

The First Christmas Carol

12-23-12

Keeping with the theme of Christmas carols, I want to start off with two questions today. The first question is this: How many of you think you could name the top 10 traditional religious Christmas carols of all time? With a little help from Google, here's the Top 10 list with the year they were written beside each one:

Slide: #1 Angels We Have Heard on High (James Chadwick, 1862)

Slide: #2 Away in a Manger (William J. Kirkpatrick, 1895)

Slide: #3 God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen (William B. Sandys, 1833)

Slide: #4 Hark! The Herald Angels Sing (Charles Wesley, 1739)

Slide: #5 O Come, All Ye Faithful (John

Francis Wade, 1743)

Slide: #6 O Holy Night (Adolphe Adam, 1847)

Slide: #7 O Little Town of Bethlehem (Phillip Brooks, 1867)

Slide: #8 Silent Night (Joseph Mohr & Franz Gruber, 1818)

Slide: #9 The First Noel (William B. Sandys, 1833)

Slide: #10 What Child Is This? (William Dix, 1865)

My favorite on that list is probably Silent Night. I just love singing Christmas carols like Silent Night this time of year. That brings me to my second question for today.

How many of you have ever been Christmas caroling? That was something we did a lot when I was growing up as a kid in central Kansas. Each year around Christmas, the kids in my youth group would bundle up in

our warm coats, and then head out to various places in the community and sing to older folks, nursing homes and shut-ins. I'll never forget the faces of some of those people who came to the door to listen to us sing. It was priceless!

Most of us know a little about Christmas songs and some of us have been out caroling, but how many of you know which carol was the first Christmas carol? Most people don't. I didn't before I wrote this message. If you're interested in learning about the first Christmas carol and its significance, then stick around. If you don't know and don't care, I think Walmart has a sale on blue ray dvd players and it's not too late to finish your Christmas shopping!

Today, I want us to look at the first Christmas carol and why it was so important. Hopefully when we are through, you'll be encouraged and challenged by what we learn. Before we get to the first carol, I want to begin by reading one of the most familiar passages in the entire Bible, the Christmas story, found in Luke 2.

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.

And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and unwrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

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 great fear. 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. 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!" 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 2:1-17 ESV)

Earlier, I said that I would tell you which carol was the first Christmas carol. And since I know you are all dying to find out, I'm going to end the suspense right now. Nested right there the middle of the verses I just read, you will find the first Christmas carol...the very first Christmas song ever sang. Any guesses as to what it is? (This is sort of like one of those "Where's Waldo?"

picture games). Let me help you out. It's found in verse 14. The angels sang it to the shepherds and we sing it every Christmas:

Gloria in Excelsis Deo or "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased."

This short little song of praise is the first Christmas carol ever sung and it was sung by the largest choir of all time. According to the Scriptures, it was sung by a multiple of heavenly hosts. The term "heavenly hosts", literally means "an army of thousands" in Greek. This little carol was so significant that God enlisted an entire "army of angels" to sing it. That must have been one, amazing Christmas concert!!

Before we examine it in detail, I want to take a few minutes to examine the historical background behind the carol.

Let's go back to the Christmas story and start by looking at the shepherds. In vs. 8, we find the shepherds out in the field keeping watch over their flocks at night.

Now I'm sure to these shepherds, this day was just like every other work day. We all know the drill: you get up in the morning, you eat breakfast, spend some time reading your bible, check your email, drive to work, put in your 8-10 hrs, come home, eat dinner, read, watch tv, talk to the wife, play with the kids, go to bed, and do it all over again 8 hours later. Just like us, these shepherds had been going through the daily drill of tending their

flocks for many years and they probably thought this night would be no different than the rest.

Now, let's push pause for a moment. Have you ever been in a pitch dark room for several hours, like when you are sleeping, and then somebody comes in and turns on the lights when you weren't expecting it? If any of you have small kids, you know what I'm talking about. It's a very startling experience. It might cause you to abruptly sit up or jump out of bed and the first thing you do is you put your hands up to shield your eyes from the brightness on the light. Now I want you to imagine that same experience magnified about 1000 times. What would you have done if you had been standing in the

middle of a dark field and an angel flipped the lights on? How do you think you would have reacted?

Verse 9 says that when the angel appeared, the shepherds were filled with fear. They were terrified. The KJV says it like this: "They were sore afraid". Now I'm not exactly sure what "sore afraid" means, but I can about guess what that feels like. Can't you? I'm sure that they were so terrified that they thought their lives were about to end.

Based on the shepherd's response to this supernatural visitation, my first observation from the passage is this:

When God shows up unexpectedly in

our lives, our first response is usually fear.

