

The Birth That Brought Heaven To Earth (Luke 2:1-20)

Sermon Title: The Birth That Brought Heaven To Earth

Scripture: Luke 2:1-20

It's Christmas Eve, everyone! Tomorrow, we celebrate the most blessed season of the entire year, Christmas Day, the birth of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. As the song says, "Joy to the world, the Lord is come, let earth receive her King/let every heart, prepare Him room/and heaven and nature sing." Christmas is a time of great joy for those of us who believe, as we tell the story of Christmas, the story of the birth of Jesus, to our children, grandchildren, nieces, nephews, and even little cousins. Yes, Christ truly is the reason for the season. He is the Christ in Christmas.

And yet, there are times when I think that we fail to realize just how spectacular Jesus' birth really was. By the looks of advertisements on television, we're more consumed with holiday sales on the latest tech, fashion, and toys, with the reduced commercials on the USA cable channel, with doorbusters at retail stores, with cooking food, reserving tables at restaurants, and binging on Netflix. And T-Mobile, for those of you who may not know, has made it even easier to consume your time with Netflix shows: it will now give you free Netflix with your plan so that you need not worry about Netflix all year. And, at Christmas, Netflix binging becomes even easier to engage in while removing yourself mentally from your family, friends, and neighbors around you.

From the looks of it, Jesus' birth, as told in the passage we're studying today, Luke 2, doesn't seem like such a birth worth discussing. I've been reading Richard Dawkins's book "The God Delusion" as of late, and I can tell you that he doesn't seem too fascinated with the birth of Jesus because he's an atheist. He doesn't believe in God, so the birth of Jesus holds little significance for him. And there were moments in this past week where I have to confess that I, too, acted like an atheist though I'm not. I was a functional atheist this week, though I am a self-professed Christian and disciple of Christ: I was so close to practically moving past the birth of Jesus. At one point I thought to myself, "Why study the birth of Jesus at all? Yes, we all know that Jesus came to earth, was born in a manger, the angels came, and the shepherds told of His birth. Big. Hairy. Deal.," is what I said to myself. I wanted to preach today on the Magi (or the wise men) who came to see Jesus as a child in Matthew 2.

And then the Lord told me, "don't skip my birthday." That's what the Lord told me when thinking on what to preach today: "don't skip MY birthday." I wouldn't want anyone to skip my birthday. Would you? No. So, the Lord gave me orders to preach about the very day of His birth. And I'm so thankful to God that we have a

written account of the birth of Jesus. And yes, tomorrow, Christmas Day, is all about the birth of our Lord and Savior. And it deserves to be studied and preached because we only have 1 Gospel account of Jesus' birth. That's right, church: of all the things that've been written about Jesus, only one account of His birth remains.

But it is His birth that changes everything. If it wasn't for His birth, there'd be no Christmas. If it wasn't for His coming into the world, His first Advent, there'd be no second coming or second Advent --- and there'd be no promise of "I am coming again and receive you unto myself," as Jesus says in John. If Jesus hadn't taken on flesh, there'd be no death, no resurrection, and no salvation. There'd be no hope for the world if the Blessed Hope, our Lord Jesus, hadn't come into this world. So the birth of Jesus, as obscure as it is to some, is everything to us who believe. It is a blessed event to celebrate, for it entails everything we know about Jesus: who He was, what He came to do, and His heavenly origin. It reminds us, as John says in his Gospel, that "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us."

But yes, none of this is to deny the obscurity of Jesus' birth. Matthew mentions it in his Gospel to tell us that "Jesus fulfills the Old Testament prophecy mentioned by Isaiah in Isaiah 7:14 (some 700 years before Jesus' birth)" but moves on. Mark is more concerned with Jesus casting out demons in his mysterious Gospel, and John's disciples who publish his work are more concerned about Jesus' miracles to evoke faith in the reader. Jesus' birth is only mentioned in Luke, out of 4 Gospels --- which tells us just how "uneventful" it would've been if we were there witnessing it. Today, wallpapers that we put on our phones, tablets, and computers "spruce" up what would've otherwise been "just another night" to many. But we know that it wasn't just any other night. It wasn't just any birth, but rather, as the sermon title says, "the birth that brought heaven to earth."

