

Sunday, December 18, 2022 | Go Tell It on the Mountain

Week 5 | Luke 2:1-21 | "The Bad, The Good, The Ordinary"

Towards the end of November, we started our Luke study two weeks ago by kicking off the series "Go Tell It on the Mountain." And during that message, we unpacked the four things Luke wanted his audience to know. Firstly, Luke was among many who had written about Jesus' life. Secondly, though he was not an eyewitness, he was close friends with those who were. Thirdly, he took all he had heard and placed the facts of Jesus' life in order. And, lastly, he wrote all that he wrote because he wanted to give his reader, Theophilus, certainty about the things he had been taught. And the takeaway for us was that we are to see ourselves as Theophilus. In other words, we are to imagine that Luke is writing to us and that, like Theophilus, we are to share the Gospel with others.

In the second week, we moved to the story of an elderly couple, Zechariah and Elizabeth. We learned through their life that God will always keep his promises. No matter if we are cynical and slow to believe, like Zechariah, or we're disgraced, like Elizabeth, the Lord will stay true to his word, and for those who believe, he will even redeem his people.

In the third week, we were introduced to the mother of Jesus, Mary. Through her example, we learned that God's grace is unmerited, he blesses those who believe in his promises, and those blessings reverse the believer's fortunes. And the natural outcome for those who are the recipients of God's unmerited favor is worship. In other words, they'll magnify the Lord.

In the fourth week, we returned to the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth. Their son, John the Baptist, is born, and a miraculous thing occurs: Zechariah gets his voice back. And, without skipping a beat, the old priest burst into song, praising God for all he's done. All told, we learned that faith can change a cynic's heart when he's been lovingly reproved by God.

Famously, today's scripture is pivotal in 1965's made-for-tv-movie, *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. If you'll recall, Charlie Brown asks, "Isn't there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?" Charlie's friend replies by quoting Luke 2:8-14. But the point in that scene was that Christmas isn't about the music, presents, or activities; it's about Jesus.

Coincidentally, this reminder is something that even those who were a part of the first Christmas had to learn. Amidst bureaucratic decrees, heavenly melodies, and a city bursting at the seams, the Savior of the world made his *début*. And, despite the hustle and bustle, time itself stood still. Looking back, Jesus' birth in Bethlehem was the turning point for humanity,

similar to how Linus' speech was for Charlie Brown. And this watershed moment did not come by human will but by divine sovereignty.

READ: Luke 2:1-20 (ESV)

¹In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³And all went to be registered, each to his own town. ⁴And 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, ⁵to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. ⁶And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. ⁷And 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.

⁸And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. ¹⁰And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹²And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ¹⁴"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

¹⁵When 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." ¹⁶And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. ¹⁷And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. ¹⁸And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. ²⁰And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

²¹And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

Notice how God uses **three** vessels to accomplish his will:

i. God's will is carried out by a Roman emperor (vs. 1-7).

God is in control, whether it's the first Christmas or the two-thousand twenty-second Christmas. He is sovereign. In everything from the momentous moments to the mundane moments, God is at work to accomplish His will. Even the seemingly accidental acts of history turn out to be the predestined acts of destiny. Like some errand boy, God takes the most powerful human on the planet, Caesar Augustus—i.e., Gaius Julius Caesar Octavianus—and makes him take a census.

Now, you might be asking, “Why a census?” Because that would be one of the only things that would cause a husband to take his very pregnant wife on a road trip. He didn't have a choice. There would be consequences had Joseph refused. Moreover, according to O.T.'s predictions about the Messiah, Jesus had to be born in Bethlehem. And the plainest O.T. prophecy about the Messiah's birthplace comes in the book of the prophet Micah, roughly seven hundred years before the gospels.¹

READ: Micah 5:2 (ESV)

But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me, one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.

So, what is a sovereign God to do when he needs his son to be born in Bethlehem, and the woman who'll give birth to his son lives over 80 miles² away in Nazareth? He made Rome's first emperor, who lived 1,400 miles away, interfere with his distant subjects. God used a seemingly tedious and bureaucratic process to fulfill biblical prophecy.

Under the hand of a sovereign God, even the aimless shift of history is, in fact, the purposeful movement of destiny. If God uses the decrees of men to accomplish His sovereign will, what else is at his disposal? Who would've guessed that a census would be the primary means by which an O.T. prophecy would be fulfilled?! Only Luke mentions this historical connection. He, more than the other Gospel writers, wishes to situate the Christmas story in a *chronological* context. Luke wanted to show that even the Roman Emperor was controlled by a divine plan and driven by a divine purpose.³ **History is the servant of the Almighty!**

¹ Phillips, John, *Exploring the Gospel of Luke: An Expository Commentary*, The John Phillips Commentary Series, (Grand Rapids; Kregel Publications, 2005), p. 74.

² “Journeys of Mary and Joseph Map,” <https://www.biblestudy.org/maps/the-journeys-of-mary-and-joseph.html>, [accessed, November 27, 2020].

³ Morris, Leon, *Luke*, The Tyndale New Testament Commentary Series, (Downers Grove, IL; InterVarsity Press Academic, 1988), p. 99.

Thus, in the same way that Joseph and Mary were beholden to Caesar, Augustus was beholden to God. And if God so turned the world back then, so too is He directing your life today. The only question is will you be an unwitting servant, like Caesar Augustus, or will you be a willing servant, like Mary and Joseph.

ii. God's will is delivered by an angelic host (vs. 8-14).