Whether it be on our jobs, like was the case with the shepherds, or in our family, or in our personal life, when God does something we didn't expect or weren't ready for, our first tendency is to react in fear. Maybe God sends an unexpected opportunity your way, or maybe you get an unexpected medical report, or some other unexpected news. When God shows up unexpectedly, our first response is fear. We are afraid because we don't know what's going to happen next. We don't like the feeling of not being in control. Our minds tend to go to the worst possible scenario. In the case of the shepherds, they probably thought they were going to die.

Now there's only one remedy for situations like these: Something or someone has to come along and dispel our fear. Without that, we will continue to be afraid. We need to be reassured that we are going to be okay or that good is going to come from the situation.

What happened to dispel fear in the hearts of the shepherds? The answer is found in verse 10. It comes from the mouth of the angel. The angel of the Lord spoke words that dispelled the fear in the hearts. Not only did the angel dispel their fear, he did much more. Let's read vs. 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."

Luke 2:10 ESV

When the angel of the Lord appeared to the shepherds, he not only delivered some important news, but also calmed their fears. He told them, "Don't be afraid. There's nothing to fear." Those words were very important. There was no way those shepherds were going to listen to another word the angel said until they were assured their lives weren't in danger.

In addition to telling them to "Fear not", the angel also told them that he had some really good news. The word "good news" used here is elsewhere translated as "gospel" whenever it's used as a verb. In essence, the angel was saying to them, "I'm bringing 'the

gospel' to you and it will bring you and everyone around you great joy!"

What exactly was this "gospel" or "good news" that the angel said would bring great joy? The answer is found in the next verse, vs. 11 of Luke 2. There we find the message that the angel said was such "good news".

For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." Luke 2:11 ESV

Now for many of us, those words are very familiar. We hear them every year at Christmas time. We've heard them at nearly every Christmas pageant or every Christmas eve service we attended the past 25 or 30 years. Our tendency when we hear these

words is to tune them out because they are so familiar. When we do, we risk overlooking the most important news that's ever been proclaimed. This news is better than winning the lottery, or landing the perfect job or even better than getting a clean bill of health. Why? Because this news has ETERNAL significance to our lives.

Let's look at each part of this of the angel's message more closely and see why it was such good news.

First, this message is good news because it tells us that Jesus came to be OUR SAVIOR. The word Savior also means Deliverer. Jesus came to earth to save us and deliver us from sin. The bible says "all have sinned and fall

short of the glory of God." All means all. That means everyone in this room is a sinner in need of a Savior. No one is exempt. With Jesus as our Savior, we can be set free from the guilt and condemnation of sin. With Jesus as our Savior, we can become friends of God. That's the first piece of good news contained in the angel's message. But there is more.

Not only did Jesus come to be our Savior, the good news is that he also came to be OUR LORD. The word Lord means ruler or master. The Bible says that Jesus is Lord of all. He's the master of the universe and the ruler over all creation. That means he's our ruler as well. He has the right to tell us what to do with our lives. This idea of Jesus is our Lord

may seem oppressive to some, but it isn't. As Lord, he knows what's good for us and he always has our best interest in mind. With Jesus as our Master, our hearts can be at rest because the Lord of the universe is in complete control of our lives at all times.

Let's push pause again for a second. I think we forget how utterly unprepared the shepherds were to hear the words, "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" How awesome that must have sounded them. A Savior has been born! The Messiah has come! The Lord from heaven is finally here! And in Bethlehem, no less! But where in Bethlehem? How will they find the baby? That's where verse 12 comes in. The angel

said,

**And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." Luke 2:12
ESV**

Now a "sign" is something that points to something else. And signs, while they are usually visible to all, are sometimes missed....especially small ones. And what sign did God choose to signify his coming to the earth? He chose a tiny one; a baby wrapped in strips of cloth lying in a manger.

Just the other day as I was writing this message, I was thinking about this idea of signs. I was sitting in my chair looking down at some of the presents Norma had wrapped and placed under the Christmas tree. I

noticed that all the presents were wrapped in different kinds of colored paper and that some were bigger than others. In fact, some of the presents under the tree were downright small. Now, I remember as I kid I hated to get small presents. Didn't you? The "bigger the better" I used to think as a kid. Usually the smaller presents contained things I didn't care about, like socks or underwear. They were always the last ones I unwrapped. I always went for the big gifts first because I thought they would be the best.

I think signs are a lot like gifts...people pay attention to the big ones but the little, seemingly insignificant ones can be ignored. I think this was what the angel was trying to

communicate to the shepherds. He said, "This will be a sign for you, and it may seem small and insignificant, but don't miss it." It would have been easy for them to overlook it or ignore a small baby born in a manger in an obscure village.

