

IV. Advent in Biblical Perspective
From No News to Good News
“The Angelic Ministry of Christmas – Shepherds”
Luke 2:8-21
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Our text for this study will be in Luke 2:8-21 but I'd first like to set the context for this. This is God's Word, inspired, inerrant, infallible, sufficient, and sovereign. Luke 2:1-7 which says [1] *In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. [2] This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. [3] And all went to be registered, each to his own town. [4] 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, [5] to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. [6] And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. [7] And she gave birth to her firstborn Son and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths and laid Him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.*

The grass withers, the flower fades, the Word of our God abides forever and by His grace and mercy may His Word be preached for you.

There are a couple of things that are pretty obvious in those opening verses that I read. Number one is that Luke very clearly is precise, focused and has done his homework. In just those few sentences we see all this historical, geographical, political facts that were established and affirmed in the way that it was laid out and what was said through confidence and clarity. Now, what does that tell you besides the fact Luke is not only a doctor and a good historian? I think it tells you very clearly what Luke is trying to communicate.

Christianity is not a speculative, mystical, philosophical concept that is being perpetrated in humanity. It is a historical reality. The Gospel truth, the Word of God is rooted in time, space, history, people, dates, political settings, national settings, cultural settings. If you want to go check Christianity you will find there was a Quirinius. There was a Palestine or the Promised Land in the context of the region called Syria, through which Rome was in power then. This was the first registration and all those things mentioned in this text are all clearly documented. Christianity is not a religion of speculation or mystical thought that tries to find some contact point, but in reality, it is reality. Biblical truth is historically rooted in time, space, people, realities, date, etc. It's all there and clear.

When I was born, my parents were still very young and still singing the songs of their day. One of their songs that I do not know, had one line they sang with great gusto went like this; Here we come right back where we started from. That's where we are. On the first Sunday of Advent, we said God has been silent for 400 years and now He's speaking and His first four statements of divine revelation come through angels leading to the birth of Christ. We are now at the fourth Sunday of Advent – the fourth message that takes place in the context of bringing us to God has finally spoken in His Son Jesus with this glorious outbreak of good news. As we get to the fourth one and we are right back where we started from.

We're in the hills of Judea. The first angel spoke to Zechariah who lived in the hill country of Judea. Where is Bethlehem? It is in the hill country of Judea. As we come to the fourth message we are right back where we started in the hill country of Judea, a very specific

place. The place is Bethlehem. A very specific moment – the night of the birth of Christ. That's where we are in time, space and history.

When you begin to pray through what God leads you to preach as a pastor, an itinerant preacher has a temptation, to think 'let me get my ten sermons in my ten suits and just go travel to keep preaching it.' In pastoral ministry, you get the opportunity to keep building from God's Word – expository preaching, passage upon passage upon passage, to declare the whole counsel of God in the initiation of evangelism and discipleship in the lives of God's people. As I come to the challenges of now almost 50 years of ministry, and what to do in an Advent season due to the limited material here in terms of text, it just struck me this last year as God laid this on my heart, I knew but thought through. The first four books are called Good News. Why? It is because God is now revealing the fulfillment of everything that He had prophesied in the Old Testament, what He had given in the latter days and the former days is now being fulfilled in the latter days, and God is finally speaking in His Son as He breaks the no new silence with Good News of Christ, and He commissions four angels from the heavens to bring this Good News.

So, this is the first time I thought of it that way, but there have been unbelievable blessings for me in this series. I kind of wish this that the next study was not going to be the last Sunday in Advent because there have been things that have struck me afresh and a new. For instance, yes, God was silent for 400 years but this was not the first time. It was the second time because He did the same thing when He had him in Egypt under affliction. Now He's doing it as they have been under the affliction of Assyrians, Babylonians, Medo-Persians, Greeks and now Romans which they have been under them for about 57 to 58 years at this point. In other words, God uses it.

