

A STRANGE BIRTH ANNOUNCEMENT

LUKE 2:8-20

The Fact That God Has Made A Way For Us To Be Reconciled With Him Through Jesus Is Great News!

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A Strange Birth Announcement

Luke 2:8-20

Last time we were together, we worked our way through Luke's description of the birth of Jesus. His account was very low key and understated. When John was born, neighbors came over and rejoiced with Zechariah and Elizabeth. Bands were playing and there was a great deal of celebration. We also said that Mary was probably present for all of that. But last week, we saw that Mary and Joseph were not surrounded by neighbors, friends, or bands. There was no celebration. Mary and Joseph welcomed Jesus into the world pretty much alone.

This morning, we are going to see a strange birth announcement. Angels from heaven are going to announce the birth of the King of kings and Lord of lords to some lowly shepherds out in the field. It's strange because one would think this type of announcement should be made to the religious and political leaders of the day. Jesus' entrance into the world should be greeted with a great deal of fanfare and formal receptions. However, all the events surrounding Jesus' birth seem strange to us. But what we fail to see is the wonder of the miracle of it all. Maybe that is the case because we are so worldly in our view even of miracles. Luing and I travel to Mexico a lot. People always try to smuggle in Cuban cigars or Mexican tequila. On one such trip, a U.S. customs official caught a guy bringing in a half-gallon bottle of clear liquid. The customs official asked the traveler what was in the bottle. The traveler said, "It's just some holy water I got from one of the shrines we visited." The inspector was suspicious. He opened the bottle and took a sniff. He shouted, "This isn't holy water, it's tequila!" Without missing a beat, the traveler lifted his eyes to the sky and cried out, "Good heavens! It's another miracle!"

Look, from a human perspective and from the value system we operate, the whole event of Jesus' birth sounds strange to us. But the more we come to understand it from God's perspective, the more miraculous and exciting it becomes. The main idea of this morning's text is this. **THE FACT THAT GOD HAS MADE A WAY FOR US TO BE RECONCILED WITH HIM THROUGH JESUS IS GREAT NEWS!** In other words, we are born into this world as alienated from God because we have inherited a natural bent towards evil. And because we separate ourselves further from God by rejecting Him, disobeying Him, or ignoring Him, we find ourselves hopelessly separated from Him. We can never be good enough or religious enough to repair the damage we have done. We cannot do enough good works either to put us in a right relationship with God. That is why the birth of Jesus is such great news. The word for Gospel in Greek means "Good News."

I. A STRANGE ANNOUNCEMENT

Luke is going to tell us what the good news is all about. In verses 8-14 he describes a strange announcement concerning the birth of Jesus. What we learn here is that **GOD'S VALUES ARE MUCH DIFFERENT THAN OURS.** We are a people who like to second guess decisions of

others. And we always seem to do it after the fact. We would have had Jesus born in the palace with world leaders sending gifts and visiting Him in the palace and the temple. But this just shows how worldly our values are. The announcement of Jesus' birth comes via a spectacular delivery in verses 8-9.

Here is what's going on. Shepherds are out in the field with their sheep. They keep the sheep moving from place to place in order for them to get enough vegetation to graze. And so they spend nights out in the field with them. The shepherds' job is to keep the sheep safe from predatory animals and thieves. Since they are near Bethlehem, these sheep are probably being raised to be used in the worship at the temple in Jerusalem.

Even though this is a very important job, and it is critical to the proper worship of the nation of Israel, shepherds were not held in high esteem. In fact, they found themselves pretty low on the social ladder. Oftentimes they would be rendered unclean for religious purposes because they often came in contact with blood, dead animals, and dung. They spent a lot of time in the field so they kind of stank.

So there is this mixed vision of shepherds. King David was a shepherd and there was this romantic idea of being a shepherd, but there was also the practical side of shepherding that was distasteful. It's kind of like our idea of working cowboys. It's kind of enchanting to think of living free under the stars, but it's kind of repulsive to think about going without a bath or going to the bathroom in the woods. All romantic notions aside, shepherds were not the most desirable people in society. They weren't hated like tax collectors, but they were definitely not on society's A-list.

The shepherds have the sheep down for the night and they are kind of leaning back on the grass, on the side of the hill, looking over the flock. It is night and pretty dark out in the country. They are alert to listen for predatory animals or thieves. Perhaps they are a little sleepy and starting to doze off a bit. All of a sudden, one of these bigger than life angels appeared before them. Gabriel the angel appeared to Zechariah and Mary. They were afraid, but look closely here in verse 9. Along with the angel, the glory of the Lord shone around them. The phraseology here reminds us of God's special presence and appearance in the Old Testament. The glory of the Lord was referred to as the Shechinah Glory of God. These were special appearances, presence, and manifestation of God's power. God appeared in the pillar of cloud and fire for the Hebrews. The pillar guided them and protected them. God would manifest Himself in the Holy of Holies on the mercy seat in the temple. So not only does this bigger than life angel appear to them, but the very presence of God surrounds them. It's now brighter than the noonday sun. Shepherds, who were normally pretty brave guys, are now terrified out of their minds. If they were sleepy before, they are certainly wide awake now.

