

## Luke 2:1~20, part 2

It might appear that having the nativity scene, in the middle of August, is out of place... But I want to suggest to you, that it might well be the best time of year for it. I say that in the sense that this may be the only time we can truly appreciate the true meaning of Christmas. Tragically, much of the true meaning of Christmas has been lost amidst all the distractions of the lights, the trees, the gifts and so on.

This morning, it is a though, we have wiped the slate clean... It is as though all that worldly stuff, the traditional decorations and hype has been stripped away, leaving the one thing that Christmas is all about...*the birth of God's Son...God's gift* of eternal life to mankind. You know, we may look at this, this morning and think...this just doesn't feel like Christmas to me. When the reality is, this is the very essence of Christmas! You know what I mean? This morning we are celebrating Christmas in its most purest form, having as our focal point, the gift of God's son....

We dealt with the first seven verses last Sunday night...dealing with the actual birth of Christ. As a result of Caesar's decree that all be taxed, Mary and Joseph traveled some 80 miles from Nazareth, to Bethlehem (...*being that Joseph was of the house of David*) to register with the Roman government. Luke tells us, that as a result of this decree, and given the fact that Bethlehem was filled to capacity with travelers coming to register, all the "rooms" were taken in the city, thus Mary and Joseph had to settle for a stable out back. While there, Mary went into labor, and gave birth. She wrapped her son in linens and placed him in a manger, a feeding trough.

It's important that we don't miss the sovereign hand of God in the midst of all this... Some may look upon this and think, what a tragedy. To think, that they didn't even have a room, a proper place to have her child. Can you imagine, having your child out in a barn? But even so, everything that transpired did so according to God's divine plan. Everything that took place, did so in accordance with God's will.

It might be best said, *Caesar was ruling...but God was in control!* Unbenounced to Caesar, his decree for taxation was all a part of God's plan to bring Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem at the precise time the child was to be born. He did this to fulfill the prophet Micah's declaration that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem! No doubt in my mind, that Mary and Joseph had no intentions of traveling this close to her giving birth, but given the decree by Caesar, they had no choice. But we learn, all was part of God's plan, and brought about the birth of Messiah, in the exact place He declared hundreds of years prior!

This morning, I want us to pick up the story again, which now moves from the manger, to out in the field, where Luke introduces us to some shepherds. Once again we see the interaction between angels and humans... Angels have played a major role in connection with the birth of these two babies.

- a) An angel came to Zacharias, announcing the forthcoming birth of a son...John.
- b) An angel came to Mary, announcing the forthcoming birth of God's son...Jesus.
- c) An angel appeared to Joseph, convincing him to stay with Mary.

And here we see yet, another appearance of an angel in connection with the birth of Jesus. This time the angel appears to some shepherds, just outside of Bethlehem, to announce the arrival of the savior.

Taking into account, the whole scene that is described here, several questions come to mind...

- Why the Shepherds?** Of all the people on earth, why did God send angels to these lowly shepherds?
- Why did the angels not go to the Temple, to the high priest, the scribes, the religious leaders, and those associated with the worship of God to make this known?
  - Why did God choose these "*Shepherds*" to announce to the world, the birth of the Savior?

**Why the Manger?** Why was "*the Lord of heaven and earth*" born in a stable, a place for livestock?

My aim this morning is to answer those questions... But in doing so, my ultimate goal is to reveal the glory and wisdom of God that is behind these choices that God made. Listen, God could have chose any way he wanted to, to bring His plan about. He chose the place, the time, to whom he would be born, to whom the angels would appear...everything. Yet He chose this poor, lowly couple from Nazareth, He choose to have His son born in a stable. And He chose to declare the birth of Messiah to these lowly shepherds, and used them to declare His arrival. Given that God could have chosen any way He wanted to bring His plan about, yet He chose the lowly manner in which He did, the question becomes why?

The answer to all these questions, lies in understanding who these shepherds were. According Jewish scholar's, these shepherds were not your common shepherds tending their flocks in the fields surrounding Bethlehem. The "*Mishnah*," a collection of well-revered Jewish writings, declares that these shepherds mentioned here are not to be confused with those who watched over the ordinary flocks which pastured on the barren sheep ground beyond Bethlehem. But these shepherds were those who watched over the flocks, which were destined for Temple sacrifices. In fact, in validating this, the "*Mishnah*" declares that "*ordinary flocks*" were forbidden around the area spoken of here, and declares that the "*common flocks*" were confined to the wilderness area. The wilderness is not what we call the wilderness. The wilderness in Israel speaks not of luscious trees and vegetation, but rather speaks of the more barren, dry, desert land. The ordinary flocks were confined to that country. The land just on the outskirts of Bethlehem, was a better land, the more irrigated land, the better land for grazing, thus a land reserved for the "*temple flocks*." According to guidelines prescribed in scripture, the sacrificial animals offered in the temple, were required to be of the highest quality. Thus, this land was set-aside for them, so that they would be well nourished and suitable for offering to the Lord.

It is in understanding "*who*" these shepherds were, and the kind of livestock they tended to, that enables us to fully appreciate and grasp the fullness of this passage. Simply knowing who these shepherds were, answers all the questions...

Why the Manger?

- Why was "*the Lord of heaven and earth*" born in a stable, a place for livestock?

Why the Shepherds?

- Of all the people on earth, why did God send angels to these lowly shepherds?
- Why did the angels not go to the Temple, to the high priest, the scribes, the religious leaders?
- Why did God choose these "*Shepherds*" to announce to the world, the birth of the Savior?

Though the "*lord of heaven and earth*" deserved to be born in a palace, it would not be "*fitting*" for this visit. When Jesus came to earth the first time, he came not as King, but rather a Savior. His first visit to earth was not to rule and reign over Israel, but to bleed and die for Israel.

He came in the manner in which was written of Him... He came to fulfill what was written of Him in Exodus, where He is portrayed as the "*Passover Lamb*..." There, He is the lamb that was slaughtered, and its blood applied to the post of the doors, providing protection from the death angel.

He came to fulfill what was written of Him in Isaiah, where He is portrayed as a "*lamb*" led to the slaughter for the people.

He came to fulfill what was written of Him in the Law... For thousands of years, the nation Israel had offered "*a lamb without blemish*" on the altar for the sins of the people!

Beloved, I want to suggest to you, that Jesus was born in a manger, because there is not a more "*fitting*" place for the *sacrificial lamb* to be born. I want to suggest to you, that lying in that inside that stable, on that cold winter night, lying in that crib, lying in that stall, was "*The Lamb of God*." John the Baptist

understood this, for he said (speaking of Jesus)... “*Behold the lamb of God, which takes away the sins of the world!*”

**Why these shepherds?** When you think about it, no one would be more qualified, no one would be more suited to present to the world, the sacrificial lamb, than these shepherds who were in charge of the Temple sacrifices. Who would know better about *sacrificial lambs*, than these shepherds?

Knowing these shepherds were those who watched over the temple sacrifices, the angel’s announcement to them could be stated like this... “*Come and Behold the **lamb of God**, which takes away the sins of the world!*” “*You will find him lying in a stable, in Bethlehem.*”

Beloved, the Messiah came just as it was written of him in the O.T writings, as a “*Sacrificial Lamb.*” But the next visit will be much different. He will not come as a lowly infant; he will not come in such humility, and *be treated like an animal.* The next time he comes, it will be in the clouds, as the heavens burst open and reveal the “*Reigning King of Glory*” that he is! His next visit will not be made known by lowly shepherds, but by a host of angels, and the sounding of trumpets, as the heavens ring out... “*Make way for the coming King of all the earth!*”