Have you ever noticed when you don't hear something, you start wanting to hear it? Some of the extra Biblical writers from that era give us the information that the people of Israel, particularly in the area of the Galilee and Jerusalem, were unbelievably fascinated with the anticipation of the coming of the Messiah. In fact, the evidence is, as the number one Old Testament book they were being consumed with at that time was the book of Isaiah. They read it, were searching it, and were longing to understand it. That's what was filling them. It's that way with us – when we haven't, you start anticipating, wanting to hear and know. They haven't heard as a covenanted nation from God for 400 years. When will the One who spoke with prophets and angels, speak again? God has them at that place and they're ready to hear and are about to hear, maybe not what they want to hear, but what God is going to reveal about the Good News of Christ the Messiah.

I also began to realize the silence of God in 400 years does not mean God was silent about those 400 years. Here Joseph and Mary are here in Bethlehem because an empire decreed a tax registration. So Joseph had to leave Nazareth with his wife, who was expecting and go back to Bethlehem, which had no place for them to stay so they end up in a stable. All of this is happening number one, to fulfill prophecy which God prophesied. The Prophet Micah said they would be in Bethlehem. The virgin is about to give birth for Jesus was not born of a man and a woman. He was born of a woman – the virgin conceived and is giving birth which, we see in Isaiah 7:14. The Messiah is of the tribe of Judah and the line of David in fulfillment of the Scripture. Joseph, the adopted father, Mary, the appointed mother which is also God fulfilling His Word.

Another thing I began to see is that when God does give His Word, it is immutable and it is infallible. It says many times in the Bible that all this happened that the Scripture might be fulfilled. God is moving populations, empires, and everything around to fulfill a prophecy that

the virgin shall give birth in a place called Bethlehem. Why? It's because there was an empire that was prophesied in Daniel that's in place called Rome and Rome is making these decrees about getting registered because they used to be registered under a previous empire that had been prophesied – Greece, that had replaced the Medo-Persian empire.

His Word will be fulfilled. Hebrews 9:27 says *[27] And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment.* God will by no means leave the guilty unpunished (Nahum 1:3). Every one of us are guilty. Every one of us has an appointment. Have you come to the only One that can make you ready on that day? His Word on that day will be fulfilled as it was on this day and He has given you a way of deliverance.

God's Word is not only infallible, it's immutable. The last thing said in the Old Testament before the 400 years of silence is that God will send one in the spirit of Elijah, who will turn the heart to father, to the children and the hearts of children to their father (Malachi 4:5-6). The next revelation is God from heaven through an angel to Zechariah and Elizabeth. Basically God says, "I know you're barren, but don't worry, I'm going to take care of this one and you're going to give birth to a child who will fulfill the last thing said 400 years ago." God is immutable. He didn't change those 400 years. He will always be faithful to Himself and His Word.

God is sending the only One who can save us from our sins by His grace – Jesus, through whom an adopted father and an appointed mother who, by the way, become wonderful examples to us of what He will do with us. Here is Joseph, a man of God, and he bears the two Biblical virtues of Christian manhood – strength and courage to embrace his responsibilities in life as he is sensitive and compassionate. He demonstrates this as he takes care of Mary and he is righteous. The Christian man, gentle man, who acts like a man to fulfill his responsibilities out of love to Christ and others, and never abandons his responsibilities in those relationships.

While we say 'no' to all the theological aberrations of certain ecclesiastical traditions that create this Mariology, don't lose the virtue that God's grace has put in this woman. There you see the two virtues of women of God. One is confidence in her God, not her circumstances, not even her husband, not even the surrounding neighbors for it rests in her God. She's like Sarah, who was not frightened by any fear as she obeyed the Lord. Two, is her commitment to do the will of God as a woman in her calling. Hear it in her words from Luke 1:38, "Behold, O God, I am your maidservant. Be it done to me according to Your Word."

