Sermon- A Customized Birth Announcement

Scripture: Luke 1:26-33, Luke 2:8-15, Matt 2: 1-8 Sunday, December 10, 2017

Luke 2 (announcement to the shepherds)

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. **9**An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. **10**But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. **11**Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. **12**This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

**13**Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

**14**“Glory to God in the highest heaven,
    and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

**15**When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”

Matt 2(Birth announcement to the wise men and King Herod)

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=matt+2&version=NIV#fen-NIV-23171a)] from the east came to Jerusalem **2**and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.”

**3**When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. **4**When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. **5**“In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written:

**6**“‘But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
    are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for out of you will come a ruler
    who will shepherd my people Israel.’[[b](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=matt+2&version=NIV#fen-NIV-23176b)]”

**7**Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. **8**He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.”

Most of us are familiar with the Christmas stories. We usually read these segments sequentially. So I will also to a sequential recap for you. When she was still a virgin and betroth to be married to Joseph, Angel Gabriel appears to Mary and announces to her that she is highly favored by God, and that she is to bear a son who is to be called Jesus. The angel tells Mary that the child she will give birth to will be great and is the Son of the Most High and he will have a kingdom that will last forever. Take a second to soak in the power of that divine revelation to Mary. In Luke 2 we move forward in time 9 months to an outdoor scene where there are shepherds watching there sheep at night in the fields in Bethlehem. A quick background note. Watching the sheep out in the fields at night believe it or not was the task of the smaller kids in the family. This is kind of hard for us to imagine in our world. But in the Biblical world this was a job for the kids. In fact you might remember in David’s family as the youngest of 8 sons and it was his job to watch the flock while his older brothers went to war. But in Luke 2 the Bible is very clear that it was adult shepherds who were out in the fields with the sheep at night. And that happens only when there was a crisis or if it was lambing season. Because when the lambs are born, the ewes are extremely helpless and the new born lambs have to be dried off and kept warm for that first night. So that is when the adults are in charge of the night watches. And the lambs are always born in springtime so scholars tell us that, almost certainly the text is telling us that this was a night in spring. Anyway it is ok that we celebrate Christmas on Dec 25th. Don’t worry about it. So the shepherds are out in the fields taking care of the night watches when suddenly an angel appears to them in glorious light in the middle of the night. Ofcourse the shepherds are frightened by this sudden presentation of God’s power in their midst. But the angel reassures them that they have nothing to fear. That he is bringing them Good News of great joy for all people. And the good news is this. In the town of David a special child has been born and he is their Savior, Messiah and Lord. And the sign that they need to look for is this, there in the little town of Bethlehem they will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. With that, a whole host of angels appear, sing “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace on whom his favor rests”. Then the angels disappear and the shepherds immediately go to find this baby that the angels spoke about. Soak that scene in.

There is another fascinating story that relates to the birth of Christ in Matthews Gospel. The story of the wise men. The Bible does not actually say how many wise men there are. We assume there were three wise men because we know about three gifts that they presented to baby Jesus. We also don’t know where they came come, except that they were from the East. The wise men from our time tell us that they most likely came from Babylon in the Persian empire. Persia is of course the present day Iran. These wise men studied ancient texts and also astronomy and astrology. So, these people through there keen observation of the night sky, they saw a new star suddenly appear in the sky. And a new star in the sky was for them a symbol of the birth of a very great person, even a new king. And the position of appearance of the star depending on over what part of the earth it is appearing would relate to which country the new star was associated with. Now because the earth is rotating the whole star chart is always spinning on any given night. Also as the earth rotates about the sun with each season or section of the year, you have a slight shift in which part of the sky you can see and so which stars you can see. So if you know well enough what the night sky looks at different times and places and seasons even, then you would be able to notice the appearance of a new star and know which country it is associated with. It would make my head spin if I had to figure it out. I can barely make out the Big Dipper on a clear night. But it is fascinating how brilliant some people are and what they can figure out. And our Magi from Persia without any modern telescopes were able to figure out not only where the Big Dipper was but also that a new star was visible in the sky in a place associated with Israel and it was a significant enough event that they decided to drop everything and go make a 1000 mile journey by camel caravan, a journey that would take weeks of preparation and travel time of anywhere from 3 months to a year. Just to go pay they respects to this one of a kind royal baby.