That's good because they will receive a spectacular message in verses 10-11. The angel immediately commands them not to be afraid. Did you ever stop and think about this command? When God approaches us He often tells us to be strong and courageous. He tells us not to be afraid. Part of being a Christian is to learn to fear God and Him alone. It seems that God and His angels have to remind even the bravest warriors to not be afraid but instead to be strong and courageous. That's what we are called to be.

The reason we should not fear is because of the Good News God has for us. The phrase “I bring you good news” is one word in Greek. The word is euangelidzo. Do you kind of recognize the English word that comes from this word? We get our English word evangelist from this word. We are all evangelist. We have the Good News of God to share with our friends, family, and all the people we come in contact with.

The angel told the shepherds that this news from God is so good, that it will bring joy to all people. Here is the Good News. In Bethlehem, the city of David, a baby is born to them. Perhaps the shepherds look at one another and say, “My wife wasn’t pregnant. What does the angel mean when he says a child is born to us?”

The angel is first of saying that this child comes from the line of King David. It is a potential ruler of Israel. Secondly, the angel said that this baby was their Savior. In the Hebrew culture, when someone fell into debt and had to sell themselves into slavery, a relative would come and redeem them. They would buy them out of slavery and set them free. This word in Hebrew is a goel. We have come to translate this word as a kinsman redeemer. I’m pretty sure that since the shepherds were free spirits, the only thing they could think of was that this heir of King David would be a warrior king who would deliver them from the rule of the Roman Empire.

Thirdly, this baby is the Christ. Christ is the Greek word for the Hebrew word Messiah. It simply means the Anointed One. In Israel, the priests were anointed for service in the temple. Prophets were anointed and kings were anointed. Israel’s promised Messiah has been born.

This Savior and Christ is now referred to as Lord. It is true that lord can refer to a king, or a boss, or an important socialite. However, let’s think for a moment what Luke has preceded this with. This baby is an heir of King David. He is the Kinsman-Redeemer of Israel, He is the promised Messiah, and now He is referred to a Lord. Luke is clearly stating this baby is God in the flesh. Later on in Luke’s Gospel, Jesus will use King David as a proof that He is the Messiah:

“41Then Jesus presented them with a question. “Why is it,” he asked, “that the Messiah is said to be the son of David? 42For David himself wrote in the book of Psalms:

‘The Lord said to my Lord,

Sit in honor at my right hand

43until I humble your enemies,

making them a footstool under your feet.’

44Since David called him Lord, how can he be his son at the same time?” (Luke 20:41-44 / NLT).

Jesus is saying that David addressed Him as Lord. In other words, God the Father said to God the Son, sit at my right hand. To sum this up, the angels told the shepherds that the Promised Messiah, was born and He could be found in Bethlehem. The Great News is that God is now

reconciling people to Himself. He sent Jesus to deliver us from our bondage to sin, fear, and death.

The angel then left the shepherds with a spectacular sign in verses 12-14. When I read through this, I find myself really confused. The angel said the sign would be they would find this baby wrapped in cloth lying in a manger. Huh? What kind of sign is that? Shouldn't the sign be that they would find this baby in a palace or the temple, surrounded by guards? Instead, they will find the Messiah, the King of Israel, God in the flesh in a feeding trough surrounded by animals? I don't get how that could be a sign to the shepherds, except for the fact this bigger than life angel is telling me it and I'm surrounded by God's glory, ... and all of a sudden a company of heavenly beings appear and start singing. It really is kind of a strange setting. The highest created beings are celebrating the birth of Messiah with the lowest social class of people, out in the field. The message really is great news. With the birth of this Messiah, God will receive praise and human beings who receive the gift of salvation from Jesus, will find peace. I don't know how big of a deal to make of this, but look at the last phrase in verse 14. We usually say, "Glory to God in the highest and peace to His people on earth." I think that's the general idea, but in Greek it literally says, "and upon earth peace in people favored." That word favored is hard to translate. The word in Greek is a compound word. It is eudokia.

