

THE BIRTH ANNOUNCEMENT
LUKE 2:1-20

Earlier this year, Prince Harry and Duchess Meghan Markle had a baby. While babies are born every second of every day, this birth captured the attention of royal followers around the world. Like many other parents, the birth was first announced by Harry and Meghan on social media. And then Buckingham Palace got involved with its official announcement. A framed declaration was brought out of the Privy Purse Door of Buckingham Palace, carried across the forecourt by two attendants, and placed on an ornate golden easel, where it remained for 24 hours to proclaim the child's birth:



The Queen and Royal Family are delighted at the news the Her Royal Highness, the Duchess of Sussex was safely delivered of a son at 0526 am today. Her Royal Highness and her child are both doing well.

You might notice that the baby's name was missing from the announcement. His name was revealed three days later, after the Queen was first informed of the choice. The child's name is Archie Harrison Mountbatten-Windsor, though the baby is missing an official Royal title. He could have become Earl of Dumbarton or Lord Archie Mountbatten-Windsor, but instead he will simply be Master Archie Mountbatten-Windsor. There certainly was more official fuss over the birth the Royal Archie than when the rest of us have children. Indeed, there was more fuss over him than the birth of *the Royal*, Jesus Christ.

While the life of Christ is the most remarkable story in the history of the world — surpassing creation, the coming wrath of God, the worldwide flood of Noah's day, or any miracle like the feeding of the 5000 or the raising of Lazarus from the dead — His arrival is told in remarkable simplicity. Like the death and resurrection of Christ which are spoken of in such simplicity ("Christ was crucified"... "He is not here..."), so the Advent of God into time and space, the immortal taking on mortality, is told with great simplicity and understatement. "Most regal figures are born with great ceremony and celebration. But Jesus' birth is as average as it comes." [Bock, 83.] Don't miss the wonder of what takes place in this account by the ordinariness of the language. This is an extraordinary story — the most extraordinary story of history.

Luke gives us the simple account:

THE "AVERAGE" BIRTH OF CHRIST IS IN CONTRAST TO THE EXALTED POSITION OF CHRIST.

In Luke's account, we see the progression of the revelation of Christ in three stages (#3 will be on 12/24):

1. **The Incident:** a Child is **BORN** (vv. 1-7)
2. **The Interpretation:** the Child is the **LORD** of **GLORY** (vv. 8-14)
3. **The Imperatives:** **WORSHIP** and **DECLARE** the Child (vv. 15-20)

1. The Incident: a Child is BORN (vv. 1-7)

• The International Circumstance (vv. 1-2)

- ✓ The story of Christ's birth is told simply, but there are complexities to the story; it is an intricate weaving of a tapestry of many threads of lives and circumstances to bring about His unique arrival.
- ✓ Mary and Joseph were in Nazareth and to fulfill the prophecy in Micah, Christ needed to be born in Bethlehem, so God ordained and orchestrated international events to get them to Bethlehem.
- ✓ ***In those days*** is a reference to the reign of Herod in Israel (1:5). Herod was an Edomite who would die soon after Christ's birth, but was also a vassal king of Rome; the Jews hated Herod and they hated Rome whom he served. (Yet God used both Herod and Rome to accomplish His will.)
 - ***A decree went out*** — this decree was not a formal law but a binding administrative edict. It came from ***Caesar Augustus*** — a title meaning "Revered Emperor." His birth name was Gaius Octavius and he was adopted by Julius Caesar and eventually also became emperor.
 - Ordinarily this edict would have come from Herod and he had great autonomy in his rulership. But in about 8 A.D., he lost favor with Rome and Augustus began treating him as a subject and vassal rather than as a friend. Herod was also ill in these years and there was unrest among his sons as they positioned themselves to take over for him, this would have been an appropriate time for Augustus to take a census, to determine the state of this part of his realm.
 - ***A census be taken...while Quirinius*** — the census was for the purpose of taxation.
 - ... It is notable that Roman taxes were based on ownership of land while Jewish taxes were based on personal property, so had this been a Jewish tax, Mary and Joseph would not have had to travel to Bethlehem, where Joseph had a land inheritance.
 - ... This census was probably a localized census (for the province containing Israel).
 - ... This census was around the year 4 B.C. and evidently there was a deadline to respond to the decree otherwise Joseph and Mary likely would not have traveled at that time.
- ✓ In the ordering of these events, we see the power of the sovereign hand of God to accomplish His purposes — the changing power structure over Israel, the strained relations between Rome and Herod, and the timeline of the census were all orchestrated by God to get Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem to fulfill Micah's prophecy. "The fiat of an earthly ruler can be utilized in the will of God to bring about his more important purposes to fruition." [I. H. Marshall]
- ✓ The international component of the story of Christ's birth is a reminder of the unique power and sovereignty of God over all things. You can trust Him, because no circumstance is beyond His control. He holds both the kings of the earth and the sparrows in the trees in His command (Mt. 10:29ff).
- ✓ There is another significant component to this story and it is the historical background...

