

Luke 2:1-21 (ESV¹) Grand Avenue Baptist Church 5/16/18

Brothers and sisters, we have this morning the great privilege and responsibility to look with reverence at one of the central accounts of all Scripture. We've heard it many times. Many of our families have memorized it. I personally clearly recall reciting it with the entire 7th grade student body of McKinley Junior High in 1963 in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. These days it is annually published even in newspapers hostile to the Christian faith. Almost all of us in some sense "know" what it says. So our responsibility this morning is not light. As we look together at **Luke 2:1-21** we must apply ourselves and rely upon God's Spirit to open our eyes and ears to the wonder of this text, lest we be complacent about it because of its familiarity. Let's pray to that end.

Our Father, help us we ask. We love You, but are frail. We give You thanks for the wonder of the incarnation, and confess our dullness as we come to it this morning in Luke's gospel. Please work by Your gracious Holy Spirit and Word to quicken and change us as we see Christ. Save me from wrong speaking and all of us from wrong hearing we ask. Honor Yourself in our midst we pray, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

I have only one main (and quite obvious) point this morning. But to be plain, let me state it clearly here at the outset. The point of the sermon is that:

The baby in the manger in Bethlehem was the eternal God made incarnate, and the implications of that should produce unceasing praise to the triune God of the Bible from all people.

As we attempt to grasp this point afresh, we will organize our time together into 4 waves or 4 views of the text, that might be called or outlined as:

1. The *facts*,
2. Some things about some of the *participants*,
3. The *significance* of the events and *reactions* of participants, and
4. Our *response*.

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First, consider the more or less unvarnished *facts* of the account. Let's take the text a verse or two at a time.

Luke 2:1 In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered.

Caesar Augustus was the first and greatest of the Caesars. His reign saw the Roman Empire expand to the entire Mediterranean world. It brought with it the famous *Pax Romana* (Roman Peace) and the flowering of the Roman arts and literature. We would today judge him to be vain and ruthless, but by standards of the ancient world, Augustus was a benevolent and good ruler and these were relatively decent times.

Augustus decreed that registrations were to be made across the Roman Empire. They were made for both taxation and military conscription purposes. But since the Jews were exempt from Roman military service, the purpose in Judea was only to assess taxes.

²This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria.

³And all went to be registered, each to his own town.

Quirinius was in charge in "Syria" (including Judea) twice, once about 10-7 BC and later after 6 AD, at which time he was officially governor. This is a reference to the earlier period, when he seems to have not had the title officially. Luke is naming times, places, and people. This is eyes-open history, not some fairy story or cultural myth he's recounting. Luke intends for "Theophilus" and others to check his real facts about real events.

⁴And 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,

Nazareth is 80 miles and at least a 3-day journey away from Bethlehem. Joseph, as a descendant of King David, goes to be enrolled in the town of David. He is no rebel. He is a descendant of a great king, but goes obediently

to register to pay tax to the current ruling authority. He acts in a way consistent with Jesus's answer 30 plus years later to the question He's asked about the morality of paying tax to Caesar. And in Joseph's submission to the God-ordained civil authority, the decree of this pagan emperor is used to bring about God's redemption purposes and fulfillment of Micah's prophecy that Messiah would be born in Bethlehem.

5to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.

In Syria, women of age 12 or more were subject to a poll tax and had to register. It is thus likely that Mary needs to go to Bethlehem as well. But even if she isn't absolutely required to go with Joseph, her condition and circumstances are such that Joseph is not going to leave her to fend for herself while he is gone. Mary travels with Joseph, and except for sexual relations they are living together as man and wife. Luke says they are "betrothed." Jewish betrothal was a serious binding matter, which could only be broken by death or divorce. And verse 5 tells us that Mary is still pregnant in keeping with Gabriel's announcement.

6And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth.

How long have they been in Bethlehem? We're not told and don't know. We have our mental images of Mary just making it to town on the back of a donkey before going into labor. Maybe it was that way. Maybe they have been there for some time visiting relatives, but having been the last to arrive or being the least prestigious travelers, there is no room to stay in crowded homes of relatives. We don't know. What we do know is that at an inconvenient time, in inconvenient circumstances, the baby Jesus is born. "**the time came**" The KJV says "the days were accomplished." The fullness of time has come, not only for Mary's pregnancy to be over, but for God's promise of a Messiah to be fulfilled.

7And 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.

We don't have much detail here. Scholars are not even agreed on the intent of the word "inn" in this verse. Whether it is a commercial establishment or a large private home is not sure. It's not even obvious how much shelter they have for the birth. Many commentators see here a large circle of stalls for poor travelers, each with 3 walls and each open to a common courtyard and central fire provided by the inn-keeper. What is clear is that there's no comfortable place for the baby to be born, the circumstances are humble, and the child is greeted by devout and modest parents who will love Him and raise Him in the fear of the LORD. He is wrapped up like any poor child of the time and placed in the feeding trough of domestic animals. That this takes place at an inn guarantees it is not something that could be dismissed as a fairy story in a few years' time. It takes place with many witnesses.

