

**What the Angels Saw**  
**Luke 2:1-20**  
**November 30, 2008**  
**FBC Waynesboro**  
**First Sunday in Advent**

Luke 2:1-20 is a unit. It forms one complete passage of Scripture. It can, however, be neatly divided into three units. Verses 1-5 give us the historical context for the central event that is announced in verses 6-7 with the first responses to that central event being declared in verses 8-20. And the first responders to this central event were the angels and the shepherds. We are beginning this morning the season of Advent. God laid it on my heart about a month ago that we needed to give our full attention to the Advent season. So, we are taking a few weeks off from Thessalonians and turning during these days to look at what were the responses of those who first saw Jesus. We want today to listen to the angels. Next Sunday we are going to join the shepherds abiding in the field keeping a watch over their flock by night. The next Sunday we are going to walk with the magi as they make their way to the Master. Then we will join Joseph and pay attention to what he did when he saw Jesus and last of all we will step alongside the aged Simeon and listen closely to what he said when he held the baby in his arms. But all of these various responses to Jesus find the fullness of their force in what is taking place as Luke opens the second chapter of his first book. So, look with me first at the historical context. If it does not hush the critics of inerrancy then there is no possibility of silencing them.

It happened. This is a historical reference. The same words are found at the beginning of verse 6 so that what is recorded in verses 1-5 and in verses 6-7 are absolute history. Caesar Augustus demanded a registration of all the citizens of the then known world. The word for "registration" is found four times in the first five verses. It is an important word. This was an important registration. The Caesars had come to control the world with such prominence and power that they had come to see themselves as gods. Oh, the people may worship Asclepius as the god of healing or Aphrodite as the goddess of love and all the others in the pantheon but the ruler of Rome surpassed them all. This registration was for the purpose of consolidating his rule so as to regulate his empire through the requirement of taxes paid to him. This was a decree or a dogma. There was neither discussion nor debate. The purpose was to leave to doubt about who

ruled the world. So, this Caesar commanded by mandate that everyone go to his city of origin. And thus the world was set in motion to move people from one place to another all directed by the hand of the Caesar. Not so fast. Eight hundred years before this time God had raised up a prophet named Micah who would proclaim the birth of the Messiah taking place in an out-of-the-way place called Bethlehem. That is where Joseph was from. So, with his betrothed bride who was already great with child, Joseph left Nazareth in the north to make his way to Bethlehem in the south. Caesar Augustus watched the movement of the world and made much of his power; God watched the movement of the world and took delight in the fulfillment of His purpose.

We are told that this was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. Here is where the critics have had a hey day. We know that Jesus was born during the rule of Herod who died in 4 B.C. and that there was a Quirinius who was governing Syria in A.D. 6-7. So the critics play gotcha with this one. But the word for "first" holds the key. It is used elsewhere in this text of Jesus as the firstborn of Mary and the point of this word wherever it is found is not first as in counting but first as in what counts. It is the word for what is fundamental and foundational. For example, when we are told that the early Christians worshipped on the First day of the week we are not just being told that they worshipped on Sunday but that this day was the fundamental and foundational day for their week. So that here the word first points to a fundamental, foundational registration or census that formed the base line for another census that would come later during the rule of Quirinius when he was governor of Syria. Thus, under mandate Joseph and Mary make their way to Bethlehem. They are fulfilling an eight hundred year old prophecy. This is the historical context. It was not the hand of Caesar that was ruling the world; it was the hand of God. History then as now was and is "His Story" and without "His Story" we have no real understanding of history at all.

Then comes the central event. They arrived at an inn which would have been no Holiday Inn. It was simply a stopping point along the road. It is most likely that Jesus was born in the open field he was placed in a feeding trough. There is in these two verses the magnificence of deity and humanity. He is called the firstborn which is a biblical term that connects him directly with God. He is the Son of God. But in the original text the very next word is "swaddled." Mary swaddled the Son of God. She did with the Son of God what every mother did

with every baby. She took linen wraps and began at his ankles and wrapped him all the way to his neck. It was to straighten him out! Literally. And placing him in a feeding trough is explained by there being no “fitting place” for him elsewhere. From the moment of His arrival the Messiah who is the Son of God is fully a human son and a holy stranger upon the earth. He is God with us thus fulfilling another prophecy from another prophet: behold a virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and his name shall be called Immanuel.