- The Historical Background (vv. 3-4)

- ✓ This edict by Rome affected **everyone**. Thousands of families were on the move during this season.
- ✓ For Joseph, this meant a trip to Bethlehem. Notice two particular phrases in this verse:
 - **to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem...** = Now if I tell you that I went to Israel and I went to David's city, what city do you immediately think of? Jerusalem. That's where David ruled and reigned; it's the place where his fortress was. It's the location of his eternal throne from which the Messiah will reign. When you think "David's city," you don't think Bethlehem. But Bethlehem is David's city because it is where he was born (1 Sam. 17:12; 20:6) and that region is where he grew up and tended sheep (1 Sam. 17:15).
 - **He was of the house and family of David** = He was in David's line (1:27; cf. Mt. 1:1-18). Since he was in the Davidic line he had to go to David's home, Bethlehem, which also fulfilled Micah 5:2.
- ✓ So as far back as the birth of David, some 1000 years prior to the Messiah, God is orchestrating events so that the Messiah will be born in Bethlehem. The Davidic throne on which Messiah will sit is established in Jerusalem, but the Davidic birthplace which will also be the Messiah's birthplace is in Bethlehem. God is weaving together the tapestry of this story according to His desires.

- The Birth Family (vv. 5-6)

- ✓ Notice that v. 4 emphasizes that Joseph went from Nazareth to Bethlehem. He had to go for the census because it was his ancestral land and his inheritance. So *he had* to go.
- ✓ But **Mary** did not have to go. She was not a landowner and she would not have had an inheritance there. She could have stayed in Nazareth and had the baby there. But she traveled. Why?
 - Undoubtedly Joseph would have wanted to be present for the birth of the baby; the angel had also appeared to him (Mt. 1:18ff) and he knew the significance of this birth. Perhaps he also understood the significance of Mal. 5:2, though nothing in Scripture tells us that.
 - There was no compelling reason for Mary to stay in Nazareth. She faced gossip and whispers later in her life (Jn. 8:41) and it is likely those had already begun; why would she have wanted to face those questions in her hometown? Her husband understood and was compassionate; it is understandable that she would want to be with him for the birth.
 - Again, God is orchestrating all the circumstances to place everyone where they need to be.
- ✓ It was **while they were there** (in Bethlehem) that **the days were completed for her to give birth**. It doesn't say, "her pregnancy ended," or "she finished her pregnancy." It says "the days were completed for her..." It means that without any planning on the part of Joseph or Mary, the plan for the Savior's birth was finished. They had come to Bethlehem, but someone else planned and orchestrated all the events for everything to come together at this exact moment. The birth occurred in the fulness of time, according to God's design (Gal. 4:4).

- ✓ In the midst of the travel that had to be hard on the birth family, we also see Mary's faith. Here is a very young woman whose response to the angel was trust (1:38) and understood the unique blessing of God on her life (1:48-49).
- ✓ "Though they must have suffered tremendously from the lies and innuendo of cruel, gossip-mongers, Joseph and Mary were steadfast. They probably didn't understand the fullness of God's plan, but they followed unwaveringly. They were ideal earthly parents for God's only begotten Son." [MacArthur, *God With Us*.]
- ✓ And that leads us to one of the most astounding verses in Scripture...

• The Birth (v. 7)

