

O Little Town of Bethlehem Luke 2:1-20

Introduction

We officially celebrate the Christmas holiday in just a couple days – December 25th

We don't actually know what day Jesus was born on - - - part of that is due to the fact that remembering people's birthdays was not a common custom in the first century like it is today

J.C. Ryle: 'Had it been good for us to know the day – God would have told us.'

December 25th became the traditional date observed in the Western church – by the 4th century

The Eastern Church – to this day uses January 7th [Russia / Eastern Orthodox]

There are some curious traditions that have arisen around the Christmas holiday across the globe

A few of the more curious:

In Austria – there is the Krampus figure – a demon like counterpart to St. Nicholas who roams the streets of Austria – purportedly to find the naughty children and put them in his bag and take them away [In the first week of December – young men dress up as Krampus]

In Norway – some hide their brooms on Christmas Eve. This goes back to a long ago tradition which said that evil spirits / witches come out on Christmas Eve – looking for new modes of transportation. Solution – hide your brooms

In Japan – Christmas often involves a trip to the local Kentucky Fried Chicken for a nice meal from the Colonel

In America - - - If you are into the modern / trendy – for \$59.95 – you can purchase a hipster nativity scene from Amazon – This nativity includes the figures of Mary and Joseph taking a selfie with the baby Jesus – while Mary holds her Starbucks coffee in the other hand / the three wise men are replaced with 3 delivery men carrying Amazon boxes riding segways – sheep adorned in ugly Christmas sweater – and cow eating gluten free feed – and shepherd posting on instagram

Christmas traditions abound around the world

Some of them are so confusing – we might feel a bit like Charlie Brown asking, '**Can someone please tell me the meaning of Christmas?**'

In the Christmas special – that first aired in 1965 - - - Charlie Brown buys a pathetic looking tree and is laughed at by his peers and even his dog Snoopy - - - and he cries out in exasperation: 'I guess I just don't know what Christmas is all about - - - Isn't there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?'

Linus – steps forward and says, ‘lights please’ - - - and begins to quote **Luke 2:8-14**

He then says, ‘That’s what Christmas is all about Charlie Brown’

What is Christmas all about?

Christmas is about the great humble love of a Savior who left the ivory palaces of heaven – to come into our world – that He might save sinners

It’s about the fulfillment of long awaited promises given thru the prophets of the OT Scriptures

This message shines thru as we reflect upon the Christmas story this morning

I. To Bethlehem - vv. 1-7

One of the striking things about the birth narrative of the baby Jesus is how this grand event took place largely unnoticed

It was a humble birth

Jesus – God’s Son was born to a poor Jewish peasant girl – named Mary – who was betrothed to a carpenter – Joseph

Yes – they were descendants of King David – but so were many other Jews – and the distinction meant nothing to the Romans who ruled the world at that time – including Palestine

They did not arrive in Bethlehem as VIP’s - - - no red carpet or celebrity suite for this couple / no limo drivers / etc.

This was not Prince Harry and Meghan Markle – where every development of the baby bump is tracked by the tabloid press

Jesus came into the world – not born into earthly nobility or rank / not into money or prestige - - - just born to plain people of a Jewish background

It is interesting to contrast the response of the world to the celebrities of the age – with that of the responses given to Jesus – even yet today

Actress Julia Roberts recently shared about the time she first realized she had achieved a level of fame in the world.

She was 21 at the time and had gone home to Georgia – visiting her parents. While there – she and her younger sister went to the movies. After the movie was over – she went to use the restroom – while in there – she heard a woman call out – ‘hey girl in stall number one – were you in Mystic Pizza?’

Roberts affirmed that she was. After which – the woman slid something under the stall – asking for an autograph. Julia responded with, ‘uh - not right now’

The world takes notice of its celebrities – ‘ah you are famous – let me have your autograph / etc. - - - how about a selfie?’

We get a glimpse of the world’s failure to comprehend the exalted nature of Christ – in the birth story

No doors swing open for Joseph and Mary – no room in the inn / put the baby over there in the manger / no crib available

I Cor. 1:21 - ‘the world by its wisdom knew not God’ [KJV]

Luke tells us about the events of Christmas Eve - - - telling us about a census – a decree from Caesar that essentially will be the reason why Joseph and Mary travel to Bethlehem

This would have required several days of travel – as it was around a 70 mile trip for Joseph and his pregnant bride from Nazareth to Bethlehem

Luke sees God as Lord of history – the actions of the Emperor in faraway Rome – set into motion events – the travel and the movements of peoples - - -that fulfill centuries old prophecies

Luke knows that it was necessary for Mary and Joseph to be in Bethlehem – so Jesus could be born there

Micah 5:2 - ‘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.’

The place of birth was predicted 700 years before Christ came into the world

Joseph and Mary are fulfilling the Scriptures by going to Bethlehem

Sinclair Ferguson: ‘Basic to the true meaning of Christmas is this: God has kept His promises.’

Jeremiah 1:12 - ‘I am watching over My Word to perform it.’

Caesar thinks he is ordering the Census – doing his bidding – but it is God’s decree that is being carried out

U.S. Census tells us - - - Close to 4 million babies are born in the United States every year / 10,000 a day

USA Today ran a story on one birth that took place on May 4th of this year.

Star Wars fans Nicole and Andrew Stewart named their baby boy – Lucas Skywalker Stewart. May 4th is seen by some Star Wars fans as Star Wars day – ‘May the 4th be with you.’

Parents also had previously run in a Disney 10 k run – dressed as Princess Leia and Han Solo – they now have the task of raising a future Jedi

Babies are born every day / 10,000!

