

December 12 2021

God's grace, peace and mercy be with you. Let us pray. Heavenly Father, the psalmist wrote, ***"I rejoiced when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord.'"*** Now that our feet are within your gates, we rejoice to hear your Word. As we listen, may your Spirit enlighten our minds and move our hearts to love deeply as Jesus loved. This we pray to you, Most Holy Trinity. Amen.

Who is your favorite superhero? As a young boy, my favorite was Superman. I watched the black and white TV series as often as I could. George Reeves play Superman. I remember the opening lines. *Faster than a speeding bullet. More powerful than a locomotive. Able to leap tall buildings in a single bound. Look! Up in the sky! It's a bird. It's a plane. It's Superman!*

Superman was born Kal-El on the alien planet Krypton to Jor-El and Lara. Rocketed to earth, found and adopted by Jonathan and Martha Kent, he was renamed Clark Kent. He grew up in Smallville, where he and his adoptive parents discovered his superhuman powers. Fortunately, for us, the Kents taught Clark to use these powers responsibly to help others and fight crime.

The reason I mention Superman is because we want to know about people's origins, even fictional ones. We inquire where this person was born, where he went to school, who his parents were, and so on. It's like our hymn, *"What Child is This?"* When asked, parents proudly announce to the world the entry of son, daughter, niece, nephew and grandbabies. Here are a few birth announcements:

*We joyfully announce the birth of Lauren Anne June 21<sup>st</sup> at 5:15 p.m. 7 pounds, 4 ounces.*

*Our home has grown by two feet! David Jonas Peterson born on November 22<sup>nd</sup>. Weight: 8 lb. 3 oz. Length: 17 inches.*

*Look who dropped in! Please share our joy at the arrival of our daughter Meredith Teresa, May 23<sup>rd</sup>. 6 lb. 11 oz. 16 inches*

What does all of this have to do with Luke narrating Caesar's decree and the events in the life of Joseph and Mary? Well, just as proud parents and princes announce the birth of boys and girls, the angels announce the birth of the Savior in dramatic fashion, trumping any announcement by parents, princes or Caesar. Caesar? Were the ancient Christians comparing Jesus to Caesar? Yes. Archeologists discovered a proclamation in Turkey that dated back nine years before Jesus' birth. The inscription says that it was good for the city to celebrate the *evangelium*, the "good news," of the birth of Caesar Augustus, the savior of the world. Augustus was seen as the Son of God, since his father through adoption, Julius Caesar, had been deified.

Some of the first instances of the term “good news” is used in relationship to Augustus, almost at the same time as the birth of Jesus.

Luke has angels announce the birth of Jesus as Son of God because He is the true Savior, the Son of God, one greater than the Caesar. With that, we turn to our text by examining first the message of the angels and then the response of the shepherds before discussing how we put our faith into action.

Who are the angels? In verse 9, the angel does not reveal his name, but given that the angel in 1:19 and 1:26 identifies himself as Gabriel, we can assume he is the same. His message is like our hymn, “*From Heaven Above.*” We read, “***Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.***”

The shepherds were afraid, and since fear was a common reaction to an angel’s appearance, Gabriel gave them a few words of reassurance and encouragement. Then the message - Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. Luke used “today” at least 10 times. “Today” indicates a *new era has begun* and *something urgent is happening at this very moment*.

The titles applied to this baby include Savior, Messiah and Lord. He is the expected Messiah, but he is also Lord. Before this, the title Lord is applied only to God. The Jews did not view the Messiah as God. So, to announce that the expected one, the Messiah, is also Lord means that he is God.

The Jews were also expecting the Messiah to be a Savior who would deliver them from sickness and physical hardship. Instead, this announcement reveals the Savior would deliver them from sin and death. Humanity’s true Savior is not Caesar Augustus, but Jesus Christ.

Like our hymn, “*Away in a Manger,*” the message continues. “***You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.***” Some translations read “swaddling clothes.” Mothers swaddled or tightly wrapped infants for various reasons. The significance, however, is not that Mary wrapped Jesus, but the only other time we hear about Jesus wrapped in cloth is when Peter bent down to look into the tomb. “***He saw the strips of linen lying by themselves, and he went away, wondering to himself what had happened.***”<sup>1</sup> Luke ties the birth of Jesus to His death and resurrection.