- ✓ Verse seven is one of the most understated verses in Scripture. God — infinite, eternal, transcendent, spiritual (disembodied), omnipresent, majestic God — appears in bodily form. The infinite takes on a finite body. The eternal becomes subject to time. The transcendent becomes touchable. The spiritual is embodied. The omnipresent is localized in Bethlehem. The majestic God becomes "common." The Creator becomes part of creation.
- ✓ And all that is encompassed in the simple phrase, ***she gave birth to her firstborn Son***. Perhaps the only sentence that could be more understated than that one is "They crucified Him..."
- ✓ The birth of Christ as stated here is the fulfillment of an eternal plan and covenant between God the Father and God the Son to bring redemption to sinners (Phil. 2:5-8). God is born.
- ✓ Luke emphasizes that Mary gave birth to ***her firstborn Son***, which implies several things:
 - It means she had other children (8:19-20); while Jesus was virgin-born, He was the only One born that way and all Mary and Joseph's other children were conceived in the natural way. She was not a "perpetual virgin." She was used uniquely by God but she was just as much human as any other person, also subject to the Adamic nature and in need of redemption (1:46-47).
 - It also means that as the firstborn, Jesus had all the privileges of the firstborn son under the Mosaic Law and He is set apart to God (Ex. 13:2; Lk. 2:23) and has exalted position in the family.
 - It is also a suggestion and reminder that Christ is not only the firstborn of Mary, but He is the firstborn of all creation (Col. 1:15ff; Rom. 9:29; Heb. 1:6; 12:23; Rev. 1:5). He is our brother (Heb. 2:11), but He is an exalted, set-apart, and unique brother. He is above us and all men.
- ✓ This is the One who was wrapped by Mary and put in a manger. Notice that she ***wrapped him***. She had no attendants other than Joseph; there was no one to help her or care for her. She and Joseph were away from family, ostracized from neighbors, alone in a distant city. With the eternal God in the manger. The angels would soon appear to the Shepherds, but in the place where Christ was born there was no fanfare, no victorious shouts, no angelic speech, no heavenly visitation. In that sense it was quiet, somber, and likely lonely for this young couple.

- The birth of Christ is a reminder to us of His genuine humanity:
 - ✓ Jesus possessed genuine manhood. While maintaining his deity, He also assumed manhood that He will keep for the rest of eternity. He is now the eternal God-Man.
 - ✓ Jesus was on a mission to humbly serve. He said it himself in **Mk. 10:45**. He came to serve. He washed feet, associated with the disenfranchised, and touched the untouchable (**Lk. 4:18**; Mt. 12:18-20).
 - ✓ His birth positioned Him to accomplish His God-ordained purpose of redeeming sinners:
 - As a man, He could stand in their place to receive their death penalty.
 - As a man, He could fulfill the Law of God to provide a righteousness that could be imputed to them.
 - ✓ We know these things are true about Christ — but what does the text say about His birth? How does God Himself explain and interpret the birth of Christ? That's what verses 8-14 tell us...

2. The Interpretation: the Child is the **LORD of GLORY** (vv. 8-14)

- Lest we think as we read this account that it is just another birth announcement of another baby, God gives us the meaning and interpretation of the story through the account of the shepherds and angels.

• The Recipients of the Announcement (v. 8)

- ✓ ***In the same region*** — Verse 7 ends with a fadeout from the scene in the stable and verse 8 begins with a fade-in to another scene taking place at the same time. Some shepherds were working...
 - We are so familiar with this story that we don't think much about the uniqueness of the shepherds, but this was an unlikely group to receive an angelic appearance.
 - Shepherds were among the most despised people in Israel. Not only were they dirty because of their tasks, but they had a reputation for confusing "mine" and "thine." As a group they were considered so untrustworthy that they were not allowed to give testimony in court.
 - They were also uneducated and considered ignorant. In most people's minds, shepherds were "like gypsies, vagrants, and con men all rolled into one." [Boice] This was an unlikely group to receive this appearance — the first appearance of the glory of God since it departed the Temple some 500 years earlier. When God's glory returned, it came first to the most unlikely people!
 - Aside: while the shepherds were despised it is also worth noting that God has always called those entrusted to care for his people, "shepherds" — it was true of priests in the OT (Jer. 3:15) and it is true of elders in the NT (1 Pt. 5:1-3). And God calls Himself the Shepherd of His people as well (Ps. 23; 80:1; Is. 40:11) and Christ came as the Good Shepherd (Jn. 10:11, 14; 1 Pt. 5:4).
 - When God's glory appears to the shepherds it reminds us that God takes the despised and loves them; God makes the useless to be useful; the devalued of the world, He makes valuable. That was the realized hope of the shepherds, and it is our hope as well.

- ✓ The family was expecting the birth of Jesus; for all the pressures, changes, and burdens it brought into their lives, they had been anticipating and expecting it for nine months. What happens in verse 9 is completely unexpected. The shepherds were just doing what they do; they were on the lookout for thieves and predators. They were trying to stay awake. Perhaps it was cold and they were trying to stay warm. Maybe they were thinking about breakfast or where they would find water for the sheep or how to treat the ill and injured sheep. There was no preparation at all for what would happen next...

