

UNLIKELY
Luke 2:1-20

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Have you ever been in charge of planning a really big event—a wedding, a class reunion, or a grand opening? Last year, I was in charge of planning the wedding of my oldest daughter, Ryan. I tried to make the wedding as memorable as possible. The wedding included 1,200 pieces of wedding cake available in six different flavors! The planning and preparation were spread over a year, managing a myriad of details and, thus, many stressful emotions. Contracts, photographers, videographers, soloists, caterer, band, venue, hotels, cake decorators, ushers, florists, groomsmen, bridesmaids, registry books, etc., etc., etc.

But what could be bigger than planning for the arrival of the Son of God? Could any of us imagine being in charge of all the details for a cosmic event like the coming of the Christ?

How would we have planned for the birth of the Son of God, the Savior, Christ our Lord? Perhaps we would have planned for the Messiah to be born in the holy city, Jerusalem, maybe even within the shadow of the temple itself. Certainly we would have selected a king and queen, or at least priestly parents (as it was with John the Baptist, 1:5), for the long-awaited holy child. Trumpets would have blared and royal decrees declared the long-awaited arrival of the Prince of Peace.

God, however, wrote the script in a most unpredictable way. Common characters—carpenters and shepherds—star in the story of the birth of the Messiah. The authenticity of Luke’s account is certain, for we would have never woven together such a humble birth narrative for the Christ if we were writing the story. Any human fabrication of the event would have been farfetched.

While John’s birth is summarized in just a few sentences (1:57-58), Luke more fully develops the record of the birth of Jesus. In the midst of poverty and with the powerless, Luke takes his readers on a most unexpected journey as he leads them to Bethlehem—not Jerusalem—for this most unusual, humble birth.

I. Traveling Up to Bethlehem (Luke 2:1-7)

Counting heads to collect coins (2:1-3)

Oppressed. The Jews loathed being taxed by the occupational government—Rome. With these opening verses, Luke reminds us that God’s people were political prisoners in their own land. The Roman emperor, Caesar Augustus, is counting heads so that he can collect taxes. Gaius Octavius (Caesar Augustus) was adopted by his great-uncle, Julius Caesar, who made Octavius both his adopted son and heir. “Augustus” is actually a title carrying divine implications, meaning “majestic.” This title was assigned to Gaius Octavius by the senate in 27 B.C.

Publius Sulpicius Quirinius was governor of Syria from A.D. 6 to A.D. 7. Yet, Jesus' birth had to occur no later than 4 B.C. because this is the year of Herod the Great's death. An inscription discovered in Antioch, however, may refer to Quirinius as the leading military officer before Herod's death. Thus, he was virtually the emperor's viceroy. The word used for "governor," moreover, is a broader term that may relate to several types of administrative positions. No conflict exists, therefore, when both names appear in the birth narrative.

The census itself was an unwelcome reminder that Israel was a conquered people living under the hegemony of Roman rule. Making a reference to the census no less than four times (2:1, 2, 3, 5), Luke wants his reader to be aware of its intrusion into the lives of God's people. This decree (imperial edict), enforced by a pagan people, was an attempt to first count heads so that Caesar could next count coins—taxes.

Registering as required (2:4-5)

As a result of Caesar Augustus' decree, Joseph and the expecting mother, Mary, travel to Bethlehem where Jesus will be born. We cannot help but note that while Luke tells us that Jesus' reign will have no end (1:33), historians tell us that Caesar Augustus' reign ended with his death in A.D. 14.

Being a descendant of David (1:27), Joseph has to travel to "the city of David." With the skill of a master narrator, Luke describes Joseph's journey as "went up" to "the city of David." The first-time reader surely supposes that these two descriptions designate Jerusalem (2 Samuel 5:6-7, 9; 6:10, 12, 16; 2 Kings 9:28). This seemingly obvious expectation, however, is upended when Luke clearly states Bethlehem as the birthplace (2:4). Like David, Jesus has Bethlehem as his birthplace (1 Samuel 16, 17:12-16, 58). The prophet Micah said long before:

"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me One who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are of old, from ancient times" (Micah 5:2).

