

12-18-16 – the Call of Christmas

Shepherds: A Call to Praise

Luke 2:1-20

Have you ever been faced with something in your sight lines that took your breath away? Maybe you are one of the millions who have witnessed the night sky extravaganza inside the Magic Kingdom of Disney World with “oooo’s” and “aaaaahhhh’s” as the evening fireworks display a show and grand finale that is a sight to behold. Each is a breathtaking experience. Each is a memorable moment. Our family went to the Lititz park for the Forth of July celebration one year when my boys were young... <expand>

But nothing this side of heaven could take the place of the shock and holy awe the shepherds experienced on the night that heaven came down and kissed the earth. The Magic Kingdom has nothing on the Kingdom of God when it comes to a heavenly host lighting up the night sky and blasting a chorus of praise that proclaimed the Call of Christmas. It was a call to praise!

“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”

Those were the words the angels proclaimed on the night when their eternal King who was and is and is to come, took on flesh and was born in a manger. A simple manger holding the Messiah coupled with a magnificent message from the angel that was magnified in song by the heavenly host. **“On earth as it is in heaven” became real.**

Luke’s gospel sets the stage of this scene in and around the little town of Bethlehem. This is where the prophecies of long ago foretold that the Messiah would be born. The ruler of the day, Caesar Augustus, thought a census needed to be taken so that updated tax rolls could be formed as Jews frustratingly made their way back to their roots and hometowns. **But the Good News is that God sends Himself into our world to bring us peace.**

Little did Caesar Augustus know that God sovereignly was at work through his annoying Roman decree? But God has a way of moving through the affairs of nations to accomplish His own purposes. God longs to insert Himself into your life situations to bring you peace and give you hope.

And God has a knack for using the ordinary to highlight the extraordinary. Three times we will see Luke mention **the common manger as the unique sign where the shepherds will find the Christ-child who will be wrapped in swaddling clothes.** And the splendor of the vision from the angels to the shepherds would forever change not only their lives but also the lives of all those who eventually would hear of this good news they would share. Let’s read the story from Luke 2 and watch the call of Christmas take the shepherds’ breath away as the angel and the heavenly host proclaim and praise His Majesty’s arrival.

“In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And 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, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.

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

And in the same region, there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

“Glory to God in the highest,

And on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”

When 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.” And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.”

Luke 2:1-20 ESV

The advent message the angel had communicated to Mary and Joseph months before in Nazareth, had finally arrived. Jesus the Messiah was born to Mary the virgin and her faithful man, Joseph, who was by her side all the way. It had been a long 70-mile haul over many days and many hills of rough terrain from Nazareth in Galilee up to the city of David just outside of Jerusalem; especially for a pregnant woman. Traveling via foot and on the back of a donkey was not the most comfortable situation when a baby boy was bouncing on your bladder all the way to Bethlehem. But they made it. And their secret message from the angel soon would be expanded beyond just the two of them. **The angels were about to go public with this proclamation of the Messiah’s birth.**

Up to this point, the angel encounters regarding the Call of Christmas had been one on one with Mary, Joseph, and even with Zachariah in the Temple who would learn that he and his wife, Elizabeth, would have a child in their old age. Their promised son, John, would be instrumental in preparing the way for his cousin, Jesus, the Lord, who soon would make his arrival.

When the angel shared the message of the Messiah in the first public setting, it was not in the Temple near the holy of holies, nor to a virgin chosen to be the mother of God, nor during a dream to a just man who lived every letter of God's law; rather, it was out in the fields to a bunch of society's outcasts.

"And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear." Luke 2:8-9

It is significant that the lowest class of society, the shepherds, were included in the public announcement. God will not exclude any people from His good news. Even though shepherds were considered lowly in occupation, untrustworthy in character and ceremonially unclean for worship, this was the group with whom God wanted the message to go public. What the shepherds experienced out in the fields was unforgettable. It all but took their breath away which is why the first words from the angel dealt with naming and trying to dissipate their fear.

"And the angel said to them, "Fear not..." Luke 2:10

Billy Graham notes in his book, *Angels: God's Secret Agents*, how over and over again the presence of angels was frightening to those to whom they came. But unless they came in judgment, the angels spoke a word of reassurance. They calmed the people to whom they came. And when the angel had quieted the fears of the shepherds, he brought this message, one forever to be connected with the Good News.

"...for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." Luke 2:10-12

The good news was that the Savior had come. Jesus was arriving to cure the sin problem of humanity once and for all. The human race needed someone who could bring them back into fellowship with God because the blood of bulls and goats could not do this in any permanent way. But the blood of the Savior could.

The angel message was that God had come; redemption was possible. This Savior was Christ the Lord. Christ is a name that means Messiah, the anointed one to rule as King in fulfillment of God's promise to David as heir to his lineage and throne. Lord is a title and name that speaks of the divine nature of the One who was born and is a reference to Yahweh of the Old Testament. The Lord had visited His people with salvation in a divine and promise-fulfilling way. And it was further validated, proclaimed and accompanied with a call to praise when the angel army of heaven showed up in the night sky over the fields where the shepherds were with their flocks.

