“GLORY TO GOD IN THE HIGHEST!”

Luke 2:1-20

This is a very familiar Christmas story. You all probably heard it for the first time when you were children. It is always a challenge to teach a lesson like this because everybody has heard it all before. Hopefully I will be able to tell you something new that you didn’t know.

Let me start by asking you a question. It is a simple question, but I want to hear your responses. Here it is: Why do YOU celebrate Christmas? I mean, what is the significance of Christmas to YOU personally? *[have class give their responses]*

I see Christmas as a love story. Played out in every scene is God’s love for us. It’s God’s love story for the entire human race – for sinful, degenerate, and undeserving people – like ME. God Himself came to dwell with us. He didn’t just come for the good boys and the good girls. He came for the naughty ones also. His gifts are for anyone who believes – rich or poor, religious or agnostic. It’s for even the lowest of the low in our society. The Bible mentions a few of these: prostitutes, condemned criminals, drunkards, unclean lepers, filthy beggars and smelly shepherds. He came for all of us and He met us right where we were.

Christmas wasn’t just a one-time event that happened a long time ago on the other side of the world from us. It isn’t even something that we do only once a year either. We should celebrate Christmas throughout the year because of what our Lord did for us. He changed our lives!

Before we get into our text in Luke I wanted to remind you of a couple of important prophecies from the Old Testament. These were fulfilled at the very first Christmas, when Jesus was born.

READ Isaiah 7:14. Of course Immanuel means “God with us.” This prophecy by Isaiah was ultimately fulfilled when the Holy Spirit came into Mary, who was a virgin at the time, and she became pregnant with God’s holy offspring – Jesus. This happened back in Luke Ch 1. Luke, being a medical doctor might have had his doubts as to the validity of a virgin birth. But Luke was also a historian and a follower of Jesus. His own careful research along with the inspiration he received from the Holy Spirit convinced Luke that the virgin birth really did happen.

READ Micah 5:2. And so to fulfill this prophecy, Jesus had to be born in Bethlehem. So God chose two people from Bethlehem, right? No. He chose a couple who lived some 90 miles to the north in Nazareth. How did God plan on getting them down to Bethlehem so that Micah’s prophecy would be fulfilled? That’s where we pick up the narrative in Luke Ch 2…

READ Luke 2:1-5.

God’s plan involves the entire civilized world at that time. It’s prompted by the actions of the most powerful man in the world – an unbelieving, Gentile, pagan ruler – Caesar Augustus. This census is taken so that the Roman government can assess taxes properly across its vast empire. Each person is required to go back to his hometown in order to register. So Joseph makes the long trip south to his hometown known as the “City of Bread” or Bethlehem. What you need to understand is that only the head of the household, the man is required to register. But we just read in this passage that Mary goes with Joseph down to Bethlehem. She makes the long difficult trip over rough terrain despite being well into her pregnancy. Why? Some have conjectured that Joseph doesn’t want to leave her in Nazareth. There’s a lot of negative gossip going around and the possibility exists that she might be mistreated. But I believe that by this time both Mary and Joseph know the importance of their child. They both would have been aware of Micah’s prophecy. Joseph knew he was of royal lineage, a descendant of King David. So I believe that God has revealed to them that their son must be born in Bethlehem. So Mary travels with Joseph.

Luke pinpoints the date of Jesus’s birth with the statement in v 2, “when Quirinius was governor of Syria.” So the edict from Caesar goes out somewhere between 7 and 4 B.C. The actual journey would have taken place sometime later. The last thing I want to mention about the trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem. It would have taken several days on foot, perhaps a week or longer. Most pictures depict Mary and Joseph traveling alone down to Bethlehem. But more than likely they would have traveled with a group because it would have been much safer traveling in numbers. So they finally make it to Bethlehem and we pick up the action in v 6…

READ Luke 2:6-7. There was no room in the local inn because of the increased number of travelers in Bethlehem due to the census. The only accommodations they could find were in a sheepfold!

The first physical image the Gospels provide us of Jesus is that of a newborn baby. Back in the 1980s there was a song I heard at a Christmas pageant entitled, “How Shall a King Come?” The words to the song speculate on all the pomp and celebration surrounding how a king SHOULD come. The end of the song reminds us of how the King of Glory actually DID come. Not quite as would have been expected. Did God’s people Israel anticipate the coming king? Sure, someday. But they weren’t prepared when that day actually came!