Usually, women were not required to register. While Luke is silent about "why" Mary makes the difficult journey with Joseph from Nazareth to Bethlehem, we can assume that being left behind in Nazareth would have exposed her to wagging tongues and caustic gossip. Apparently, the townspeople had unholy explanations for Jesus' birth that did not include Mary's virginity (John 8:41). Others might also argue that as she approached the end of her pregnancy, Mary did not want to risk being away from Joseph.

Settling for a "stable" (2:6-7)

Luke likens Jesus' birth to that of an ordinary peasant baby born in the backwater of the Roman Empire. He is wrapped in bands of cloth that create a soothing sense of security. Luke, thus, implies that, in many ways, Jesus shares the lot of all mortals. Such binding, moreover, may foreshadow the future wrapping of Jesus in burial linens (Luke 23:53).

Finding no "guest room," Joseph secures a first-floor stable as the only available shelter for his expecting wife. The place of Jesus' birth was most likely a barn which was attached to an ordinary peasant dwelling. Picture an overcrowded Palestinian peasant home. The animals were under the

same roof as the family dwelling. The areas were only separated by the raised platform for the family area. The word translated “inn” (*kataluma*) is also used elsewhere in Luke to describe a simple guest room (22:11). The official noun for a commercial “inn” (*pandocheion*) is not used here, but, rather, in 10:34 in the parable of the Good Samaritan. The standard home consisted of two main rooms: one in which the family cooked and slept and another room, the guest room, as described here. With the guest room (*kataluma*) already occupied, Joseph and his wife do the best they can, finding shelter where the family animals (who are likely out in the pasture this time of year) are ordinarily housed. Therefore, having carefully chosen his words, Luke is indicating that with the guest room already occupied, Jesus was born in the stable below.

The word “manger,” moreover, is better translated “feeding trough.” The Savior who will later die a shameful death on a wooden cross (Deuteronomy 21:23; Galatians 3:13) finds his beginning in a common feeding trough, a mundane manger. As Martin Hengel notes, “His head rests where cattle have fed.”

II. Declaring Good News (Luke 2:8-20)

Watching the flocks (2:8-9)

Luke has already given clear hints that shepherds would be the next supporting cast members coming across his narrative stage. He has continually mentioned David, the shepherd king (1 Samuel 16:11-13; David is mentioned in 1:27, 32, 69; 2:4). Not only has he tipped his hand by talking about David, he has also spoken about the lowly (1:52). Hardly anyone in Jewish culture was ranked lower than shepherds. While we might romanticize the occupation of a shepherd, at the time of Jesus’ birth they were generally thought of as being dishonest and, certainly, ceremonially unclean according to the standards of the law.

Ironically, Luke’s selection of lowly characters such as shepherds rightly foreshadows the fact that Jesus came for the “outcast and sinners.” According to Luke, in fact, such shepherds were the first recipients of God’s good news.

Shepherds were generally “out in their fields” during the months of March thru November. Nothing, however, in the two birth accounts in the New Testament ties Jesus’ birth to any specific date.

Luke could hardly have chosen a greater contrast when he follows up lowly shepherds with an angel of the Lord. The angel is nameless, probably because only the message matters. This is the third angelic announcement in the infancy material (see Luke 1:5-25; 26-38). The angel is accompanied by “the glory of the Lord” shining around the shepherds. Old Testament readers are well aware that “the glory of the Lord” is associated with the tabernacle and, later, the temple (Exodus 40:34-35; 1 Kings 8:11; 2 Chronicles 5:13-14; Psalm 63:2). On this occasion, however, the glory is associated with neither the tabernacle nor temple in Jerusalem, but with lowly shepherds in an open field who were doing little more than keeping watch over their flock.

Including all people (2:10-12)

As has already been witnessed in Luke’s account, fear is the first human reaction to contact with the divine (see 1:13, 30). The angel, however, has nothing but “good news” for the shepherds. The

word used by the angel, “good news” (*euangelion*) was a term used by the Romans to announce the glad tidings concerning the birth of an heir to the emperor or his ascension to the throne. This term takes on an entirely new meaning, however, as it is redefined by the good news story, the gospel, of Jesus. In Isaiah 40-46, the “good news” concerns the arrival of God (40:9) and God’s saving reign of peace and justice (52:7), all for the outcast (61:1-2).