We read in Luke 2 that Joseph and Mary return to Bethlehem because it is the City of David. Since they are both Jewish and Mary and Joseph are from the line of David, then they had to return to their hometown to register for the census issued during the reign of Caesar Augustus. Now, it says that the decree was that "all the world should be registered," but the word "world" here is not referring to the entire world as we think of it (every place), but rather, the empire. Caesar Augustus wasn't the emperor of the entire world, so he could only decree a command for his empire, his territory. Thus, Caesar demanded that his empire, those in his territory, would return to their hometowns in order to register for the man count. In verse 2, Luke says that "This census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria." According to historical record, Quirinius was governing Syria during the reign of Caesar Augustus's successor, so some historians have said that Luke is incorrect here about his timing. This doesn't appear to be so, in my view.

After all, Luke has said that he had researched everything carefully, that he would write an orderly account to Theophilus in Luke 1:1-3, so why would he get the date of the census wrong under Quirinius? Thus, if he mentions the date of a census given 10 years after this point, I believe that Luke is saying here that Mary and Joseph traveled to Bethlehem to pre-register for the upcoming census that didn't take place until Augustus had died and Quirinius, under a new emperor, was governor of Syria. After all, do we not experience political changes years after a leader sets them in place and leaves office? The current President of the US, Donald Trump, has said that the new American embassy in Israel will be located in Jerusalem instead of

Tel Aviv, but the new embassy will take some years to be built...it won't come overnight. Perhaps this registration was for a tax set in place by Caesar Augustus that wasn't implemented until after Augustus died and a new leader took over (10 years after the census registration).

Perhaps everyone returned to his or her city as some sort of pre-registration. While we can only speculate, it appears as though Luke's effort to give a date (that the census took place during the reign of Quirinius) shows that he has done his research. Someone recalled Quirinius being governor when the census occurred, so perhaps Joseph and Mary return to Bethlehem in order to register for the census (it may not have been conducted officially until the reign of Quirinius). Perhaps there was a census of the Jews only, seeing that the Jews were under Roman oppression. History didn't record such a census of the Jews, though, and the fact that this can't be verified seems to be a sore point for historians. Of course, there are a number of things they can't verify --- but that doesn't make those non-verifiable events necessarily untrue, does it?

In verses 3-5, we see that all of the Roman empire returns to their own cities, with Joseph going up to Bethlehem, in Judea, called "the City of David" (referring to the historical King David), "because he was of the house and lineage of David." Mary was of David's lineage as well, but in those days, the men registered as the heads of their families (which explains why Luke focuses on Joseph here). Joseph and Mary tied the knot before Jesus' birth, according to Matthew 1, since Matthew 1 says that after the dream from God by way of an angelic visitation, Joseph took Mary to be his wife. They were married at this point (and Joseph was the head of the family). Mary was pregnant with Jesus in verse 5, so she's likely tired from the travel and ready for some rest and relaxation. Traveling was tiring in those days since they traveled by animal's back, but being pregnant put even more weight and stress on the body. They left Nazareth to travel to Bethlehem to register for the census.

In verse 6, Mary has to give birth while in Bethlehem because the baby was coming. The text says that "while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered." In other words, the days of her

pregnancy had come and gone while they were in Bethlehem, and she had to give birth. In verse 7, it says that she "brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn." Jesus was the firstborn son of Mary; He was the first child to open her womb. This was significant because Jesus was to be "the firstborn" among many brethren (brothers and sisters). When Jesus is born, Mary wrapped Him "in swaddling cloths," the word "swaddling" in the Greek meaning "to wrap in strips." It would be the equivalent of wrapping someone in cloth, to bandage someone's knee by applying a few strips and wrapping them around the knee. What we know from this is that Jesus was wrapped up, likely to protect Him from the weather. It could've been too cold when Jesus was born, and the circumstance of being born outdoors is what moved Mary to wrap Jesus and protect Him from getting sick in the outdoor air.