Now we've come to this fourth Advent Sunday and we will see the last time the angel speaks in Luke 2:8-21 before our focus is on what Christ says in the apostolic doctrine that comes after. We're specifically at a place called Bethlehem. There's three intriguing moments that take place in this text. The first one is the expected response of the shepherds to the angels.

Luke 2:8-9 says *[8] And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. [9] 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.*

Every time an angel spoke to Zechariah, Joseph, Mary and now the shepherds, what was the first thing they had to say to them? Don't fear. There were two directions of the fear to Zechariah and to the shepherds. Don't fear the angels presence and the glory that they brought from the throne room of God. There was the Shekinah glory that was upon them as they came from the throne room of God. There's two other times they appear to Joseph and Mary. To them it was don't fear the message we're bringing in what we're calling you to do. God is able. Don't fear the messenger and don't fear the message. Why? It is because God has given us the emotion of fear but it has to be instructed otherwise fear paralyzes. That's why a lion roars – to freeze you. Fear gets our attention and it paralyzes unless it is instructed.

The Bible tells us to run after the fear of God for it's the beginning of wisdom and it says to cast away all the fears of men – the fear of death, the fear of the future. Now Biblical concern is another issue, but the domination of fear is to be addressed and the way it's addressed is to run to the fear of God, but you can't run to the fear of God until you cast away the fear of man. What is it that casts away the fear of man? This is what casts away the fear of man; perfect love cast out of fear (I John 4:18).

How do they assuage the fear of these angels? Every time an angel shows up doesn't evoke fear. It's only the times that they show up, having come from the presence of God with no veil. When they come from the presence of God bathed in the Shekinah Glory of God, we can't stand it. It brings fear. Angels show up sometimes not straight from the presence of God unveiled. That's why the Bible says to us in Hebrews 13:2; [2] *Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.* I don't think Abraham knew those were angels that showed up when he was feeding them. They appeared as men, they appeared veiled. But when angels come unveiled like with Zechariah and the shepherds the Shekinah glory of God overcomes us and therefore, we have to be assured of the love of God, which casts out our manmade fears. Then we can run to the fear of God which is really awe.

Fear is a tough word. In the ESV of Luke 2:9 we see that the shepherds were filled with great fear. In the NAS version it says terrifying fear. The KJV says they were sore afraid. That's a great word to translate that word. It means painful like when you get a sore spot. It's sensitive and painful. The presence of God overwhelms them and they need a message from God of the grace of God bathed in the love of God. So now paralyzing fear is cast away and inspirational fear – the awe of the Almighty fills us with reverence. That's what happens when the angels now assuage their fear, instruct their fear, banish the fear of man to fill them with the fear of God.

I just I just read the recent changes in the Webster dictionary, and I'm so disheartened I can't hardly stand it for how they have redefined words, but here's one that has bothered me my whole life. It is how we use the word awful. We used the word awful to describe something that's bad and actually, the word means full of awe. I love the Trinity hymnal where we sing 'How sweet and awful is your church, O Lord, full of a people who stand in the awe of the Almighty.' That's what He is saying. What's going to take away paralysis and what's going to fill them with inspiration of majesty? It will be the next words for the angels are about to give them a unique announcement, an unexpected message.

Luke 2:10-12 says [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. [11] For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. [12] And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger."*

The angels are instructing them with the news of God's glory bathed in God's grace and the display of God's love in Jesus. His message will go to all the nations for His covenanted people will come from every tribe and nation - old, young, rich, poor, male, female. It's designed to go to all the people through all the people that He is saving. We're called to take it to all, even as it came to us. The angel gives them a birth announcement that has the date, the name, and the place. It also has something else, a prophetic word. This is the Savior, the One who will save His people from all their sins, but this announcement is unique because of who the object of the announcement is.