And now the responses begin. An angel of the Lord appears to a group of shepherds. We will have to wait to next week to see why this is so strange. The angel appears in the midst of the manifestation of the glory of God. The glory of God is the display of the presence and power of God upon the earth and these shepherds “feared a great fear.” They were filled with fear. I cannot develop this as I would like but let me just say that when God shows up in our lives in the midst of our sin; if we are not fearful then we have either much too low a view of God or much too high a view of ourselves. When the holy God makes himself known to human life, it ought to cause us to fall upon our faces in the dread of what we deserve. Too few of us really taste the delight of His grace because we have never had in our mouths the rightful taste of the dread of His judgment.

Then the angels who have already seen Jesus long before He came to the manger begin to speak to them what they need to hear out of what they know because they have seen him. There are four movements in what they say and ten words. Let’s sit alongside these shepherds as we prepare our hearts for the Supper and listen to what they said. The first movement consists of one word and it has to do with the power of God. The angels say, “do not fear.” Does it make sense to you that do not fear makes sense only if you do fear. The assumption here is that God’s power could debilitate and destroy, but it comes to deliver that which delivers us from destruction. John Calvin said, “the majesty of God could not but swallow up the whole world if there were not some mildness to mitigate the terror that it brings.” The fear of God is the foundation for any real faith in God absent which whatever faith we may have is farcical.

The second movement consists of three words and is the proclamation of the truth that is seen in Jesus. It is so fascinating to me that here the angel proclaims what the angel has not experienced. Peter tells us that the angels love to look on when sinners are being saved and here the angel proclaims what is the

center of the truth in the coming of Jesus. The first word: I bring you the Gospel. The Good News. Good news is only good news in the light of bad news, right? This Gospel is great joy and great joy is experienced and expressed in the midst of great grief. This Gospel is for all people. Now you have to choices here: the Gospel comes to save all people or universalism, or the Gospel is for all kinds of people. Remember that prior to this period, it was understood by the Jews that only Jews could know God. Now Jesus comes and this good news of great joy is for Jews and Gentiles, it is for rich and poor, it is for every ethnicity equally, it is for all the world. And what is this good news?

Here is the third movement which also consists of three words and is all about the person. A savior has been born today. The word for “savior” needs to be savored in two contexts. The first is linguistic. The word is used of someone who brings a salvation that is complete and thorough. A savior in a battle is someone who brings victory over the enemy and then keeps the enemy at bay so that the victory is complete. That is what Jesus brings. He brings complete victory over everything and everyone that would threaten us in any way. The second context is historical. Remember that the Casears wanted to rule the world as gods. So, it was not accidental that during this time on the birthday of the Roman ruler an edict was issued throughout the empire that called the citizens to celebrate because “today there is born to you a savior who is Caesar Augustus . . .” Do you hear what is happening here? From that moment to this one even here today we are either celebrating the Lordship of Jesus over all of life or we are committed to the world and its ways for finding fulfillment. And at no time should we kid ourselves that any citizen can do both. The second word: He is Christ Lord. He is the Messiah for the Jews and the Ruler for the Gentiles. He is both for both. Third word: the sign of this sovereign savior is a child in a feeding trough. You either accept that and go to Him or you trust something or someone else.

The final movement is about the purpose of Jesus and it consists of three words. The angels joyfully announce His purpose. First, He is the one who brings glory to God. The salvation of sinners is a result of His coming but it is not the primary priority in His coming. His primary priority is to bring pleasure to God. He desires to honor God as do all who come to God through Him. Second, He brings peace on the earth. His coming brings peace to the earth. The only peace there is in Him and the only peace there will ever be will be because of Him.

And there is a day praise God established already by this God when Jesus will stand upon the earth and there will then and only then be peace at last. The third word is the most difficult for us because of the faulty translation of the King James through the Latin Vulgate. The text is clear: Glory to God in the highest and peace on earth among those with whom He is pleased or upon whom His favor rests. The angels saw that. There are those upon whom God's favor rests because they have turned in repentance and faith to God and trusted Him alone for salvation. Have you done that? That is what they saw that He came to do. He came to bring His peace to troubled hearts. And when we are at peace with Him, we are at peace. And we can come today to this table and celebrate the good news that He is our peace who has broken down the barriers between God and us and brought us by His body and blood into a right relationship with Him. Do we see when we look at Jesus what the holy angels saw?