So, in 7 short verses, with remarkable economy, Luke has told us the story of the birth. But the birth, without what God reveals about the One who is born, would mean little. So Luke immediately goes on to show us what the Father and the witnesses have to say about the event.

8And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.

Tradition says these are flocks kept for the temple sacrifices. The shepherds who watch the flock are chosen by God to be the first outside the family to see the single newborn Lamb of God, the Savior of the World. They are the first to see the One who will Himself be the final and complete sacrifice for sin.

It is notable and fitting that these are ordinary and humble men, ones that careful Jews might well look down on for their rough ways and lack of careful adherence to ceremonial law. It is to such common people (and thus you and me as well) that the announcement comes. These men are busy doing what they have been given to do. They are at work, taking shifts staying awake caring for the sheep.

9And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear.

An angel/a messenger of the Lord appears and the visible awesome presence of God shines around them. These fellows are common folk, but they are not dull. They recognize their vulnerability in the presence of the powerful messenger of God. Literally the text is "they feared a great fear." Think about this: one second they are camped out on the hills on a dark night, and the next, it's bright as day and there is a magnificent heavenly being from God having business with them.

10 And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy that will be for all the people."

"Fear not" is more literally "Don't keep on fearing." They are terrified as well they should be. But the angel announces that rather than bringing terror, there is "good news of great joy." The word translated "good news" has the same root as our word "evangelism" and the proclamation that the angel brings is "good news" to a world under the curse of sin. It is good news that will be for "all the people." To the shepherds' ears "all people" probably means "all Jews." But we know that in fact, something far more glorious is meant. All is all! This is news for both Jews and gentiles.

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

A Savior is born. It is "Jesus," literally "God saves," who has been born. He is Christ, God's anointed one, Messiah. And He is the Lord, God Himself in human flesh, the rightful King of the universe.

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

A more literal rendering of this verse is "And this will be 'the' sign for you." There are probably other babies in Bethlehem wrapped this way on this night. But there is only one in a manger, Jesus. While this might seem like a most unremarkable pointer, it marks one of the 2 or 3 most remarkable and important events of all time. And this humble signpost is all that the shepherds are given or will need.

13And 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!"

If Mary and Joseph were at home, local musicians and relatives would have gathered and greeted the birth of the baby with music of joy and congratulation. Here near Bethlehem, there is instead the sound of angels praising God. It is a multitude of the heavenly army of created beings praising God and giving glory to the Holy One.

These angels declare "on earth peace/shalom/well-being among those with whom He is pleased." This is not "hold-hands-and-sing-kum-bah-ya" about world peace. It's announcement of eternal well-being and wholeness, everything that makes for a sound existence and peace *with God*. This is now available to humanity, to those who greet it with true faith and repentance and are pleasing to God. The curse of sin is about to be eternally broken.

15When 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."

16And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger.

The shepherds don't need to be coaxed into the trip to town. They recognize that there is nothing more significant than the news they've been given. They don't delay, they don't worry about who is going to see that the sheep don't wander off, or who will keep the wolf away. Instead they leave those matters in God's hand, act on the news, and find things just as God promised. And in so doing, they are the first after Mary and Joseph to behold God's Savior come to earth.

17 And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child.

18 And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.

This is a wild story that these men have to tell: God's Messiah, prophesied since the Garden of Eden, born to poor parents in humble circumstances in Bethlehem, announced first to rough shepherds. But there is no hint that these guys are reluctant to share the story or that people are inclined to dismiss their testimony. It's wild and wonderful indeed, but it's just not the kind of thing one makes up and then persists in broadcasting. The story simply rings true, with a beauty unmatched by that of any other in all of history. And all who hear it are amazed.

19 But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart.

Consider all that must have raced around in Mary's mind in these early years. What indeed was in store for her and Joseph and this baby? Mary continually shows a characteristic remarkable modesty. In this little verse Luke conveys to us the gentleness of a young woman to whom amazing things have been promised and in whose experience amazing things have come to pass, who rather than blabbing all over town, quietly ponders them in private.

20 And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

The proper reaction to all this is indeed to give glory and praise to God. What else could they or should they do?

Jumping ahead a bit over a week

21 And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

The central matter here is that this is indeed Jesus/"God Saves" born in Bethlehem and welcomed into this humble devout Jewish home, circumcised at

eight days, and soon after presented at the Jerusalem temple in accordance with God's law.

These are the *facts*. Let's now consider a bit more slowly some points about *participants* in this account.