We know this is what happened to the Jews of Jesus' day. We know that the Jews back then were looking for a Messiah. Even Herod's scribes knew that Micah 5:2 predicted that Christ would be born in Bethlehem. Why didn't they recognize him when he came? They wanted something spectacular, a political messiah who would deliver them from Roman domination. The Jews wanted "a BIG sign," but they weren't expecting a baby in a manger. God gave

them a sign and they missed it.

Now I'm sure by now, some of you are thinking, "Ladell, all this information about Jesus' birth is helpful, but what does it have to do with the first Christmas carol?" Good question. And here's my answer. The reason I spent so much time on the story of Jesus birth is it represents the most important revelation of God to man.

Now up to this point in the message, we've spent quite a bit of time talking about the Christmas and how the angel messenger came to reveal the news of Jesus birth. But none of this means anything to us unless there's a response to it. In fact,

God's revelation always demands a response.

The revelation of Jesus' birth demands a response from all of creation. Every work of God deserves acknowledgement. Jesus once said, "if men keep silent about me, then the rocks and the trees will cry out." The birth of Jesus demands a response from us. We can't just sit and listen to the Christmas story and then go our merry way. No, this story demands a response! Why? Because the announcement of Jesus birth wasn't just any old announcement, it was personalized message given to all mankind...to you and me! When God sends us a message, he expects a response.

When we read the Christmas story, we find

two immediate responses to the message of Jesus' birth. Let's look at the first group to respond to God's revelation. Let's look at the the angels in heaven. Look how they responded in v. 13, 14.

**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 2:13,14 ESV**

Here we see heaven's response to the birth of Jesus Christ. This was one excited group of angels! They rushed to earth to proclaim their joy over the birth of the Christ child. "Gloria in Excelsis Deo." they sang, "Glory to God in the Highest," they chanted. It must have sounded as if all the angels in heaven

where on their feet praising God and giving God a standing ovation for what he had done.

But that's not all. The angels also said those on earth with whom God is pleased would benefit as well. Peace was promised to all who know God. The angels tell us that the Prince of Peace, Jesus, came to grant us peace...peace with God, that is, the end of all of God's hostility toward us as sinners, and the peace of God, that is, hearts that are set free from the bondage of fear and worry.

The angel's response to the birth of Christ is the very first Christmas carol ever sung and we sing it again every year as a reminder that God deserves all the glory for giving us the greatest gift of all in Jesus.

Let's look at the second group who responded to the revelation of God, the shepherds. Let me read vs. 15,16 for you.

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

Notice how they responded. First, it says that they left their fields and immediately set out to find Jesus in Bethlehem. Next, they give God glory and acknowledge their submission to him by calling him "Lord". And

third, they spread the good news about the birth of Christ to whoever would listen.

In the heavenly hosts and in the shepherds, we see an immediate response to the miracle of Jesus' birth. But that begs a question: what about us? How will we respond to God's revelation?

There are three ways all of us here today can respond to the amazing revelation of Christ's birth. The first way we can respond is to do nothing. Some of you here today have heard the Christmas story and treat it just like a fairy tale. To you this is an interesting story, but that's as far as you are willing to take it. You are like the Pharisees and the unbelievers in Jesus' day. When they

heard the news of Jesus' birth, they didn't seek him out. They stayed in their homes and went on with their lives... just like it was business as usual. They could not see the divine in the ordinary. They missed him altogether! They wanted "a sign," but they weren't expecting a baby in a manger. God gave them a sign and they missed it. It was too simple then and for many of you today, it is still too simple. For some of you, there is no response.

The second way we can respond is to rejoice and give glory to God, just like the angels and the shepherds did. If that describes you, then I know this isn't the first time you responded to Jesus this way. You actually responded to Jesus awhile ago. You said,

"yes" to him and responded to his call to "follow me". You are those whom the angel said would find true, lasting peace. You are ones with whom God is well pleased. For you, singing, "Glory to God in the highest", is the truest expression of your heart. For you, Jesus is the greatest gift of all.

There are some of you here today who don't fit into either group. You know you can't ignore the true meaning of Christmas. You know that this Jesus thing is more than just a fairy tale. You are very much interested in God and you want to respond, but you just haven't yet. You want to sing like the angels and you want to respond like the shepherds, but for some reason, you just haven't. I have one word for you. TODAY.

“For unto you is born TODAY in the city of David, a Savior Christ the Lord.”

Today is your day to respond. “Today” is the day you can say “yes” to Jesus. Don’t delay! Don’t procrastinate! The news is too great, the salvation too wonderful to put it off any longer. Today you have the opportunity to sing the first Christmas carol and really mean it. That’s my hope for you today. That you will accept God’s greatest gift, Jesus Christ our Lord. Let’s pray.