Our typical birth announcements, have the date, the place, who the child was born to, the name of the child and perhaps the weight and length of the child. This announcement doesn't say who this Child was born to. More than one commentator has pointed out that this is a unique

which means holy announcement. It will never be repeated. This is the announcement of a Savior born of a virgin from the descendants of David and the tribe of Judah in the prophesied town of Bethlehem and it is a child born to you – to all the people, all of His people. This One has come to save and will be called Yeshua - Jehovah Saves for He will save His people from their sins. Then this anticipated response of fear that is instructed by this unique birth announcement comes with a compelling invitation – this will be a sign for you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. Let's continue in the text.

Luke 2:13-21 says [13] *And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, [14] "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"*

[15] *When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another (the invitation compelled them), "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us. (Through Divine revelation God's silence has been broken)" [16] And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. [17] And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this Child (they started telling others who He is and we call this evangelism). [18] And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. [19] But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. [20] And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. [21] And at the end of eight days, when He was circumcised, He was called Jesus (just like we do in New Covenant baptism where the name is announced), the name given by the angel before He was conceived in the womb.*

From the very first of these angelic messages, we knew what His name was, what He would do and now He is here as it is announced by an angel. Up until now, it's always been a solitary angel and we know the angel that came to Zechariah and Mary was Gabriel. The third message came to Joseph but the angel who came to him we were not given his name. The angel's name is unknown who speaks to the shepherds but is also joined with a host of angels to proclaim the Good News – Glory to God in the highest and peace on earth, among those with whom He is pleased, that is those who become the recipients of His saving grace, that they now have the blessings of grace and no longer the curse of sin.

We like to sing the song at Christmas 'Hark the Herald angels sing' but some will say that it doesn't say they sing. It says in Luke 2:13 they were joined by a host which means more than you could count, beyond our counting at that moment. The shepherds just couldn't count a host of angels praising God and saying... I think they were saying and singing. Why? It's because we have one infallible hymn book in existence – the Psalms and they were written for praise and singing. So if they're praising God, it would not be unreasonable to think that they're singing and they not only had a worship service to sing the Word, they had a time for the confession of truth for they were saying the Word as well. So, I think both singing and saying, just like we've done today in the assembled saints of God's people. And they now are joined by that chorus of angels. In that context, the angels invite them to go to this Jesus.

The angels tell them what they will find when they go see Jesus. There wasn't room for them in the inn but there was a place in the stable. In the stable there was a makeshift cradle called a manger which is really a cattle trough. When I take people to Israel, I take them to stable caves that are still in Bethlehem and show them the troughs of the first century. A person wouldn't have wasted money on rotting wood for there is stone there and the troughs are troughs of stone. So here is a stone trough that Jesus lies in and you'll find Him wrapped in swaddling

cloths that were increasingly tightened to help the arms, legs and back get straight. I'm sure Mary was doing all that mothers would do then for the child. That was their sign and the shepherds found it just as the angels said, as they came to that place, because a sovereign God had made sure they had gone to a place where there was no place for them. So they would be laid in this place and where He laid wrapped in swaddling cloths in that manger, signified this wasn't just making do. This was the Almighty, and it is making clear what He is doing.

Here is the takeaway. There are two inevitable marks of true saving grace. In other words, those who are truly saved, the two marks are their worship and witness. What fills their heart will come out of their mouth first in praise to God and secondly in proclamation to others – to believers to encourage them and to the lost, to evangelize them. That's one of the reasons I know we're in trouble today, for the church no longer preaches the Gospel of saving grace and discipled God's people to the priorities of worship and witness. I understand there is in the assembled worship the reality of providential hindrance – when one is sick or one shut in and I'm grateful that we can extend the facsimile of worship through technology. I know that there are moments of works of necessity when the ox is in the ditch. I know that there are ministries of mercy that occur that need to be embraced in the moments of gathered worship for I understand that.

But what I see today in the evangelical church with the trivial approach to the Lord's Day and worship where if it works in my schedule, betrays what we've seen in every single case of the advent. When God's saving grace lay holds of people, wise men worship and bow – the Gentile elite bow, worship and bring their gifts gladly. The lowly shepherds weren't even allowed to testify in court but God's people come from the down and out and the up and in to bring them in and the shepherds go away praising God. They imitate the angels for they praise God and they proclaim the Good News.

