unprecedented times. It seems to bring a kind of weight to every day and a sense of helplessness. The threat of someone we love contracting the virus and not being able to fight it off is significant. Indeed, there is the feeling that the governmental leaders are randomly issuing mandates which seem more politics than science or health – with little concern for those they claim to serve. Many feel that they/we have no voice with our leaders and for the first time since I've been a Christian I sense that the biblical church seems cast as an enemy to a significant portion of our culture. If all of that weren't enough, we in the church are at odds with each other about how to best address the problems we face and our conversations seem ignited by the same intense feelings which have divided our culture.

Let's, for a moment, return to that first century town of Bethlehem and to that field outside of town. Let's look carefully and see this Transcendent Creator wondrously “imminent” and moving sovereignly and with great care over every page of our history – no less masterfully and lovingly shaping its every sentence and filling every moment with love and grace in the most unexpected ways. Let's consider that surprisingly, even shockingly, all along, from before the first word of creation was spoken and certainly, from our perspective, since Genesis 3 when man fell in sin and were destined to life under the curse, He was directing all of human history – *not simply as Creator but as Redeemer* – to this very moment in our history. We are not living in a time that is out of control or experiencing anything at all that has not issued forth for the hand of our loving Father. We are at the mercy of any governmental leader, any cultural force or movement and certainly not of any impersonal and deadly virus. The Lord Himself has descended in a declaration of personal and unspeakably powerful love, He entered in – He came!!

Let's hear the angel's words as filled with promise – because as every moment of history, up to that day, was directed by the hand of God to that central moment in redemptive history – so too – every moment since has issued forth from that place and time – the Savior's birth – AND it all finds its substance and meaning in Him.

Let's go with the shepherds to the manger to “see” – to look upon the face of the Savior. Let's go out and declare to all who would hear us – He has come – God entered in profoundly in that baby!! Then let us enter into life in adoration and loving worship!! This day is filled with “good news of great joy that is for all people” and for every time - “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests” (Luke 2:14 NIV).