This sounds familiar? It’s just like us today anticipating the King’s return… someday. People believe the prophecies that He WILL return, but are they really prepared for that day? Despite the fact that the Messiah had long been anticipated by God’s covenant people, when He finally came, they had no room for Him. And as a result, the King came into this world in a shelter used for livestock. His first bed was an animal feeding troth. Amazing!

God often acts in ways that run contrary to the expectations of people. He’s God. His ways are not our ways. With God we should expect the unexpected. The event that the Jewish people had waited centuries for finally arrives; and yet nobody in Bethlehem is aware of the significant birth that has just taken place in their little town. Well, not yet.

READ Luke 2:8-12 “In the same region” – somewhere around Bethlehem.

The thing that strikes me most about this part of the Christmas story is to WHOM God chooses to make the announcement of Jesus’ blessed birth. To SHEPHERDS! God sends His angels to announce this to a group of unknown, unnamed, seemingly unimportant shepherds in a field outside the small village of Bethlehem. I mentioned earlier that shepherds were among the lowest of society. They were in fact the lowest class of people in that day. Shepherds had a bad reputation. They generally were despised for several reasons. First, these keepers of sheep were viewed as dishonest and unreliable. Because of the nature of their work, they were regarded as ceremonially unclean. Shepherds were not even allowed to testify in courts of law. As a class they were quite low on the social ladder. How interesting that God chooses to announce the birth of the Savior to these outcasts of society.

Notice the setting for God’s big announcement – a dark rural Judean hillside. Not a crowded convention hall in a major city; not a palace; not a temple; not some huge gathering of important dignitaries. All that are present on this night for God’s wonderful news are a handful of shepherds who are guarding their sheep. That’s all!

Well, as might be expected the shepherds are terrified at the sight of the angel. This is a normal human reaction. So the first thing the angel says to them is, “Don’t be afraid. We bring good news.” And here is the good news: “Today in Bethlehem is born a Savior for you. He is Christ the Lord. He is the Messiah, the Deliverer. And just to show that what we’re saying is true here’s a sign for you – “You will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.”

This is the great news! It is the news that God’s people have been waiting to hear for centuries! But this news is SO big, SO exciting that heaven literally cannot contain itself.

READ Luke 2:13-14. This angelic host sings out their praises to God with unbridled joy. A heavenly brilliance lights up the night sky. It is an incredible scene!

During the Christmas season we hear a lot about “Peace on earth and good will toward men.” Verse 14 says, “On earth peace among those with whom He [God] is pleased!” So then, the million dollar question is “Who is God pleased with?” Answer: This is from Romans 5:1-2: “Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God thru our Lord Jesus Christ. Thru Him [Jesus] we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God.” God is pleased with those who recognize His Son Jesus as the promised Messiah, as the Savior, as the Deliverer and place their faith in Him. These are the recipients of the peace on earth that God promises.

Well, the angels leave. Once again the countryside is dark and quiet.

READ Luke 2:15-17. The shepherds leave their flocks in the fields and hurry into Bethlehem to see this Savior who has just been announced to them. When they find the baby, everything is exactly as the angel had said. They tell Mary and Joseph all that the angel revealed to them about their baby boy.

READ Luke 2:18. The shepherds don’t just tell Mary and Joseph. They are telling the good news they heard to whoever will listen to them. They can’t help themselves. You know how it is whenever you receive some good news. You share it with others. You can’t keep it to yourself! And just like those shepherds, God expects us, the recipients of His grace to share that good news with others.

READ Luke 2:19. Mary treasures the shepherd’s words. She ponders in her heart all that these things could mean. John Walvoord in his commentary talks about Mary reflecting on this momentous event in history. Of all the women of Israel, SHE was the mother of the Messiah!

READ Luke 2:20. The shepherds return to their field and flock glorifying and praising God for all they’ve seen and heard. This is the appropriate response to hearing news of God’s salvation thru His son. The angels had the same response earlier. Simeon has this response in the temple later in Ch 2 when he sees Jesus. The paralyzed man that Jesus healed and forgave of his sins in Ch 5 has this response. The crowds have this response as they see their Messiah approaching Jerusalem riding on a donkey. The Roman centurion at the cross has this response as he suddenly realizes that Jesus is the Son of God. Finally, the disciples have this response as they make their way back down the Mount of Olives following Jesus’ return to heaven. So, having received Christ as Savior and Lord, what will be YOUR response?