After that, ***“Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”*** We know this as ***“Gloria in Excelsis Deo,”*** the first words of the Latin Vulgate translation and the root of the Church’s great liturgical hymn. It is also the source for our opening hymn, *“Angels We Have Heard on High.”*

If we tie the hymn to the Scripture verses, we see, ***“The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.”*** “Luke’s main point, which links God’s glory in the highest with peace on earth for the humble<sup>2</sup> – those on whom His favor rests – would have been lost had the passage raised only the matter of Jesus’ identity.” Humbly born, Christ was a Savior for the humble,<sup>3</sup> those with whom God was well pleased.

Now, what about the shepherds? Matthew says Magi were the first to the Christ, but Luke says there were shepherds. The shepherds live in the fields year-round protecting the flock reserved for temple sacrifice against thieves and predatory animals.

Shepherds remind us of David’s humble origins;<sup>4</sup> and in keeping with Luke’s theme of poverty, shepherds are lowly people. Shepherds also reflect Luke’s theme of joy in the face of God’s salvation breaking into humanity. God has saved you from your sins. That is reason enough to rejoice! ... Are you smiling?

The shepherds could also stand-in for biblical Israel, since the Shepherd-Sheep image is a describes Israel’s relationship with God. However, in the first century shepherds were not treated with any dignity. They were not clean because they were with sheep all the time. So, the presence of shepherds is odd, but since Luke is always promoting the odd person as the privileged one, it tells us that we should see these shepherds as privileged outsiders who acknowledge Jesus. In other words, the people that you don’t think are worthy to be with Jesus really are.

Lastly, shepherds as model believers. They are evangelists running to tell Joseph and Mary what was revealed to them. They are joyful apostles who just witnessed the Risen Lord’s birth, leaving that place praising and glorifying God. We are model believers, evangelists and apostles – believing, announcing and praising God.

So, there you have it – the message of the angels and the response of the shepherds. It’s like we removed the gift wrapping and opened the box, and saw what Luke gave the world – the

most memorable birth announcement of Jesus through angels and shepherds rejoicing, glorifying and praising God! ... But I would be remiss if I stopped there, wished you a Merry Christmas and dismissed you from this service. As I said, earlier, we would also discuss how we put our faith into action.

Friends, not only with the birth of Jesus did a new era begin. Not only did something urgent happen 2,000 years ago. Today, in this place something urgent is happening at this very moment! A new era has begun.

Where is this happening? When did it begin? It's happening here – in this church – and in your minds and hearts. You heard the Good News, the story of Jesus' birth. You know the story of his birth maybe better than you know the story of your own. That's great news! You know more about his origins than you know about your favorite superhero or superstar. That is wonderful news! You have received his peace. You have been granted salvation.

The shepherds glorified and praised God for all they heard and saw. What we hear and see each Sunday is greater than that – for they knew the Christ child, but we know the Christ man. The Christ child evoked jubilation. The Christ man accomplished salvation. Through his birth, the Christ child offers hope. Through the Paschal Mystery – His suffering, death and resurrection, the Christ man fulfilled that hope. That is such important news that you should “*Go Tell it on a Mountain.*”

Through Christ, God accomplished our salvation and gave us Word and Sacrament as the means to remember that each Sunday. For that reason alone, should we not glorify and praise God? Should we not do that each day of our lives? Wouldn't that be like celebrating Christmas every day? So, how do we put our faith into action and celebrate Christmas every day? The opportunities are endless – from a simple greeting of “God bless you,” to a response to a kind deed done unto you, “Thank you, and God bless you.” You can post inspirational Scripture passages online and refrain from liking politically correct or incorrect posts. Maybe the Holy Spirit is inspiring you to reach across the fence or across the ocean to someone in need of hope.

I suggest that we thank God for the example of shepherds who glorify and praise God even when others think they are a bit odd and look down on them. We should do that because in a way, each of us is a bit odd – including me. As we prepare to receive the Sacrament, we thank God for it and loving humanity so much that He sent us His Son. When we do, may the peace of God that surpasses all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 24:12.

<sup>2</sup> Luke 2:14.

<sup>3</sup> Luke 1:46-55.

<sup>4</sup> 1 Samuel 6:1-13.