What is so special about this baby that Mary has been carrying in her womb now for nine months?

Why celebrate His birth? / Why talk about it 2000 yrs. later?

Luke 1:26-38 – Gabriel’s stunning announcement

Mary – you will give birth to the baby Jesus

For the faithful in Israel – who were awaiting the fulfillment of God’s promises - - - young girls would hold out hope that they might get to be the mother of the Messiah - - - it was rightly seen as a great privilege

The one selected for this role by God: Mary

A woman [Eve] was instrumental in the fall of humanity into sin
A woman [Mary] will be instrumental in God carrying out His program of redemption

The whole birth scene spells poverty / obscurity

There were no features at hand to suggest this was the birth of an important person

But the Son of God Himself had just entered our world

The scene of a stable – was a striking contrast with where Jesus came from – the glory of heaven!

Jesus left the glory of heaven – for this??? - - - Why??? - - - so He could become a man / die on the cross for our sins

Paul describes the incarnation of the Son as an act of chosen poverty:

II Cor. 8:9

John MacArthur: 'History's most notable birth happened under the most obscure, nondescript, humble circumstances imaginable – Jesus was born in the place where the animals of those staying in a public shelter were kept. No one in the sleepy little village of Bethlehem realized the significance of what had happened, except to a certain degree, the child's parents. But that was about to change; the silence regarding the Savior's birth would be broken in a most supernaturally dramatic way.'

II. Working the Night Shift - vv. 8-14

We come to a scene of some shepherds

The annunciation / the first birth announcement will come to shepherds working the graveyard shift

David once watched over sheep in this area near Bethlehem

Being a shepherd was a humble occupation – not among the high and mighty

These shepherds were having a rather ordinary night – watching their flocks - - - nothing too exciting / maybe chase off a predator or two

Suddenly - - - They are struck by an awesome sight – struck with fear!
They see an angel in the glory of God

People who saw angels – often tended to be gripped with fear

Zacharias – 'fear gripped him' – when Gabriel showed up!
Gabriel said to Mary – 'Do not be afraid'
The shepherds here are terribly frightened

The angels announce the birth of the baby Jesus

Birth announcements are pretty standard fare today – a few expected details

Someone announces the birth of John Smith – born to parents Jack and Susie Smith
This baby checked in at 8 lbs 6 oz. - - - and 21 inches long - - - born at Mercy hospital / etc.

That's it

When we look at this birth announcement given by the shepherds – we might notice a few things that are missing

The angel does not say – to Joseph and Mary has been born a new baby

It says a Savior has been born for you – v. 11

This baby is for you – this isn't at all about Mary and Joseph starting a family – like other young couples their age

This birth was about God the Son coming into the world to be our Savior

Another feature: the angels don't give the name of the baby – Jesus

That is one of the first things we expect in a birth announcement – 'we announce the birth of James Alexander'

The angels instead tell the three primary offices of Christ – Savior / Lord and Christ

Christians are those who confess Jesus as Lord now

Phil. 2:9-11

Phil. 2:10, 11 - 'That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow . . . and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.'

[someday – that will occur – all will bow]

Rom. 10:9 - 'that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead - you shall be saved.'

Lord means that we acknowledge Jesus has the right to tell us how to live

Jesus indicated such on one occasion He said: 'Why do you call me Lord and do not do what I say?' - Luke 6:46

i.e. – saving faith in Jesus – shows up in humble surrender to the Lord

Pastor Timothy Keller says that sometimes people say to him, 'I am interested in being a Christian, but not if being a Christian means I have to do X or Y. Do you know what they are doing? . . . They are saying, 'I want Jesus Christ but on my terms.'

Saving faith – is when we drop all conditions – and say, 'you're the Lord' – You died for me – I'll live for you – your ways are ways of righteousness and wisdom and peace

What is Christmas about? It's about recognizing Jesus as Lord - - - calling upon Him as such

The shepherds show what they thought of the vision by how they respond – they go to see Jesus

We show what we think of Christmas not by having our picture taken with Santa – or hiding a broom – or putting out our hipster nativity - - - but by trusting in Jesus – calling Him Lord – following Him

That is the true meaning of Christmas – ‘today in the city of David – there has been born for you a Savior which is Christ the Lord.’

III. Visit to the Baby - vv. 15-20

The shepherds who had just seen a staggering display in the angelic realm – made haste to go and see the baby Jesus

The baby in a manger was the sign given to the shepherds that they had come to the right place

This is the baby who will turn the world upside down - - - He will call the dead back to life / give sight to the blind / calm the storms / rescue sinners from their chains of sin - - - He will go to the cross and die for sinners – then rise again - - - the long awaited Savior / Messiah has arrived

Because of Him – God and sinners will be reconciled
He will be the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world

Conclusion

John Piper: ‘God is the great actor and great goal of this story. He is at the beginning, planning all things; He is in the middle, governing all things; and He is at the end, being magnified in all things. Jesus Christ – the God-man, is His divine Son. Salvation is His glorious work. And childlike faith is your way in. Go join the shepherds, theophilus, glorifying and praising God. Be filled with the Holy Spirit. This is the happiest story in the world.’ [His Mission, p. 21]

The message of the angel still stands today

‘Today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior which is Christ the Lord.’

In the Garden of Eden – angels were posted to bar man’s entrance back into paradise - - - the way back had not yet been revealed

On Christmas morn – the angels announced the way back in - - - thru a Savior which is Christ the Lord

He went to the cross – and died for sinners and rose again
All who put their trust in Him – are saved / receive eternal life