Verse 7 ends with Mary placing Jesus in a manger "because there was no room for them in the inn." We've seen that only Luke, of the four Gospel writers, details the birthday of Jesus, and now we see that Mary has to give birth to Jesus outdoors in a manger, a feeding trough, because the nearest inn is packed. It could be the case that the inn is packed and there is no more room because of the census registration as Luke tells us earlier in Luke 2. What we do know is that there was no more room for Jesus, Mary, and Joseph there. Jesus was born in a feeding trough, a thing that animals eat from. He was born on an animal feeding tray, so to speak, a place fit for animals but not fit for the King of Kings and Lord of Lords! Apparently, all the rooms were full in the inn. Mary was a pregnant woman who should have had access to a comfortable room over other, non-pregnant women --- but that wasn't the way it worked in those days.

Despite her pregnancy, there was, apparently, nowhere else to go. As if the birth of Jesus wasn't obscure enough that few of the Gospel writers concern themselves with it, now we have Jesus being treated in some sense as a donkey (he was born where donkeys eat). He was a King, but He wasn't born as a King: He didn't have media coverage of His birth, He didn't have a royal crib and a golden spoon or rattle; instead, He was born as the lowest of humans. No matter how poor many of us may be today, few of us have ever had the "privilege," I should say (and I place "privilege" in quotation marks for a reason), of ever being born out in a manger with the animals. This was an inhuman situation but it was the best of the situation for Mary and Jesus. It's safe to say that Jesus was not of the "inn" crowd (the crowd at the inn), nor of the "in" crowd today (the popular cliques and groups). Jesus came for the unpopular, the unloved, the detestable.

The birth of Jesus happened in the worst of circumstances: Jesus was born at a time where the inn was stuffed and packed with people, there was no space for Him or His earthly parents, and He was born out in the fields. And yet, while the media today would care little about or pay attention to Jesus' birth, His birth

was "the birth that brought Heaven to Earth." How? Jesus Himself was God, sent from Heaven by His Father to come down and die for our sins, and being born into the world was the very beginning of the divine mission to save the world. And while Jesus, the one who came from Heaven, was born (and that's enough of Heaven on earth to make the case), that's not all: in verse 8, Luke points to shepherds in the fields: "Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night."

There was no media at the event, no celebrities at the event, and no one treated the birth of Jesus like they would've treated the birth of Prince William, Prince Harry, or the engagement of Prince Harry to his fiancee Megan Markle. No, there was little fanfare, but the angels went to the shepherds in the field, who were on night duty watching over the sheep. If you remember in Jewish history, most Jews tended sheep, but sheepherders were detestable to the Egyptians. Joseph informed his brothers of this after they reunite in Egypt and learn that he is second in command to only Pharaoh in Egypt in Genesis 46:

31 Then Joseph said to his brothers and to his father's household, "I will go up and tell Pharaoh, and say to him, 'My brothers and those of my father's house, who were in the land of Canaan, have come to me. 32 And the men are shepherds, for their occupation has been to feed livestock; and they have brought their flocks, their herds, and all that they have.' 33 **So it shall be, when Pharaoh calls you and says, 'What is your occupation?'** 34 **that you shall say, 'Your servants' occupation has been with livestock from our youth even till now, both we and also our fathers,' that you may dwell in the land of Goshen; for every shepherd is an abomination to the Egyptians."** (Genesis 46:31-34)

Shepherds were considered to be an abomination to the Egyptians, detestable, despicable because of how little they thought of the occupation. So, for the only witnesses of the birth of Jesus outside of Mary, Joseph, and the angels to be the shepherds wasn't "groundbreaking" in any respect. It was abominable or detestable to the Egyptians, and, despite the value of shepherds in Israel, one of the most respected occupations in Israel was seen as of little importance in society at large.

Verses 9-12 are all about an angel of the Lord who appears to the shepherds, as well as the message he gives them: "And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. Then the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger.'" It is often the case that whenever an angel or angels appeared to humans, those

human witnesses became afraid. The angels would often tell humans "do not be afraid." Here in Luke 2 we see the angel appearing to shepherds, but we've already seen Gabriel appear to Mary in Luke 1:26-38 (we preached on this same passage two weeks ago), and we've seen an angel appear to Joseph, Mary's fiance, in a dream in Matthew 1:18-24.