Angels have already played a vital role in Luke's narrative. Gabriel, if you'll recall, came to both Zechariah and Mary. What is interesting is that while, at first, only one angel appeared to give the initial greeting to the shepherds, more angels soon followed. The Bible says there was an entire "host" of angels, which is the term "army" in today's vernacular. And what did this army band of angels do? They sang! Meaning a group honed for combat did not make war but made music! In all of history, has there ever been a military force marshaled to the front lines to sing a song about peace?!

Their message to the shepherds is "good news of great joy," and it is not only to them but to "all people." But what is the news? "**For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.**" The Savior, the Christ, and the Lord has been born in an earthly city, one known for its attachment to the old Israelite monarch, King David. And those three titles are significant:

When the angel said the newborn was a "Savior," he spoke about Jesus' mission. By his own admission later in Luke 19:10, Jesus said he "came to seek and to save the lost." He did not come to condemn the world (cf. Jn. 3:17). The world, because of sin, was already doomed. He came to save the world (cf. Jn. 3:16).

When the angel said the newborn was the "Christ," he spoke about Jesus' Messiahship. What often gets overlooked during this time is that Christmas, technically, is as much a Jewish holiday as it is a Christian one. Mary made this very point in the first Christmas carol, and Zechariah made the point again in his song. Throughout the O.T., the prophets spoke of the Messiah as one who would rule the throne of David. This Promised One would fulfill all the promises made to Israel. Jesus is the one in whom all the O.T. promises are fulfilled (cf. Lu. 4:16-21).

When the angel said the newborn was "Lord," he spoke about Jesus' might. While the term "lord" in the Bible can refer to anyone in leadership (i.e., landowner, civil leader, etc.), it almost always refers to God.⁴ In fact, the Greek word translated as "lord" is

⁴ General Editors, "Yahweh – LORD," June 1, 2017, *The Bible Project*, <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/yhwh-lord/>, [accessed, December 17, 2021].

κύριος, and of the over 9,000 times it is used in the Greek translation of O.T. (LXX), the term "Lord" refers to God 6,150 times (68%).⁵ Roughly two out of the three times you see the term "lord" is likely speaking about the Lord, not a lord. So, when the angel said that this newborn was not only the "Savior" of the world and the promised "Christ," he was also saying that this baby boy born in Bethlehem that night was God in the flesh.

The prophet Isaiah foresaw the advent of this Savior-Christ-Lord figure 700 years before the first century:

READ: Isaiah 9:6-7 (ESV)

⁶ For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called, "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."

⁷ Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

The angels then give the shepherds a "sign" that confirms what they've told them. When they come to Bethlehem looking for this Savior-Christ-Lord figure, they'll find not a grown adult but "a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger." Not every day, you come across a newborn in a feeding trough. It's bound to leave an impression. And, in this case, it was proof that the Savior-Christ-Lord had indeed come.

Now, because we already covered the angel's song last year during our Great Joy series, I won't go into too much detail. However, I will say that they sing a mighty chorus praising God for the peace that comes from his Son. And while that peace is offered to all, it is only accepted by some.

iii. God's will is broadcast by a shepherd band (vs. 15-21).

The Bible tells us that after the shepherds found the baby Jesus, "they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child." The angel's chorus, combined with the confirmation of seeing a baby in a manger, propelled the shepherds to become the first Evangelists. As the "good news of great joy" was delivered to them, they gave it to others. And this proclamation had three reactions:

⁵ Bock, Darrell L., *Luke: 1:1-9:50*, The Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids; Baker Academic, 1994), p. 218.

- A. The people were **puzzled**.
- B. Mary **pondered**.
- C. The shepherds **praised**.

We often forget when dealing with familiar stories that the characters do not know what's coming. We do. We can see the significance of events. But those in real-time are filled with exciting uncertainty. But may their real-time reactions be a lesson to us in our time. We may have experienced many Christmases and know this story all too well, but we mustn't lose the **puzzlement** of this moment. God's dealing with humanity doesn't make sense; it's an extraordinary turn of events that God even cares enough to deal with humanity. Furthermore, we, like Mary, should **ponder** the Christmas story's meaning. What would compel a King to leave his heavenly throne and become like his subjects?

Ultimately, however, we may react to the Christmas story, we ought to remember to **praise** God. We may be confused by the actions of an all-knowing, all-powerful, ever-present God, but we do not have to fully understand to worship him. Often, our bewilderment is the very thing that fuels praise. And yes, we may rightly contemplate his actions to see if we might discern some meaning, but even when we lack understanding, we may still glorify God because, although we may not know everything, we know that he is always at work behind the scenes.

So, what's the takeaway?

God's **sovereignty** means he can use the bad, the good, and the ordinary to accomplish his will.

READ: Philippians 2: 9-11 (ESV)

⁹Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name,¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Some day, every knee in heaven, in earth, and below the earth will bow before King Jesus. The knee of the bad—i.e., Gaius Julius Caesar Octavianus—will bend. The knee of the good—i.e., the angelic host of heaven—will bend. The knee of the ordinary—i.e., the shepherd band of Bethlehem—will bend. And not only their knees will bend, but their tongues will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. Why? Because he alone is **sovereign**.

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Video Description

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Pastor's manuscript can be found here: