



## The Pastoral Gospel

Luke 2:1-21

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A little over a hundred years ago in a dusty temple in modern day Turkey several greek inscriptions were found. One in particular dates back to 9BC. The inscription is now commonly called: “The Priene Calendar Inscription.” It’s called that because the Greek city where the temple was was called at that time Priene. It’s a calendar inscription, however, because what it is describing is a suggestion to move the beginning of the calendar year to a new date: the birthdate of Caesar Augustus, known at that time as Octavian. Augustinus is a title, meaning “majestic”. This majestic Caesar Octavian was known as the emperor of peace, because it was in his reign that the territories of Rome found unprecedented rest from internal war and political strife. He was so highly regarded by the Roman elite that the popular suggestion was to rearrange the calendar to honor him, instead of his great uncle Julius Caesar. Listen to the language of this inscription:

“The providence which has ordered the whole of our life...has ordained the most perfect consummation for human life by giving to it Caesar Augustus, by sending in him, as it were, a savior for us and those who come after us, to make war to cease, to create order everywhere...the birthday of the god [Augustus] was the beginning of the gospel for the world that came by him.”

Notice there the language used to describe the birth of Augustus. His birth is gospel: literally “good news” or “glad tidings”. Augustus’ reigned with such command and sovereignty and peace that the advent of his birth was described as the advent of good news into the world—a savior who brought political peace. So they said of him.

It is with this context that we consider today the story of another birthday, another advent of one who would rule and reign, who was said to be an emperor or a price of peace. And what we will be told in our text is that this birth is the beginning of the gospel for the world. It is literally: good news. And the irony of the contrast between these two proclamations of gospel is that the second one, the birth of Jesus, comes during the reign of the first. You could almost say he is setting himself up as a foil to Caesar Augustus. The anti-Augustus, if you will.

What is the heartbeat of the gospel of Augustus? It is the centralized power of the Roman way. Who is the birthday of Augustus good news for? It is for those who are in control. It’s for the Roman citizens, who have unprecedented civil rights and liberties across their vast empire. But it is not good news for the conquered, is it? This “gospel” serves only to remind them that their freedom has been stripped from them, that they live constantly under the watchful and often



vengeful eye of Rome. There may be peace in the land, but there is no peace in their hearts. When we read in **verse 1** that in those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree for the registration and census of the whole world, we view it through the lens of those who are being counted. Their registration is a remembrance of their allegiance to a foreign, far-off power. For the Roman elites, a census is the good news of the expanse of their peaceful, submissive subjects. For Joseph and Mary, it is the news of their oppression and forced obedience. It's inconvenient, it's not fun. The gospel of Augustus is the gospel of the throne room—it rings most true when it is pronounced in the halls of the haughty.

But this new gospel, the one proclaimed in Luke 2, it's different, isn't it? It promises political peace, but not at the expense of the oppression of the world. It promises a ruler, but not one who gives orders from far away. This gospel is not a gospel of the throne room—in the throne room it sounds only like insurrection and rebellion. No, the gospel of Jesus the Christ is the gospel of the pasture. It rings most true when it is proclaimed to the least of these, or as we know: to certain poor shepherds in fields where they lay.

So it's my job this morning to show you exactly why the gospel of Jesus Christ is far better news than the gospel of Augustus. Or perhaps we can put it this way: the gospel of Jesus Christ is far better news than the gospel of American nationalism or American exceptionalism. The gospel of Jesus Christ is far better news than the gospel of authentic individualism, the gospel of self-help and self-care, it's better news than the gospel of economic prosperity or the gospel of sexual expression or the gospel of social progressivism. It's *actually, eternally*, good news.

And it's good news primarily because it comes to us exactly where we are: in the pasture. It's a pastoral gospel, for dirty, wandering, low-class outcasts. And friends, that is good news, because that is *you*. Spiritually speaking, you are not Caesar Augustus or the governor Quirinius. Long ago your ancestor Adam rejected and abdicated the spiritual high ground in this world, and you've descended with him. So the gospel of Jesus is good news because it is the only gospel that truly comes down to the place where you are: dirty, wandering, rejected, normal. Once again, it is the pastoral gospel: the gospel at home with the sheep and the goats and the grazing cattle. You know, where you are. It's a gospel on the ground. So let's hear some good news, today, shall we?

## The Pastoral Scene

What is so curious about the setting here given by Luke is that he strips away any sentimental idea of Christmas being a fairy tale. Christmas in popular culture is a time for magic and mystery. I have no immediate qualm with engaging in creative mythology, but our text aims to make sure we understand that the advent of Jesus Christ is first and foremost a *historical* event. **Verse 1** and **2** make that clear. What is also clear is the journey made by Joseph and Mary. Although this is a Roman census, the tradition of being counted in the place of your lineage is a Jewish one, and it's likely the Romans were trying to conduct their registration in a way that was least offensive to the Jews, in a way that felt more normal to them.



But it is certainly not convenient. **Verse 4-5** tells us Joseph has to travel the long journey south to Bethlehem from Nazareth.

Mary travels with Joseph, which likely would have been unnecessary except for the fact that she is very pregnant. The text mentions that she is Joseph's betrothed. Although by this time they would have already been married, as is relayed to use in Matthew 1:24. Luke calls them betrothed here because he is emphasizing the important fact that they have not yet consummate their marriage. Although they are bound together in marriage, this child inside Mary is not Joseph's. Even so, Joseph feels protection over Mary, and cannot leave her alone to possibly give birth while he is gone. So Mary makes the trek with him. But she doesn't make it back the same. While she is there, **verse 6** says, her time comes. Not exactly an ideal birth situation. There is no family, there is no doctor, there is no comfort of home. Why would this be the place chosen?

Earlier Bethlehem is noted as the city of David. It's an insignificant, small city, but significant for this fact: God had promised that from this city the Messiah ruler of Israel would be born. We find this in Micah 5:2,

But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.

What is all this showing us? It's showing us that the pastoral gospel may operate below the surface, but it isn't powerless. Consider all that had to happen to get Mary to this point: Augustus ordered the registration, Quirinius decided when it would be, and that it would be required to travel to your ancestral town, Mary had to have been pregnant enough for Joseph to want to take her along, but not pregnant enough to give birth to the baby before they arrived. God is using all of this for his specific purposes. All signs are pointing to this city, to this time. Even the great Augustus' plans are instruments in God's hands.

So we pause, and we remember: Christmas is so powerful because it forces us to reckon with the small details we are prone to miss. You may be swallowed up this year in all the things outside of your control—government mandates, cancelled events, lonely Christmas plans, you name it. But he is working to bring you, just as he did his Son, to the place that you need to be. It was ever so important that Jesus Christ was born in Bethlehem. Because God had promised: he would be from the town of David. And it is ever so important that you should be in the place where you are now, because if you are in Christ God has promised to make that place a place for your good and his glory. He is using your circumstances.

This is only further displayed by the developing unexpectedness of Jesus' nativity. **Verse 7** is brief, but might be one of the most astonishing paradoxes of history. The moment that the earth has held its breath for has come: and all of creation turns its eyes, towards a feeding trough, where an out of breath, exhausted mother and a terrified first time father lay down a sleeping baby on hay they've stolen from the cattle.



There is exactly zero grandiosity in the birth of Jesus. But he is the one for whom the calendar of time moves, not Augustus. It is his birth, his nativity, that we still long for and celebrate. Because this humble scene is the beginning of a new age, the age of peace.

What is significant about the manger? Well, there is some debate as to what the end of verse 7 means. The word “inn” there may actually mean a public house, where rooms were available for travellers. It may also mean simply a normal house or dwelling, perhaps where distant relatives of Joseph were expecting him but simply ran out of room. Either way, the emphasis here is that “there is no place for them.” Now I wonder, what kind of folk turn out a mother in birth pangs from a room? How crowded does this place have to be to deny her? Of course they don’t realize who they are rejecting: not just a mother in childbirth, but a child who is born to rule. So they are forced to go elsewhere, maybe in the courtyard with the animals under the stars, or in a cave where the animals are kept. But this is not a clean room with a bed, it is a palace where animals eat and sleep. The son of God, from his first moments of earthly breath, is rejected and treated as an animal. Why?

Again I think the beauty of this scene is shown best in contrast. What kind of gospel is Jesus preaching in his birth? It’s the same gospel he preaches in his life and death. The son of man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. The son of God did not come to be accepted and praised, but rejected and killed. He is born to die. His birthing room companions are animals, perhaps even animals destined to be sacrificial lambs or goats. And so he identifies with them: lowly, servant beasts whose purpose in life and in death is to provide for others. Here is heavenly foreshadowing—the contrast of Christmas.

Tomorrow is the winter solstice—the darkest night of the year. This year, right after sunset, Jupiter and Saturn will appear so close in the southwestern sky that they will look like one large, bright sky. Matthew’s gospel tells us that the night of Jesus’ birth was similar. A great star hung over Bethlehem, and it shone brighter because of the darkness of the sky. I love how Sally Lloyd Jones puts it in *The Jesus Storybook Bible*: “The darker the night got, the brighter the star would shine.” And here in this scene, the more humble the means of birth, the more glorious the king.

This is the pastoral scene of the first proclamation of the true gospel. At just the right time, in just the right place, Jesus was born. Don’t be fooled by the unimpressive nature of it, it’s exactly the point. Jesus Christ came into time, where you are, and into the dirt, where you are, to be king over all things. The pastoral gospel is better news than any other news because it says that instead of the ruler being high and lifted far above us and shouting down decrees, he became the lowest of us. Take a second to let that contrast work in your mind. God made low.

## **The Pastoral Message**

Now that we have considered the pastoral scene of the gospel, let’s consider the message. Only this gospel can come down to where real people are, but what does this gospel say? We find it’s



content as it is proclaimed first in the pasture to shepherds, surrounded again not by royal halls or comfy hearths, but by stars and sheep. They are in the same region, says **verse 9**, close by. Because they are close by, it's likely that their sheep would be used for sacrifice, since Rabbinic law prescribed that flocks were normally to be kept far into the wilderness, unless they were to be sacrificed soon. The fact that they are anywhere near Jerusalem may mean that these shepherds, watching over their own sacrificial lambs, are about to hear news of a sacrificial lamb who will watch over them.

The appearance by the angel to shepherds is not insignificant. Shepherds were not thought of well in society, or at least they did not have a high status socially. Their work kept them from participation in the religious activities of the day, and so they were often considered unfaithful or unclean. But the Scriptures have a knack for bringing shepherds good news. Moses was keeping his sheep when he encountered the burning bush. David was looking after the flock when he was called in to be anointed as king. Jesus' pastoral gospel is signifying the breakthrough of the divine into the lives of the lowly and unfaithful ones.

In the darkness of the night, an Angel of the Lord appears to them, with the glory of the Lord shining around them. The idea here is that the angel possesses a certain glow, gives off a light, that is a reflection of the glory of God. They immediately can identify this messenger as coming from holy God, which is why they cower in fear. But the angel does not come with bad news, but good news. The angel says: "I bring you gospel". This gospel will not be the gospel of Augustus which brings lament, but a new gospel which brings joy. The phrase "*for all the people*" is pointing to the fact that this gospel is not for others, it's not a foreign gospel, not a Roman gospel. In context, "all peoples" is centered on all the people of Israel. This promise will go forward to the nations later in Luke's narrative, but here we notice the specificity. The good news is about fulfillment: one promised to Israel has come. It's political news, news of the kingdom of God.

This news, we find in **verse 11**, is a birth announcement. Unto you, says the angel, signifying the personal nature of Christ's kingdom, is born, in the city of the King, a baby. And here we find why the gospel is good news, and why it brings joy: because this child is Savior, Christ, and Lord.

We associate the word "savior" with religious overtones, but that is not how it would have been received in the original context. The word Savior was given to any deity or political figure who brought deliverance or preserved life. But this savior is different. He is the one, as Matthew 1:21 says, will save the people from their sins. This savior will do what no other savior can do: he will save not just from poor harvests or political turmoil, he will save the people from their sins. At the heart of Christmas is the substitutionary death of Jesus, who became sin so that we might become the righteousness of God.

But he is also Christ—the anointed one. This title is given to the Messiah, the one who is the fulfillment of all God's prophecies and all God's signs. He is the one the people have been waiting for. To wrap it all up, he is savior, he is promised one, but he is finally LORD. Again, it was not uncommon to call a king or ruler Lord. Augustus was called this too. But here is the difference: Israelites only called God the Lord. Anything else was blasphemy worthy of death. When you say



that the messiah, the Christ, is the Lord, that is a serious claim. The deity of Christ is a surprise to the Israelites, something that they could never have imagined. They do not yet understand how the servant of God could be God himself. This Lord is *the* Lord, a threat to every false lords out there.

The shepherds are given the strange sign: The Lord will be wrapped in cloths (a baby!) and lying in a manger (a poor and forsaken baby!). To confirm this is indeed the message of God, an army of heaven appears, and what is their song? Not war, but peace. Their message is two-fold: in heaven, there is praise. On earth, there is peace. At the birth of Jesus Christ, all of heaven rejoiced. This is all part of God's plan, the angels are saying. He deserves all the praise for doing it this way.

And on earth, there is peace. This is not the peace of Augustus, but the peace of Christ. Augustus brought peace through subjugation and war, Jesus brings peace simply by appearing. Let's consider where we need his peace.

**We need his peace in our physical world.** In his poem *In Memoriam*, Tennyson famously describes nature as "Nature, red in tooth and claw, shriek[ing] against [God's] creed." Paul says creation is *groaning*. The very world we live on is not at peace with itself. It's bent towards hurricane and tornado and earthquake.

**We need his peace in our selves.** For all our efforts, we can never subdue the fallenness of nature, can we? Because we can't even subdue the fallenness of ourselves. We all struggle to make peace with ourselves, because we know deep down something is off, something is wrong.