The "glory of the Lord shone around them," a reference to the light that would reflect off the angelic beings onto those they encountered. This lets us know that angels were radiant beings that came from God. Jesus later refers to Himself in the Gospels as "the light of the world" (), and this light reflects God's character. God is the One who said "let there be light" in Genesis when He created the world, and the angels that belong to Him are referred to as "stars" --- again, another reference to their radiance and light-giving capabilities. The end of verse 9 shows that the shepherds are fearful (as any of us would be if we encountered a heavenly being), and the angel tells them to not fear. "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people." In other words, "Do not fear me because I bring good news that will be good news for everyone, all people, everyone in the world." There is no fear or fright in good news. There is no worry or concern in good news.

What is the good news? "For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." "Today," the angel said, "on this particular day, Christ the Lord, the Savior of the world, was born in Bethlehem, the city of David." The shepherds, Jews, would've known what city was called "the City of David." Not only does the angel tell the shepherds His name (Christ the Lord), the content of the message (that Jesus was born), and His location (in the city of David, Bethlehem), but the angel now gives them a sign by which they'd be able to identify Christ the Lord: "you will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger." In other words, they'd be able to find Jesus by looking for a baby wrapped in clothing strips, and placed in a manger. It's likely the angel has to tell them this because they would've been looking for a baby in the inn (Jesus wasn't there), and the manger would've been the last place to look for a child. It just didn't make sense for a baby to be placed in a manger. But remember, Jesus was born in a manger because the local inn was filled to the brim and there was no more room for anyone.

Upon this one angel delivering the news to the shepherds, we read that he is accompanied by what Luke calls in Luke 2:13 "a multitude of the heavenly host." In other words, there were numerous angels, a "multitude," that were singing. What exactly were they singing? Read verse 14: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!" Think of it: Heaven comes down not only in the person of Jesus Christ, the Babe in the manger, but the angels, ministers of His that do His bidding, came to sing over Jesus at His birth. Many of us have our mothers singing over us at our birth, or relatives, but Jesus had the angels sing over Him. Imagine that: this birth that was deemed so insignificant to so many in Jesus'

day (and sadly, our own) was the birth that brought Heaven to earth in the form of 1) Jesus and 2) angels to both deliver the message of Jesus' birth and to sing over the Son of God.

Now, let's analyze the song of the angels. It's a song, a statement of theological meaning. This time of year, at Christmas, let us sing songs to our Lord to celebrate His birth that are full of theological meaning. The angels sing "Glory to God in the highest," referring to Jesus. Jesus is God's highest glory. Paul says that God the Father has crowned Jesus, His Son, with glory when He provides a Messianic interpretation to Psalm 8 in Hebrews 2:5-9:

5 For He has not put the world to come, of which we speak, in subjection to angels. 6 But one testified in a certain place, saying:

"What is man that You are mindful of him,
Or the son of man that You take care of him?
7 You have made him a little lower than the angels;
You have crowned him with glory and honor,
And set him over the works of Your hands.
8 You have put all things in subjection under his feet."
For in that He put all in subjection under him, He left nothing that is not put under him. But now we do not yet see all things put under him. 9 **But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, for the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, that He, by the grace of God, might taste death for everyone.** (Hebrews 2:5-9)

Psalm 8 in its immediate context praises God for the glory He bestowed upon man. And it is true that man's existence testifies to the glory of God, for when we sin, we rob God of His glory in us (see Romans 3:23). When it comes to Jesus, He is the "Son of Man" who, through the suffering that led to death, brought glory to God by going to the Cross and "taste[ing] death for everyone." This is why the angels proclaim "Glory to God in the highest" --- because Jesus would live to God's highest glory by going to the Cross. The highest praise mankind could ever give God would be to exalt Him for saving mankind from its sins and reconciling God and man. Jesus is the mediator between God and mankind who reconciles mankind back to its Maker.

