

—{1}. **Luke 2:1-20.** **“In a ‘Stable’”**

A. “The Christmas Program”

1. Part of Our Christmas Memories

- a. I enjoyed the Christmas Program we had last Sunday
- b. I hope you did, too
- c. it’s close to 65 years since I took part in such a program
- d. my memories of them are a mixture of fear, joy, relief
- e. how do you remember them?
- f. Charles Schultz’ expresses his memories through Lucy and Linus^{—{2}}.
- g. with a little practice, I think that I can still quote that passage that Linus was memorizing; we read it as our text for today

2. Did You Notice?

- a. when we were reading those verses from Luke 2
- b. that there was one word which we associate with Jesus’ birth
- c. that is missing from them?
- d. yes ... that’s right ... it is the word ‘Stable’
- e. we find it in our Christmas Carols; pictured on Christmas Cards; but, you don’t find the actual words in the Bible account
- f. but word ‘Stable’, or no word ‘Stable’, the birth of the Lord, Jesus Christ, took place under very humble circumstances
- g. for His mother laid Him in a manger: a crib used to hold fodder for the animals that would be sheltered in that place

3. A Story of Contrasts

- a. A holy God uses a pagan emperor
- b. The Lord of Glory enters mankind as a helpless baby of poor parents

- c. The angelic announcement to simple shepherds
- d. The exuberance of spectators; the thoughtfulness of Mary

B. God Uses a Pagan Emperor

1. The Promise of Messiah

- a. was made in a special way to King David, that from his descendants there would spring up one who would reign on David's throne forever
- b. prophecy upon prophecy was added describing this Messiah
- c. until through the prophet Micah, this specific promise was made:
- d. **2 But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, Too little to be among the clans of Judah, From you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, From the days of eternity. 3 Therefore He will give them up until the time When she who is in labour has borne a child. Then the remainder of His brethren Will return to the sons of Israel. 4 And He will arise and shepherd His flock In the strength of the Lord, In the majesty of the name of the Lord His God. And they will remain, Because at that time He will be great To the ends of the earth. 5 This One will be our peace. ... (Micah 5:2-5)**
- e. Bethlehem was to be the birthplace of Messiah, of the Christ
- f. the very Child promised to Mary and Joseph ... but they lived in the town of Nazareth; Mary was close to delivering that child; Joseph was running his carpentry business there
- g. how would their Child, the Christ-Child, be born in Bethlehem?

2. 'God Moves in a Mysterious Way'

- a. 'His wonders to perform', wrote William Cowper in about 1773
- b. how true that is, for God uses men, sometimes evil men, to accomplish His plans
- c. when we were studying the book of Isaiah, we saw in its history as well as in its prophecy, God's using pagan rulers as His instruments: Sennacherib, Nebuchadnezzar, Cyrus
- d. in 30BC, God – the Sovereign Lord – established Octavius Caesar, who later took the name, Augustus ('revered'), as the Roman Emperor
- e. this was a man to whom God had given an administrative genius
 - (A) he completed Julius Caesar's calendar reform (used >1600 yrs)

- (B) as part of reforming the administration of the empire, he instituted a series of universal registrations or census
- (C) as the AV indicates, one of the purposes was the poll-tax of every individual (Christopher Wordsworth: men >14, women >12)
- (D) though the records of these prior to 7AD are lost, the survival of Luke's record assures us that it took place
- f. with the word 'Syria,' Luke turns from the empire-wide aspects of this to the local picture, particularly that in Galilee and Judea
 - (A) many Bible scholars believe that the returning of people to their own city was Jewish, rather than empire-wide
 - (B) if so, then probably King Herod, an astute politician, deserves the credit by this appeal to Jewish heritage of avoiding trouble
 - (C) a later census, to which reference is made in Acts 5:37, was less peaceful and accompanied by Jewish insurrection
- g. in any case, Augustus Caesar's decree brought Mary and Joseph the 70 miles (110 km) from Nazareth to Bethlehem, so that the Messiah, the Lord Jesus, could be born in the city of David as foretold

3. 'She Brought Forth Her Firstborn Son'

- a. it is to hear about this Son, Jesus, that you and I came here today
- b. He is the central theme of this record, and of the entire Bible
- c. but what a picture!
 - (A) the Lord of the universe; the one who spoke worlds into being
 - (B) is lying there in those poor, humble, demeaning surroundings
 - (C) as we sang, 'What condescension, bringing us redemption...' ¹⁻³.
- d. even there in that rude place, there is a contrast
 - (A) the care with which He has been wrapped against the elements in strips of cloth; swaddling cloths; keeping him snug and warm
 - (B) perhaps with His mother Mary lying beside Him giving comfort
 - (C) versus the rejection implied by being in those very surroundings

- (D) because there was no room for them in the inn
- e. what was that 'stable' like?
 - (A) it was in Bethlehem, not out on the hills as is often pictured
 - (B) possibly it even adjoined the inn itself – in rural Canada 50 years ago you would often see barns and stables that were built right up to the house (or even a church building) to provide extra shelter for animals, particularly horses and cattle – the best that the inn-keeper or a kind person could provide – you remember that because of the census, Bethlehem would be packed
 - (C) but it was a distant cry from a sanitary hospital; or even a home
 - (D) Dr Luke tells us just enough to appreciate just how great was this condescension and grace exhibited in this gift of God of His only Son so many years ago