**We need his peace in our mortality.** Death is the opposite of peace. It's not normal, it's not natural, it's not right. Peace on earth means no more death. And we all die.

**We need his peace in our relationships.** How do we cope with our lack of inner peace and our impending trajectory towards death? By alienating ourselves from others, by conflict, by violence, by shame, by oppression and racism and discrimination and hatred. Peace on earth means peace between all men.

**We need his peace before God.** How are we to have peace with God if we live in a peaceless earth and cannot have peace with ourselves or others? Ultimately we desire peace with God, who is justly offended at our insult and rejection of him.

But the promise of the pastoral gospel is that into the valleys of our heart, comes peace with hom God is pleased. How then friends, are we the ones with whom God is pleased? **Verse 15** tells us immediately the shepherds respond to good news with active faith, trusting the Lord has been pleased with them to reveal to them this good news. Here is how you can tell if God is pleased with you: you are hearing right now from my lips and from the scripture good news. And if you respond to that good news with acceptance and humility, God is pleased with you. Not because of your



impressiveness, but simply because he saw you, an outcast, in your pasture, and decided to give you good news.

The very fact that you are here and I can tell you that the best news in the world is that Jesus is king and he died to make you his means that you are favored among all men. Peace has come to you today, God is rejoicing in revealing his character to you. He says to any lowly shepherds who would hear: there is a Savior, Christ, the Lord! And he wants to bring you into peace with God! He says to you today: here the good news! A king is born, a king for your kind of people. A king who was born to die, who came to sit with the lambs at his birth and become the lamb at his death, a king who isn't shouting decrees from afar but is right here with you, willing to live and die for you, a king who is more powerful than this groaning world, more powerful than your inner conflict and broken relationships, who is more powerful than death itself! Are you not among the chosen and favored to hear this good news?

The gospel didn't pass over you because you were too poor and too much of a failure. It has come to you today precisely for that reason! And so friends, whether you have heard this gospel proclaimed every week for years or not, you are invited to today, like the shepherds in the field, to come and behold. To come and see the little savior of the world. To take a peek in and see a miracle.

There are two ways to respond to this miracle. One is a baseline, and this is what the shepherds do. They are amazed and they go and tell a few others who are also amazed and in wonder. They are emotionally changed, and with good reason. The preaching of the gospel to dry hearts brings about excitement and change and zeal to tell others, as it should. But notice Mary here in **verse 19**. The text says "but", contrasting her response with the shepherds. I do not think there is anything wrong with the shepherds response to the good news. They have come and seen and told. And **verse 20** says they praised and glorified God. But Mary's response is the response of lasting faith. She does not simply wonder and praise, I'm sure there was plenty of that. But she does more. She treasures and stores.

30 years later, when Jesus arrives on the scene and begins working his ministry, no one saw it coming. They had all forgotten what the shepherds had told them about this baby and their angelic visit. Angels come and go, signs and wonders and dreams and revelations come and go. They are surpassed by what is normal. With each passing day, the shepherds probably praised less and thought less of that moment. But Mary stored up it all in her heart, mulled it over. She made mental pictures in her mind.

Church, today I stand before you and proclaim the goodness of the gospel of Jesus Christ. But will that goodness fade after a few days? After a few weeks or months, or 30 years? May it not be so—may we respond like Mary, pondering and treasuring up the gospel news in our hearts,



reminding ourselves of it day after day, and seeing it grow brighter and brighter in us year after year. That is my prayer for our church—that Jesus would be treasured here about all else.

When Roman gladiators came into the arena to fight to the death, they would face the emperor for their last words. As they held out their hands towards the ruler, they would say: “We who must die salute you.” As they faced their certain death, they gave this honor to their emperor, to their Caesar.

In one of his Christmas poems, the poet W. H. Auden makes a play on this brutal Roman practice. Here is what he says:

We who must die demand a miracle.

How could the Eternal do a temporal act,

The Infinite become a finite fact?

Nothing can save us that is possible:

We who must die demand a miracle.<sup>1</sup>

As one author says, “Auden is adaciously describing the central mystery of Christmas—the moment the the impossibility of the human condition is met by the possibility of God—a miracle.”<sup>2</sup>

So too today we preach the impossible meeting the possible. We who must die receive a miracle. The miracle has happened to you, the least deserving. Jesus Christ came, died, and rose to save sinners. To those facing the darkness of certain death, the peace of certain life is offered. The infinite became fact, and this is where we hinge all of our hopes. As we wait out the last few nights of advent, we long for the culmination of our miracle gospel news. The gospel says something better than Ceasar Augustus is born. It says Jesus Christ the Lord is born.

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<sup>1</sup> W. H. Auden, “For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio”.

<sup>2</sup> Fleming Rutledge, *Advent: The Once And Future Coming Of Jesus Christ*