This good news, moreover, is not something for which the shepherds will have to wait. It has been fulfilled “today.” Luke uses the term “today” to connect the yesterday of God’s promises and Old Testament prophecies to their present fulfillment (4:21; 5:26; 19:5, 9; 23:43). Consistent with Luke’s writings, he makes clear that the announcement of the arrival of the Savior is for everyone, including the Gentiles (Acts 15:1-29; 18:10).

I’ve always enjoyed the story about the five-year-old who was assigned to play the part of the “angel of proclamation” in his church’s annual Christmas pageant. The volunteer director had rehearsed the lines over and over, trying to teach the little boy that as the spotlight shines on his face, he was to deliver his lofty lines: “Fear not, for behold I bring you good news of great joy which shall be for all people everywhere. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” Despite all the practice and best intentions, however, stage fright got the best of the little actor. With the spotlight beaming on his face and all ears tuned to his message, he paused, panicked, and then paraphrased the proclamation into his own words, “Boy, have I got some good news for you!”

That is the gospel, is it not? God has good news for all people: The Savior is here.

The angel’s description of the newborn baby is “a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” “Savior” is a word specifically used of God himself, the God who delivers his people (1 Samuel 10:19; Isaiah 45:15, 21). This role, appropriately enough, is now also given to Jesus (Acts 5:31; 13:23). The next term, “Christ” (*Christos*), means “Messiah” or “anointed one.” In Israel’s political sphere, the title referred to kings who would come to continue the Davidic dynasty (Psalms 18:50; 89:20, 38, 51; 132:10, 17). “Lord” is a word used for the Roman emperor, including Augustus. In Mary’s Magnificat (1:46-55), Mary declared that her soul exalts the Lord, and “my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior.” “Lord” and “Savior” were both used already of God in Luke’s Gospel, and now they are used of the Bethlehem baby. Together, these words underscore the elevated status of Jesus as nothing less than the Messiah, God’s anointed one.

For the third time in the infancy material, we have a physical sign that confirms a prophetic declaration (see 1:18-20, 36). Just like Zacharias’ silence (1:18-20) and Elizabeth’s pregnancy (1:36), the feeding trough bed would serve to confirm the truth of the prophetic proclamation.

Declaring peace (2:13-14)

The angel of the Lord is now accompanied by a heavenly host. “Host” is normally a military term applied to God’s army. This particular army, however, does not come waging war, but declaring peace. The term “peace” would recall for Luke’s reader both the Pax Romana (the peace of Rome) and the Hebrew Shalom.

Having proclaimed the good news of God, the angels disappear just as quickly as they came. And the responsibility for a response rests with the shepherds. In haste, the shepherds respond in four ways: they go, they see, they rejoice, and share. Whenever God proclaims the good news of the arrival of Christ the Lord, there should always be an obedient response.

Gathering her thoughts (2:15-20)

Arriving to the birthplace of Jesus, the shepherds find everything “just as had been told them” (2:20). Receiving confirmation of the message concerning the Messiah, the shepherds go and “make known” what they had been told about this special child. Those who heard it wondered with amazement (v. 18) at the message shared by the shepherds.

Mary, however, gathered all these godly thoughts into her heart, pondering. One scholar likens Mary’s response to that found in the parable of the sower. She, he argues, represents those who “when they hear the word, hold it fast in the good and honest heart, and bear fruit with perseverance” (8:15).

Conclusion

Luke begins his “orderly account” with a most unexpected story. God’s angel has finally proclaimed the “good news” that the Savior, the Christ, has arrived. His presence, however, is not just for the benefit of ancient Israel, but “for all people.” His birth, surprisingly, has few exceptional or noteworthy elements. God leads a poor carpenter and his expecting, teenage wife, to a most humble city—Bethlehem—for the birth of the Son of God. Rather than being received as Savior, however, the infant is pushed out to find his lowly place in an animal’s feeding trough. Even the guest room is unavailable for the creator of all things. Despite his royalty as a kingly descendant of David, his only garment is the wrapping cloths of a peasant child. With the exception of a few shepherds, his birth is unnoticed by the very people who have longed for his arrival. Unlikely place, unlikely time, unlikely parents, and yet angels gather in mass to make known the thing that has happened—God is now here.