C. The Shepherds, the Angel, the Host

1. Shepherds Abiding in the Fields

- a. there has long been a debate over the use of December 25 as the date chosen for celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ
 - (A) it is pointed out that the Talmud states that sheep are taken in from the hills to shelter between November and March
 - (B) other information indicates that apparently this is not the case for those sheep that are destined to be used for sacrifice at Passover
 - (C) current Jerusalem weather records in December give average daytime highs of about 15°C and night time lows of 7°C
 - (D) so really, nothing precludes its being in December
- b. shepherding was an ancient occupation of Israel's patriarchs
 - (A) but it was also ill-regarded: a job for the youngest son, as David
 - (B) in Jesus' day, shepherds had a poor reputation – but perhaps this was only in eyes of religious rulers, because their occupation would often keep them from being fully observant Jews
 - (C) it was to this poorer class – and the night shift at that (when I was working my way through college, I often had the midnight shift; that went to the lowest man on the totem pole) – there came

2. The Angel

- a. in the lighting of our fourth advent candle I pointed out that the word for angel in both Greek and Hebrew means messenger
- b. what an angel!
 - (A) suddenly without warning he comes into their midst
 - (B) that in itself would be sufficient to greatly frighten them
 - (C) but beyond that he was accompanied by the glory of the Lord
 - (D) His first words come of necessity: *'Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people'*
 - (E) unlike Gabriel, he does not give his name; just his message
- c. what a message this angel had for these poor shepherds
 - (A) it was the joyous gospel to all mankind
 - (B) *'for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord.'* – a Saviour – Messiah – even Yahweh
 - (C) the fulfilment of the promises made through the prophets
 - (D) the fulfilment of the promise made to David, 1000 years before
 - (E) the fulfilment of the promise made to Abraham, 2000 years prior
 - (F) the fulfilment of the promise made to Adam and Eve, when sin first entered the world, that a woman would bear a son
 - (G) and that Son, born to Mary, is also born unto us, a Saviour

3. The Host

- a. the heavenly army the angels of God appears – again suddenly
- b. at this central and key event in the history of the universe
- c. they burst forth into praise – praise that we have sought to imitate in song – praise that transcends any song or choir we have heard
- d. because on this night, God entered into the stream of humanity in gracious fashion, that in Christ He reconcile man to Himself

- e. 'Glory to God in the highest' – as being in the highest heaven, or being given the highest praise, or as being the most High God; or all these
- f. 'and on earth peace among men with whom He is well pleased'
 - (A) it is praise of the peace of God given in this new-born Saviour
 - (B) it is praise of God's grace in stooping down to mankind
- g. and just as God acted suddenly: in the appearance of the angel; in the appearance of the heavenly host; so the shepherds likewise set off in great haste – 'C'mon! let's go! hey! get a leg on! ... to Bethlehem.'
- h. and, just as it had been told to them, there they find
 - (A) this is not the finding of the man who found – chanced upon – a great treasure in a field and sold all he had to buy that field
 - (B) this is the finding which results from the deliberate setting out to seek something, to following the instructions, and discovering it
 - (C) they came and found the place where the young child was lying

D. Making Jesus Known

1. The Meeting

- a. upon hearing the angel's announcement, the shepherds' response is immediate and excited in verse 15: 'Let us go ... and see this thing ... which the Lord has made known to us'.
- b. verse 16 tells us that they met that family group: there, were Mary and Joseph, and, the Baby Jesus lying in the manger
- c. the traditional translation of verse 17,
 - (A) 'when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying, ...' is misleading because it suggests that they didn't say anything about the angel's message until after they had left the stable
 - (B) but that did not happen until after verse 19
 - (C) the verb, which is found only once or twice elsewhere in all of Greek literature, is better rendered, 'they made thoroughly known'
- d. the Greek of this verse is much shorter than the English, full of action:
 - (A) 'upon seeing, they burst out with the angel's words in detail'
 - (B) they could not contain themselves ... could you?

- (C) this was wonderful — the glory of the angelic host — happening in this lowly place: the birth of Messiah, the eternal King!
- e. Mary heard these words
 - (A) verse 19 tells us that she held close to herself, she treasured the shepherds' words, their account of the angels message
 - (B) she pondered them – in times to come she would weigh them over and over in her mind as the Babe grew first into a boy, then a youth, then a man – a man who was the Saviour for mankind
 - (C) yes, Mary indeed heard

2. The Shepherds' Proclamation

- a. she was not the only one
- b. back to verse 18: '[And all who heard it wondered at the things which were told them by the shepherds.](#)'
- c. the common picture of the birth of Christ is in a remote, lonely stable, but I think that ignores
 - (A) first, the Scripture, that the birth took place in Bethlehem
 - (B) and second, human nature – when there is a new-born baby, what do you always find – a group of people wanting to see! And the coming of the seeking and asking shepherds would draw them.
 - (C) to these people the shepherds repeated the gospel message
 - (D) and they were amazed; they marvelled; that this child was Christ
- d. thus the shepherds left that place: '[glorifying and praising God](#)'

E. Conclusion

- 1. we do not know
 - a. how long those amazed people remembered what they had seen and heard; whether the shepherds' account of the angel's message sank into their souls and remained
 - b. we do know that Mary remembered and carried them through life
- 2. today we have heard again the good news
 - a. unto us is born in the city of David, a Saviour who is Christ the Lord
 - b. will it be but a moment's amazement?
 - c. or shall we take hold of this Saviour for life?

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- BM - Biblical Museum, Editor James Comper Gray, ca 1870
- EBC - The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, © 1986 Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 49530, Michigan -
- EGT - The Expositor’s Greek Testament, Hodder & Stoughton, 1910
- TYN - Tyndale New Testament Commentaries
- Kerux - The sermon & illustration data base compiled by Rev. David Holwick at the web-site, www.holwick.com.

2. Cartoons taken from 'The Gospel According to Peanuts' by Robert L. Short, pages 73-74, © 1963 by M. E. Bratcher, and cartoons © by United Feature Syndicate, Inc.
3. '*Down from His Glory,*' by William E. Booth-Clibborn (1893-1969)