At the end of verse 14, we read "and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!" Yes, there's a benefit for God (Jesus lives to His highest glory), but there's also a benefit for those who live on the earth: "And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!" What does this mean that there's peace on earth and "goodwill toward men"? The word for "goodwill" can also refer to satisfaction or good intent or purpose. What this is saying is

that Jesus brings peace on earth and God's favor to all mankind. This is something that bears repeating once more: Jesus brings peace on earth and God's favor to mankind. By coming to earth in this First Advent, Jesus is on a mission from God the Father to die for the sins of mankind and reconcile humanity back to God. His death and resurrection, by shedding His blood, brings peace between God and mankind.

As Paul goes on to say in his letter to the Romans, "Having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 5:1). Jesus is "the peace child," for He is the embodiment of peace between God and men. Having borne the wrath of God on the Cross in His body, He took our place and gave us His righteousness for our sin. Jesus is the one by whom we have peace with God the Father. Prior to His coming, there was only wrath between God and mankind. Paul has something to say here as well in Ephesians 2:

"And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, 2 in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, 3 among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others.

4 But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, 5 even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), 6 and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, 7 that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. 8 For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, 9 not of works, lest anyone should boast. 10 For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

11 Therefore remember that you, once Gentiles in the flesh—who are called Uncircumcision by what is called the Circumcision made in the flesh by hands— 12 that at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. 13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

14 For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, 15 having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, 16 and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity. 17 And He came and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near. 18 For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father." (Ephesians 2:1-17)

Jesus is not only peace on earth, but He is also "goodwill toward men." In other words, because there is peace between God and men where there was once wrath, God purposed good towards mankind and not evil. Jesus' First Advent changed the relationship between God and His creation, a relationship broken and severed because of Adam's sin in the Garden of Eden and his violation of God's order to not eat the forbidden fruit. God's "goodwill toward men" is not something you'll find a Calvinist affirming. Nope, whether Calvinists like it or not, Luke 2 disagrees with Calvinism and John Calvin's theology because it says that God has "goodwill" toward men, all men, not some men. Remember the angel's words in Luke 2:10 that Jesus' birth was "good tidings of great joy" that would come to "all people"? Jesus' birth would be good news for all mankind --- not SOME of us, but ALL of us.

As John 3:16 says, "God so loved THE WORLD," that He gave His only begotten Son. He gave His Son for the entire world, for every person, whether they'd believe in Him or not, whether they'd embrace the gospel or shun it. I've drilled this many times before, but it bears repeating: Calvinism is not the gospel. I repeat: Calvinism is not the gospel. The gospel is for all people, all men. Jesus Himself said in John 12:32 that if He was lifted up (that is, if He died), "I will draw ALL MEN unto Me," Jesus said. Again, "all" means "all."

For those who wonder what happens next, verses 15-20 tell us that the angels depart, the shepherds go to see what the angel has told them in Bethlehem. After seeing it for themselves to verify the angel's message, they go and tell everyone they can (the text says that they "made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this Child" in verse 17). Those who hear what the shepherds say are amazed at what they'd been told. Mary keeps all these things within, thinking on all that has happened. The shepherds return to the fields after leaving Bethlehem, and the text says they did so "glorifying and praising God" for all that they'd heard and seen. Their response to the angel's message, the good news of salvation that began with the birth of Jesus, is one of praise and glorifying God.

And that's how we all should be on not only Christmas Day, but every day: we should all give glory to God, exalt His name, praise Him for bringing Jesus to earth, praise Him for loving mankind so much that He sent His Son to die for us. We can never repay the Lord for what He's done for us, but the least we can do as beneficiaries of His sacrifice is to praise, exalt, and bless His name. And it is my prayer that we, like the shepherds, will tell the good news widely, spread the gospel to everyone we meet, so that every man, woman, boy, and girl can experience the salvation that we believers have found in Jesus. As in the days of

Jesus, when so many were so busy that they didn't even notice His birth, there are many today who still need to hear (and long to hear) the good news in the gospel about the Son of God and the Savior of the world, Jesus Christ.