"And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!" Luke 2:13-14

Notice the kindness of God unfolding as the messaging takes place with the shepherds. First, God sends a single angel to meet with the men of the field. As they catch their breath and begin to understand they are not going to die, then the heavenly host breaks onto the scene and lights up the sky with their presence and praise. Had the order of their arrival been reversed, the shepherds likely would have had a heart attack from being overwhelmed with the company of those who dwell in the presence of the Holy One.

Three chapters in the Bible peel back the curtain of heaven and allow those of us on earth to peer behind the veil into what was happening in the presence of the King. As we think about the heavenly host breaking into song before the lowly shepherds, frame that scene with these glimpses of the heavenly host. While the passages are a bit lengthy, they are worth the read to get a feel for the encounter this group of angels from heaven suddenly transports to the Bethlehem countryside skies. With the context of **these scenes** from the Scriptures, we better understand what we mean when we sing:

“Heaven came down and glory filled my soul.”

Isaiah 6:1-7 recounts scene one with the heavenly host praising the Lord.

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said:

*“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory!”*

And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. And I said: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!”

Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth and said: “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.” Isaiah 6:1-7 ESV

Revelation 4 recounts scene two with the heavenly host praising the Lord.

After this I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, ‘Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.’ At once I was in the Spirit, and behold, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne....

seated on the thrones were twenty-four elders...

And around the throne, on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with the face of a man, and the fourth living creature like an eagle in flight. And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and within, and day and night they never cease to say,

*"Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty,
who was and is and is to come!"*

And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to him who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever. They cast their crowns before the throne, saying,

*"Worthy are you, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and
power, for you created all things,*

and by your will they existed and were created." Revelation 4:1-11 ESV

Revelation 5 recounts scene three with the heavenly host praising the Lord.

"Then I saw in the right hand of him who was seated on the throne a scroll written within and on the back, sealed with seven seals. And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming with a loud voice, "Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?" ...

And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain, with seven horns and with seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. And he went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who was seated on the throne. And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. And they sang a new song, saying,

*"Worthy are you to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God
from every tribe and language and people and nation,
and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God,
and they shall reign on the earth."*

Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice,

*"Worthy is the Lamb who was slain,
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might
and honor and glory and blessing!"*

*And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying,
"To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb
be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!"
And the four living creatures said, "Amen!" and the elders fell down and worshiped."*
Revelation 5:1-14 ESV

The angels who had resided throughout eternity in heaven around the throne of God consistently had lived lives that praised and honored and worshiped King Jesus. They had become aware of man's fall and had been informed that God had provided a way of salvation for all of humanity. We can assume that at least that the very birth of Christ in a condition of poverty and deprivation must have caused these angels to stand in awe of God's indescribably marvelous love. One might perhaps say that having become informed about the Savior's birth, a birth under such circumstances and with such self-sacrificing purpose, these angels never before had been so thrilled!

No wonder, therefore, that from the bottom of their hearts they shout: "Glory to God in the highest!" The incarnation was a call to praise because that is what they had done as created supernatural beings from the inception of their creation. The angels desire that all creation shall praise His holy name! As the host returned to heaven from where they came, the shepherds soon would heed their call of Christmas to join in the praising of the Lord they would find in the manger.

"When 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." And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them." Luke 2:15-20

Before we observe the actions of the shepherds, do not miss the detail that "the angels went away from them into heaven." It is interesting to note that the way Jesus returned to heaven at His ascension is the same way many scholars believe the heavenly host returned to heaven after their appearance and concert before the shepherds. Acts 1:9-11 records the account. <explain>

The shepherds were told that the manger would be the sign to indicate which baby in Bethlehem would be the one who would save the all the people from their sins. And they went with haste and found everything just as the angel had said. The trainer says you have to lift these weights, run these drills, and get your heart rate to this level, but they can't make you do it.

The shepherds knew what they had been told. But then they had to go. **And go they did!** When they got there, **they told all who were present** what the angel had told them. Suddenly the secret was out. It was no longer just a Mary and Joseph secret message from the angel. These men from the fields had been told where to find the Messiah; look for the baby in the manger wrapped in swaddling cloths. **That will be the sign.** And that message is what Mary treasured in her heart. **It is the message the shepherds would tell all whom they came into contact with upon their return to their jobs.** Don't miss that part either. They went back to work after they celebrated Jesus' birth. **At some point you have to go back to work.**

Never underestimate the fact that the shepherds not only were the first evangelists of the good news but also that they went back to work. They saw their domain where they worked as the greatest place to be on mission and tell others about Jesus. **The task of the church is to make disciples who engage the broad context of society for the kingdom of God increasingly to be realized on earth as it is in heaven.**

We don't establish God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven by remaining separated and marginalized. We take steps to make the kingdom a reality in our world by living for Christ in every domain in our society, in the love and power of the Holy Spirit.

In other words, we go back to our jobs and schools and neighborhoods and friendships and lives after the holidays are over and do them well as we love others well and tell the story of the good news of Jesus. He is the One who came to save us, our Savior, Christ the Lord.

Unchurched stats...

We get to be like the shepherds, telling the story of Jesus as we go about our day and our way of life whatever domain we happen to work and live within in society. And the shepherds did so as they praised the One whom they met in the manger.

That is the call of Christmas.

It is a call to praise.

This Christmas may we be the people who carry the good news of Jesus into all the domains of society so all the people of the earth can hear this call of Christmas that leads to praising Jesus just like the heavenly host did that night and continue to do throughout eternity.