In this coming year our whole focus will be 'bringing them to Him. Luke 2:17-18 says [17] *And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this Child* (they started telling others who He is and we call this evangelism). [18] *And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds **told them***. Who have we told about the One who has saved us from their sin and the One without whom they face an eternal condemnation? The two marks are seen in the lowly shepherds – worship and praise. I'm not a killjoy. I love the beauty of this season. I love work, sports and all those things, but I believe with all my heart the inevitable evidence of true saving grace will be seen with people who will not let anything get between them (unless providential hindrance) and the gathered worship of God's people which they will be doing for all eternity. They find a way.

I remember my first years as a truck driver and going into the locker room of the truck drivers at 6:00 in the morning. I messed up evangelism. Just come meet with me and I'll give you all the ways not to evangelize, but I knew one thing – I had been saved and I had to tell people because they can't come to Him until we bring Him to them and that's what these shepherds did. They brought Him to them. Here is some Good News. The God whom you worship, Father, Son and Holy Spirit actually made you, saved you and gave you your breath today for that purpose and there is nothing more important. Realize you are not doing trivial stuff when you assemble with God's people.

Hebrews 10:24-25 says [24] *And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works,* [25] ***not neglecting to meet together**, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.* When you assemble, you exalt Him, you encourage one another, and you evangelize the seekers. Our worship is angelic. It

communicates Good News to the encouragement of believers and to the call of the lost. So when we assemble together it is glorious.

Secondly, when you evangelize, your Savior is ready to receive any and all who come to Him. You tell them 'ask and you will receive, seek and you will find, knock and He'll open the door.' That's what's been told to these shepherds. I believe that's what's underneath this sign. The sign is that you will find it and it's not going to be hard. In fact, God has moved heaven and earth to put Him in a place He is fully accessible. Where would you and I have had Jesus born? We would have had Him born somewhere where you had to go through five filters, three screens, two shakedown, pat downs and everything else. Not Jesus, you'll find Him in a stone trough. It's a manger. You'll find Him wrapped in swaddling clothes. He's a Baby, but He's the Lord, the Savior of sinners and you don't have to make an appointment. He made the appointment to save you, and He has come so that you can get to Him and He will bring you to Him.

Here, let me bring you to Him right now. You won't have to stand in line. You won't have to get an appointment. You won't have to be examined. You won't have to go through a scanning machine. You can just come to Him. He's in a stable, so you can come. You don't even have to knock on a door. Just walk in and there He is for you, your Savior, your Lord. By the way, when you see Him, He's already telling you how you're going to be saved. Watch Him. Look at Him. He's in a stone trough. In 33 years, He'll be put in another stone trough after He has gone to the cross to save you from your sins. Look at Him. When He's laid in that stone trough, He'll be wrapped with linen cloths again. Look at Him for on the eighth day in circumcision He'll shed the first drops of blood that point to the cross, where He will become your circumcision to cut away your sin, your heart and your record with His blood. The incarnation is pointing to His crucifixion and His atoning death. That's why you can come to Him. He has come for you.

This Noel is unique but it is for all who come. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Take a few moments in personal prayer. Believers, please let this just saturate your heart. Spirit of the living God speak to Your people that they may rejoice as the shepherds in worship and witness, but right now just fill them in their heart with the joy of awe and reverence. They are Yours. You sought them, You bought them, You sealed them, and You will send them. For those reading this who are seeking at this time of year, the neon lights don't save, but the Word of God brings you to the God of the Word. Come to Him today. If you'd like to pray with someone about the decision to follow Him with your life please call us here at Briarwood at (205) 776-5200 for we'd love to talk with you about this. Thank You Jesus that You made this way possible for us to come to You and live with You for all eternity, I pray this in Jesus' Name, Amen.