The first half of the word means good. The second half of the word can mean feelings, opinion, or seeming. The compound word can mean to take pleasure in someone, to have good feelings for someone, or to be chosen, elected, or selected. This may mean that God has predestined some of us for salvation. And according to the Bible, peace is only available to those who find themselves in a right relationship with God. The shepherds were chosen by God to receive this salvation message. That would truly be a spectacular sign. If we stop and think about it, isn't it Great News to think that God chose us for salvation? In order to make it happen, He sent His Son Jesus to suffer and die for us. And now that we are God's children, we need to pick up on God's value system. God did not value the pomp and circumstance of human displays of power and opulence. God chose to be born in an out of the way town, in a simple setting, and He chose to share the Good News with common, everyday working folks, not the A-list religious leaders or politicians. We need to internalize this fact. **GOD'S VALUES ARE MUCH DIFFERENT THAN OURS.**

II. A STRANGE RECEPTION

Verses 15-17 describe a strange reception. In addition to accepting God's values, we learn here that **FAITH IS USELESS UNLESS IT PRODUCES ACTION.** In his New Testament letter, James said that faith without works is dead. In these verses, we get a little insight into this process of faith. In verse 15 we encounter the decision of faith. After this incredible worship experience, the angels depart and go to heaven. Gone also is the Shechinah Glory of God. The shepherds are left out in the field, trying to figure out what had just happened. Look at the faith response here. They look at each other and make a conscious decision to believe the message. They decided to go to Bethlehem and explore the meaning of the message. When people are presented with the truth of the Gospel, the only acceptable response is to believe it and explore it further.

Verse 16 reminds us of the urgency of faith. Verse 16 starts out, “So they hurried off.” The shepherds wasted no time. The text doesn’t say who stayed to watch the sheep or if anyone stayed behind to watch the sheep. The text picks them up visiting Mary, Joseph, and Jesus Who was lying in a manger. This has to be a strange place to find the Savior, Messiah, and Lord. Think about how strange God planned this to be. If Joseph and Mary gave birth in their hometown of Nazareth, there would have been bands playing and their neighbors would be rejoicing. But since Jesus was born in Bethlehem, no band would be playing, no neighbors would be rejoicing because they were alone in a strange town. Even though Bethlehem was their official home of record, they were strangers there. This will be typical of Jesus’ life. The Apostle John described it like this:

“10But although the world was made through him, the world didn’t recognize him when he came. 11Even in his own land and among his own people, he was not accepted” (John 1:10-11 / NLT).

Jesus was continually rejected by the people He came to save, rescue, and redeem. The only people to immediately come and acknowledge His birth were simple, humble, shepherds. God made Himself known to a lowly group: Mary and Joseph, along with shepherds. There is no royalty present and no religious present. That should give us some insight into what kind of people God is looking for. When Gabriel told Mary about the role she would play in this, she immediately responded by going to visit Elizabeth. When the shepherds were told about the Messiah’s birth, they immediately went to see Jesus. Why is it so hard for us to respond to God in faith? It seems as if even though we know what we are supposed to do, it seems as if we drag our feet. Perhaps we are too proud and perhaps we think too highly of ourselves. God’s commands are not meant to be debated or discussed. They are meant to be obeyed immediately. Perhaps we lack the humility that Joseph, Mary, and the shepherds had.

Maybe that’s why we make such poor witnesses. Verse 17 illustrates the expression of genuine faith. The NIV translation of verse 17 is a bit mild and restrained. The NLT captures the excitement a little better:

“Then the shepherds told everyone what had happened and what the angel had said to them about this child.”

It seems as if the shepherds couldn’t contain themselves. Everyone they met, they told what had happened to them. Why do you suppose we are not that excited about our salvation and what God is doing in our lives daily? Based on what God has done and continues to do for us, shouldn’t we be as excited as the shepherds? Maybe we have fooled ourselves into thinking that we deserve all the good things we have. Maybe we think we are entitled to good things. But authentic faith can never think like this. Out of love, gratitude, and excitement, we should be living witnesses of the Great News that God wants to be in a right relationship with all people. This may give us cause for reflection. **FAITH IS USELESS UNLESS IT PRODUCES ACTION.**

III. A STRANGE EXPERIENCE

Verses 18-20 remind us that this has indeed been a strange experience. Since God is so awesome and beyond our understanding it follows that ENCOUNTERING GOD'S GREAT NEWS BRINGS A VARIETY OF RESPONSES.

Verse 18 reminds us that we should never stop being amazed at what God has done in our lives and for what He continues to do in our lives. Everyone who came in contact with these shepherds were amazed, and why not? The Jews had been waiting for the arrival of Messiah for a long time. If it was true that He had really arrived, why would He announce it to lowly shepherds first and why would He be born into an obscure family? Secondly, they would be amazed at how it affected the shepherds. Here is something I would like to talk to all of us about. If people cannot see Christ in our lives, and how He continues to change us, then we need to question whether we have really had an authentic faith experience. These shepherds were like night and day. I have seen Christians who are simply nasty people. I have seen Christians who are outwardly prejudiced. I have seen people who claim to be Christians who are gossips and troublemakers. I have seen Christians who demonstrate no joy. This cannot be. If we take time to reflect on what God is doing in our lives, we should be filled with amazement. And people filled with amazement and wonder, are easy to spot. I'm hoping that people can see in us the wonder of Jesus.