Consider first, the persons of Augustus Caesar, Joseph, and Mary. Augustus Caesar (or Octavian) is the nephew and adopted son of Julius Caesar, who simply seized power as the Roman republic was coming unglued following the assassination of Julius. He is arguably the most powerful man in the world at this time, but was hardly one to be personally admired. In contrast, Joseph and Mary are both devout and honorable descendants of King David and thus qualified by prophecy to stand in Messiah's genealogy. But they are without any public notoriety or position. They are modest and gentle people, who show only obedience and love for God. And God, in His characteristic reversal of human expectations and perceptions, sends Christ not into a power family in Rome, but to this modest faithful godly family in Bethlehem.

Consider next the angels who appear to first announce and then celebrate the birth. These are ancient beings of great power and love for God. Consider that they have long known this person in the manger. They knew Him before the creation of this world! He created them and they have seen the glory that He has shared with the Father and Spirit from eternity past. They are not at this moment privy to all details of God's redemptive plan, but Peter says that these are "things into which angels long to look." (**1Peter 1:12**) As they see this eternal God they have long known, clothed in flesh in a manger, they are surely awestruck. Whether they can see the cross from where they stand on this night we don't know, but the incarnation is already enough to evoke great praise from heaven.

Consider then the shepherds on this night and over the following days. Humanity's fundamental problem from **Genesis 3** onward has always been lack of faith, basic failure to take God at His Word. This account is a warm and glorious one, partly because there is none of that here. These fellows may not live in palaces or have the advantage of much formal education, but they take God at His Word and are richly blessed in doing so. There is no hesitation

about publishing the good news. While they cannot possibly see every coming detail of the life of Christ, they wonder *without disbelief* when they are told **"For unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior who is Christ the Lord."**

And finally and most importantly consider the child in the manger. We know this is Jesus. But think of some of the implications of this. The angel has identified Him as the Christ, God's anointed One. He's the King of the universe. John will later tell us in **John 1** that He is the real and eternal "Word" who called all into existence.

Paul will tell us that He is both Creator and Sustainer of all that has been created.

Col 1:15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.

Col 1:16 For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him.

Col 1:17 And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

He is Creator/King/ Christ, and He is the only *Savior* of the world. He is the One who will bear the just wrath of God toward us and our sin. He is the One who will be accursed/suffer God's malediction in our places. R.C. Sproul used a helpful device for describing what Christ bore on our behalf. That is to take the familiar Aaronic blessing of **Numbers 6** and replace its elements with their polar opposites. In place of

Num 6:24 The LORD bless you and keep you;

Num 6:25 the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;

Num 6:26 the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.

reverse every phrase and turn the benediction into a malediction. That is, on Calvary, Christ on our behalf received not the blessing, but rather bore the *curse* of God. He was wasn't *kept* by God, but rather sent away from the Father's presence. He didn't enjoy the *shining face of His Father* but rather had the Father's back turned on Him. He didn't receive God's *grace*, but rather the Father's complete rejection without any mercy or grace. He didn't enjoy the *Father's smile and what makes for good and joyous life, the favor of God, God's peace*, but rather in infinite torment felt the Father's utter displeasure. This is the saving work of the One in the manger, that You and I might enjoy the Aaronic blessing.

This is the person born into our world in **Luke 2**, and it ought to take our breath away. That this person, God's King and Savior, is the baby in Bethlehem is simply mind-blowing. Christian people are sometimes silly on this point, worrying about the biology of conception and how it is that a virgin could conceive and bear a son. My goodness, that's not a fraction of it! That the finite can hold the infinite!!!??? That is a far greater mystery and miracle! That this baby in Bethlehem can be the Creator of all is what should make us speechless. Brothers and sisters, the scandal here is not that the second person of the Trinity is wrapped in the cloths of the poor and has been laid in a manger, but that He has condescended to wrap Himself in humanity, to join us, and to soon stand condemned in our places! Do we Christians believe things the world holds to be fantastic/impossible? Of course we do, we believe in the incarnation!

The *facts*, the *participants* ... now consider with me the *significance* of the Bethlehem scene and the *reactions* it evokes from participants.

The angels and then the shepherds recognize that at long last, the corner has been turned and Messiah is here. Redemption is near. The exact nature of that is not completely revealed nor well-understood (and won't be clear even for the *disciples* after three years of watching the adult Jesus in action). But the long wait for the crushing of the serpent's head promised in **Genesis 3** is nearly over. The Kingdom of God is near and the angels and shepherds know it. The great fulfillment of all Old Testament prophecy is in motion and at various levels the

characters in this account understand this. And that evokes joy, exuberant praise, and reverence.

The angels, faithful messengers of God, see the significance of the night relatively clearly and break out in "**Glory to God in the highest!**" Speaking of "glory," they know that in one sense, the person in manger *is Himself* the glory of God. The writer of Hebrews says about Jesus

Hebrews 1:3a He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature ...