- **The Announcement of the Birth (vv. 9-12)**

- ✓ When Luke says that the angel appeared **suddenly**, I don't think we can understand just how suddenly that felt to them. We are occasionally startled when we see something unexpected. They were in full and complete terror when the angel appeared. [Aside: angels are never presented in Scripture as "cuddly." Their arrival always produced terror (e.g., Balaam, Num. 22:31).]
- ✓ It was not only the angel that produced the terror, though. He appeared with **the glory of the Lord**. This is the outshining of God's majesty. This is the revelation of God's divine magnificence. This is the brightness that cannot be tolerated by man (Is. 6:5; Lk. 9:31-32). But it is also the kind of light that brings life and transformation to sinners (Jn. 8:12; 9:5; 11:9).
- ✓ The angel arrived to give an announcement —
 - First he allayed their fears — **do not be afraid**, "Stop being frightened..." It is an affirmation that just as with Zecharias and Mary he was not coming in judgment but with joy.
 - Then he affirmed **I bring you good news**. Not just "good news," but this word is our word "gospel." The angel was bringing *the evangel* — the declaration of that which would save. The angel was sent by God with good news that could save shepherds and all men. So being sent, the angel declared the good news. This is the principle of **Rom. 10:14-15** at work — it takes a messenger sent by God with God's message to save sinners. And that's what happened here.
 - This good news produces **great joy**. When confronted by the glory of God, men always immediately understand the greatness of their sin (e.g., Gen. 3; **Ex. 3:6**; **Hab. 3:16**; **Rev. 1:17**). But where fear is great, the joy of the gospel is greater. When the gospel is believed fear is replaced by fellowship. We think of Christmas as a happy day; (virtually) everyone is happy at Christmas; how can you not be happy at Christmas? But the arrival of God and the presence of God is naturally terrifying, not satisfying. For us to rejoice and be happy is supernatural. The only reason there is joy on Christmas day is not because a baby is born but because the God-Man appeared to take away the sin of the world (1 Jn. 3:5). That's where joy is found.
 - Even more remarkably, this gospel good news is **for all people**. Yes, Christ came for the salvation of Israel (**1:68-72**; **Mt. 1:21**); but He also came for the salvation of Gentiles and all people everywhere.

- That announcement is rooted in the promise to Abraham (Gen. 12:3); but it's also central in this story (cf. 2:30-32). Regardless of gender or race or nationality or social standing or education, Christ came for *all* people.
- The One who was born was **Savior**. That was his very name — Jesus/Y'shua (Mt. 1:21). Central to Christ's nature is that He saves people: He keeps them from the wrath of God and from His own eternal judgment against them. And He saves them to Himself, drawing His enemies close and making them His sons. He saves them from Himself so that they can be with Him without terror and fear. He redeems their sins and changes them, saving them from the ongoing effects of sin in their lives. He preserves and keeps them from now and forever.
- This Child is also the **Christ** — the Messiah, the anointed One who will be eternal King of Israel. He came to David's (birth) city to rule in David's (kingly) city and on his throne (1:32-33).
- And this child is also **the Lord**. He is sovereign and Master. He is an infant, but He is absolute authority over everyone and everything. Even as the newborn King, "there was not one atom in the universe over which He could not say, 'Mine!'" [A. Kuyper] It's all His. And every person is accountable to Him. He is every man's sovereign.
- If you are here this morning, are you happy for Christmas because of family and celebrations and time off work? Or are you happy for the coming and appearing of the most remarkable Man (the God-Man) who ever lived? Do you believe in this Child who is Savior, Christ, and Lord? Is He *your* Savior? Is He *your* King? Is He *your* Master? He must be — or you will only be able to relate to Him in terror. Don't assume that you are ok. None of us are ok until we trust only in Christ to save us. So examine yourselves. See whether you really have the faith of Christ saving you (2 Cor. 13:5). And if you are not saved, the good news is that He came to save you — His salvation is for **all men**; He died for all men; He was resurrected for all men; what He did on the cross and in rising from the dead is available and sufficient for all men. But you must believe — you must believe that you are a sinner; you must believe that He died for your sin; and you must believe that He is worthy to be your Master beginning now, forever. Do you believe? You can be saved. You must believe in Him (alone) to be saved.
- ✓ How will the shepherds identify the baby Jesus? He was likely the only child born that night in Bethlehem, even with the additional people flooding the area for the census; but the angel gives another **sign** to recognize Him — He will be **wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger**.
- The wrappings of Jesus were not unusual. They were the typical way children were wrapped to keep them snug, protected, and warm. Every baby would be wrapped similarly. To say to them, "you will know this baby because he will be wrapped up in newborn cloths" would not have provided any kind of distinguishing mark anymore than saying today, "you will know our baby because it will be the one wrapped in a blanket at Harris Hospital."