Verse 19 reminds us that it often takes intentional reflection to grasp what God is doing in us, through us, and for us. The angels were worshiping, the shepherds were evangelizing, the people were amazed, and Mary pondered. I know that I am not good at this because I'm not a person who is quiet. I'm always talking. I'm kind of hyperactive. But if we want to get a handle on what God is doing in us, then we need to get away, be quiet, and listen for God. Some of the disciplines we need to reclaim are listening prayer, Scripture memorization, silence, and meditation. Mary would need a great deal of spiritual fortitude to withstand what she would have to witness her Son go through. We gain strength and clarity as we ponder the things of God.

And most of all, encountering God should lead us to joyful worship as described in verse 20. I would just like to point this out. The shepherds raised sheep for temple worship. Because of the nature of their work, they were oftentimes ceremonially unclean and prevented from attending the temple. But this night, they got to see and touch the actual Lamb of God, Jesus. He was the One Who would take away the sins of the world. The shepherds were changed for life. They returned to their lives but now they lived their everyday lives continually rejoicing, glorifying, and praising God for all they had seen and heard. I really do hope that our lives are lived in continual and joyful worship. ENCOUNTERING GOD'S GREAT NEWS BRINGS A VARIETY OF RESPONSES.

We moderns have trouble believing that miracles continue to happen today. But we should remember that God worked the miracle of salvation in us if we are Christians and we should see that miracle repeated over and over again if we are a people who evangelize. In other words, if we are sharing the Good News, people ought to be getting saved. THE FACT THAT GOD HAS

MADE A WAY FOR US TO BE RECONCILED WITH HIM THROUGH JESUS IS GREAT NEWS!

We need to grasp the nature of God's work of salvation in our lives. And keep in mind that this miracle of salvation is a process. We were saved by grace through faith. We refer to that as justification. We are being saved by grace through faith. That is sanctification. And we will be saved by grace through faith. That is glorification. God is in the business of miracles. Let's not forget that. I don't know where this story came from, but it's a reminder of how we should look for and expect miracles.

"An eight-year-old child heard her parents talking about her little brother. All she knew was that he was very sick and they had no money left. They were moving to a smaller house because they could not afford to stay in the present house after paying the doctor's bills. Only a very costly surgery could save him now and there was no one to loan them the money.

When she heard daddy say to her tearful mother with whisper in desperation, 'Only a miracle can save him now', the child went to her bedroom and pulled a glass jar from its hiding place in the closet. She poured all the change out on the floor and counted it carefully. Clutching the precious jar tightly, she slipped out the back door and made her way six blocks to the local drug Store. She took a quarter from her jar and placed it on the glass counter.

"And what do you want?" asked the pharmacist. "It's for my little brother," the girl answered back. "He's really, really sick and I want to buy a miracle."

"I beg your pardon?" said the pharmacist. "His name is Andrew and he has something bad growing inside his head and my daddy says only a miracle can save him. So how much does a miracle cost?"

"We don't sell miracles here, child. I'm sorry," the pharmacist said, smiling sadly at the little girl. "Listen, I have the money to pay for it. If it isn't enough, I can try and get some more. Just tell me how much it costs."

In the shop was a well-dressed customer. He stooped downward asked the little girl, "What kind of a miracle does your brother need?" "I don't know," she replied with her eyes welling up. "He's really sick and mommy says he needs an operation. But my daddy can't pay for it, so I have brought my savings".

"How much do you have?" asked the man. "One dollar and eleven cents, but I can try and get some more", she answered barely audibly. "Well, what a coincidence," smiled the man. "A dollar and eleven cents the exact price of a miracle for little brothers."

He took her money in one hand and held her hand with the other. He said, "Take me to where you live. I want to see your brother and meet your parents. Let's see if I have the kind of miracle you need."

That well-dressed man was Dr Carlton Armstrong, a surgeon, specializing in neurosurgery. The operation was completed without charge and it wasn't long before Andrew was home again and doing well. "That surgery," her mom whispered, "was a real miracle. I wonder how much it would have cost." The little girl smiled. She knew exactly how much the miracle cost one dollar and eleven cents ... plus the faith of a little child."

That's exactly what the birth of Jesus symbolizes for each one of us. We were all hopelessly incurable from the damage of sin in our lives. There was no way we could afford in any way to wipe out the effects of sin in our lives. In fact we were all dead in our sins. But God sent Jesus to pay the debt we could never pay. We needed a miracle and God delivered at the perfect time. Here is how the Apostle Paul put it:

*"6When we were utterly helpless, Christ came at just the right time and died for us sinners.
8... God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners" (Romans 5:6,8 / NLT).*