And the Apostle John says of Jesus in Revelation

Revelation 21:23 And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb.

Further, the angels know that what God has promised as the *work* of His Messiah *will bring great glory* to God. They know what Isaiah said

Isaiah 53:11 Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.

and they declare with loud praise that the God of the Bible deserves great renown, great glory, for this stunning exchange of our guilt for Christ's righteousness that He will soon bring to pass.

The shepherds hear this proclamation and react in simple faith. They surely don't fully grasp what is happening here. But to the extent that they understand, they believe and put feet to their belief. They hear the Word of God delivered by the angels, and run to Christ. They rejoice in Him. They give praise to God and tell everyone in town what has happened. These honest souls, though they have only limited revelation, become the first human evangelists, announcing to all Bethlehem what they do know about this event. They sow good seed and they give glory and praise to God for all that they

have been shown. There is little doubt these guys have real God-given faith and are even now presently in heaven giving glory and praise to Christ.

But as always, not all good seed bears fruit. The people of Bethlehem "wonder at" what the shepherds tell them. They have an interest in it, but there is no record that any of them pursue the details or implications of it. Perhaps some of them 30 years later become Christ's disciples, but surely most do not. There is no group at Bethlehem during the ministry of Jesus there ready to remember His birth and repent and believe. This is a passing event that doesn't fundamentally change them. It's novel and maybe even raises their religious zeal for a few days, but in the main, the Bethlehem townspeople are ultimately hard soil. They *wonder* but they *do not believe* in the Biblical sense of staking their lives on what they hear.

And finally consider Mary's reaction to the events in Bethlehem. Verse 19 says that "**Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart.**" Of course, Mary has the advantage of being 9 months into this amazing nativity experience that began with Gabriel's visit and announcement to her. But even accounting for this, her response is most humble, devout, and wonderful. She meditates literally for years on the wonder of the reality that the baby in her womb was the promised Savior of mankind, the Son of Man referred to in Daniel, Jesus Christ, God's Son, Savior. There is great reverence and wonderful pure undivided faith in God in her.

So we have *the facts*, *the participants*, and *the significance* and *reactions* in this glorious account. What then must be our *response*?

Brothers and sisters, I submit that there is only one reasonable response to all this. Every human being who has the privilege of hearing what happened on this night in Judea 2000 years ago should believe this Gospel, this amazing Good News, repent/drop his or her self-will, and throw himself or herself on the mercy of this Savior in the manger for forgiveness of sin, and forever give glory to the triune God.

Christian, let us continue to believe and repent. Let us believe the testimony of the shepherds. Like Mary, let us constantly treasure the things of Christ and

ponder the profound mystery of God incarnate, born to stand in our places under the Father's just curse for sin. Let us join the angels and give unceasing thanks and glory to God for the undeserved mercy we receive in the work of this Jesus Christ. We know far more about this Jesus than did the shepherds. Let us have their zeal and joy, and like them declare to all what God has done on behalf of sinful people like us.

Non-Christian, as you ponder this account, believe, repent, and be saved. This Jesus, born in Bethlehem Christmas night is both God and King. Believe the testimony of the shepherds. Believe the testimony of Luke and the Apostles, that Jesus Christ lived on this earth perfectly doing His Father's will, died bearing your sin on a Roman cross, rose again to life, presently sits at the right hand of the Father in heaven, and will ultimately judge all people. Take this message to heart. Don't just look in wonder or sentimentality on the manger scene and then forget, as if you heard it in town at Bethlehem a few days after the event. This announcement of peace with God is for you, if you will run to the Savior and throw yourself at His feet. Jesus is present with you and ready to save, if you will give yourself up wholly to Him. Know this precious account for what it is, not a fairy story or nice warm fable, but the very difference between eternal life and eternal death, between eternal heaven and eternal hell. There is salvation in no other. Yield all that you are, and give Him glory and thanksgiving.

Brothers and sisters, every human being is commanded to repent and believe this Good News. That includes me and every one of you under the sound of my voice. Every one of us owes unceasing thanks and praise to God for His great mercy in the Christ, born in Bethlehem on Christmas night. Thanks be to God!

Let's pray and then sing in praise and adoration of this Jesus.

Father, with the saints of all time, with the hosts of heaven, we give you thanks and praise for the baby born in Bethlehem, Jesus, Messiah, King and Lord, God in human flesh, our only Savior. We wonder at His condescension to us and the great grace lavished on us through His work on earth. We gladly cast ourselves on His mercy. We ask for humble, simple, and true hearts and

tongues like those of the shepherds, quick to spread abroad the Gospel, the Good News of the way of Peace opened through Christ. All glory in heaven and earth is Yours, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This we confess and pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.