- What was unique about Jesus was where He was placed — in a **manger**. He was in an animal feeding trough (which is what makes us believe He was born in a stable). Christ was set apart from all other children for the shepherds not because of what He was wearing but because of where He was lying — He was in “typical clothes” in an atypical place. We talk about the humiliation of Christ, but see it here in its starkness — the Lord of glory not even in a child’s bed but in a cattle feeding trough. I’m guessing most of you moms wouldn’t be willing to put your children there; but the second Person of the Trinity put Himself there.

“On the night the angels appeared near Bethlehem, Caesar would have been sleeping in Rome on a golden bed beneath sheets of fine linen. He would have been attended by servants, protected by the Praetorian guard and the many Roman legions. By contrast, the babe was wrapped in swaddling clothes and placed in a manger. His attendants were beasts.” [Boice, *The Christ of Christmas*, 57.]

- **The Affirmation of the Announcement (vv. 13-14)**

- ✓ As if the appearance of the one angel along with God’s radiant glory wasn’t enough to validate the message (and terrify the shepherds), in another moment, **suddenly** the one angel is surrounded by a tremendous number of other angels. Again, that “suddenly” had to be more than startling!
- ✓ It is a **multitude** of angels — the term is generally a military term for a band of soldiers coming in war; instead, this army of angels comes in peace to declare peace (isn’t that just like God’s grace)!
- ✓ These angels testify to the validity of what the angel has just spoken to them.
 - Their affirmation is **praising God**. They do not praise Mary, or Joseph, or the manger, or the shepherds, or anyone else. Their praise is of God who revealed His glory in the Incarnation. Their praise is not of sinners, but of the God who redeemed sinners.
 - It is the function of angels to always praise (the angels of Is. 6:1ff are doing the same thing thousands of years later in Rev. 4:8). And their object of praise is the only One ever worth praising — God, who is above all, and condescended to come to all so that anyone could be saved. The magnitude of this is beyond our comprehension.
- ✓ In their praise, the angels said some particular things:
 - **Glory to God in the highest** (Heaven) — the second member of the Trinity has descended to earth, but the Trinitarian godhead is still fully exalted in Heaven. He always gets all the glory because only He is worthy of receiving glory.
 - **On earth, peace among men** — that’s remarkable. On earth, where men only resist, hate, and rebel against God, there is now the potential for peace. He came in peace to bring peace.
 - The declaration **on earth peace among men** was not intended to be a statement that God would instantly remove all animosity from the earth and that all people would love all other people everywhere. But it was a statement that if anyone wanted peace he could have it.

- Peace had arrived on earth in the person of Christ and was being made available to all men. What political structures could not do, Jesus — the Prince of Peace (Is. 9:6) — would.
- But notice especially that it says this peace would be granted and known ***among men with whom He is pleased***. Any man can have the peace of Christ, but not all will. The only ones who have Christ's peace are the ones who are pleasing to God. That doesn't mean that men can do things to ingratiate God to them. The phrase more literally reads, "men of His good pleasure," and means, "those upon whom God's will/favour rests" [Marshall, in MacArthur]. In other words, the peace of God is given to those who have experienced God's saving grace. Peace is available, but you must believe to have it. And again, this peace is for ***all men***.
- The angel came with the most amazing birth announcement to the most unworthy people; and the host of angels confirmed the declaration of the one angel.
 - ✓ This is all most remarkable — the God-Man has appeared.
 - ✓ He has appeared for the sake of all men, so that they might be saved.
 - ✓ When they believe, fear is replaced by God's favor and peace. This is good news, indeed.

CONCLUSION:

I began this message by noting that the way the story is told is in a very matter-of-fact, simple manner. It is a severely understated telling of one of the two most remarkable events in the history of the world (the other being the crucifixion and resurrection). Yet, there is something that is not understated — and that is the declaration of Heaven attesting to what just happened. At His triumphal entry some skeptics were annoyed at the shouting of the crowds about Jesus' Messiahship (Lk. 19:38-39). Jesus told the Pharisees: "I tell you, if these become silent, the stones will cry out!"

It seems that something similar is happening in this account: there is no one else to sing the praise of Christ, so the Heavens cannot be restrained and they open with the angelic throng declaring the majesty of the Christ child. This is the greatest birth announcement given in the history of the world: God has come. He is in the flesh. And He is bringing peace to all who will believe in Him.

BENEDICTION: Luke 1:50-55