Speaking of royalty, I want to our last character, the present ruler of the Judah. The so called “Herod the Great”. Again quick context note, there are 4 Herod’s in the Bible, Herod the Great, was ruler at Jesus’ birth. But he dies within the year of a terrible disease. This son Herod Antipas is the one who has John the Baptist killed. His son Herod Agripa I, the the one who persecutes the church in Acts 12. His son Herod Agrippa II is the one whom Apostle Paul faces in Acts 25. So coming back to our Herod the Great, couple things you need to know about him. He was not strictly speaking Jewish because he was of Idumean descent. If you don’t know what that means, his father’s ancestory was from the Edomites who were descendants of Esau and not Jacob. But the Edomites came and lived with the Israelites and adopted their customs. Many of them were forcibly converted to Judaism including Herod’s father. So Herod the Great was not pure Jewish. He was not even a ruler in the fullest sense because he was installed by the Pagan Romans and so he was disliked by his people on many levels. But he was a great builder and a great politician who knew how to keep the Roman Emperor Julius Caesar and after Caesar, Mark Anthony happy.

But because he claimed to be Jewish and was ruler of the Jews, he should have been more well verses in Jewish scripture than either Mary who was just a teenage girl or the shepherds who would have been uneducated or even the wise men who were from a different country and culture. Yet Herod the Great did not know his scripture and never noticed the Messianic expectation that scriptures are filled with. It seems he first hears about this Savior king from the wise men from the East. But as soon as he hears it he immediately conveys the 70 rulers of the Sanhedrin who are asked to report to him what the scripture says about the Messiah to be born. The Sanhedrin elders look into scripture and report back that the wise men are right. They find the verse in Micah 5:2 which says, But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
    though you are small among the clans[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Micah+5%3A2&version=NIV#fen-NIV-22636a)] of Judah,
out of you will come for me
    one who will be ruler over Israel,
whose origins are from of old,
    from ancient times.

This is how King Herod comes to know about the birth of Jesus.

I have presented you with four very different birth announcements. To Mary the would be mother of our Savior, angel Gabriel, one of one two named angels in the Bible personally appears and after informing her that she is highly favored by God and tells her that she has been chosen to miraculously carry the child who would be the savior of the world and the king of an eternal kingdom.

Then comes the shepherds. These shepherds were the bottom of the social structure in Israel. Why? Because shepherds need land to graze there sheep. Land is the one thing you cannot get in Israel. It is not just today but even 2000 years ago Israel was a hotly contested real estate. So you can be sure that the land they grazed their sheep was not theirs. You can be sure that mostly even the sheep they grazed was not their own. Most shepherds did not own anything and where at the mercy of those who did own what they need. Secondly, if you spend all your time with sheep you can be sure you would smell like them as well. And because of that, the shepherds were not exactly esteemed people in society. They were at the bottom and pretty much keep their own company. They were never invited to anything by the other sections of society.

I imagine their excitement when an angel from heaven comes and personally announces the birth of Christ to them and then presents them with the world’s first ever Christmas concert which was literally heavenly and then they are personally invited by the angels to see the baby who will be their Savior, Messiah and Lord. Can you imagine what that must have been like for the shepherds? There is one more thing here in the presentation to the shepherds that is easy to miss. How were the poor shepherds to know that they were looking at the same baby whom the angels had informed them about? Well, the angel gave them this sign, look for a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. This was certainly unusual. You would not find human babies in a manger for animals. But every element of this sign was customized for shepherds to be able to easy recognize. A manger, human baby wrapped in cloths. Remember I mentioned that this was lambing season and they were out in the fields wrapping the new born lambs to keep them warm the first night they were born? Now they are witnessing the lamb of God wrapped in cloths out in the manger, the first night he was born. You think something about that scene would resonate with the shepherds like no body else?

Ok now look at the wise men. What were the wise men experts in? They were experts in the study of the night sky. So they were given a sign that was spectacular for sure for them but honestly, it was a kind of sign that any other group of people would totally miss. You see experts in a given field get so excited about a discovery in a way others who are not in their field just don’t get right? You know the story of Archimedes who was trying to figure out how to calculate the volume of an irregular shaped object. Then one day he steps into his bathtub, sees the water rise and immediately figures out the solution. He figure out that the volume of an object is equal to the volume of the water it displaces. That discovery helps him to solve a big problem that the king had posed to him and so he gets so excited that he jumps out of the tub and runs naked through the streets shouting “eureka, eureka”, which is Greek translates as “I found it, I found it”. Well, experts get really excited when they make a discovery in their field because they can see the vast implications for human life of their discovery that others just can’t. God knows that and so God announces the birth of Christ to the Magi from Persia in a way that only they would really get. And their excitement is no less than Mary’s or the shepherds.

Now God lets “Herod the Great” know about the birth of Christ as well. But notice the difference here. What do kings have access to? Kings have access to experts in every field right? So Herod the Great, gets his information from the collaboration of the Magi from Persia and his own Sanhedrin. There is another important thing to note about this birth announcement. While Herod gets bits of the information, does he get all the information about the Savior who was born? No, on the contrary, God knows Herod’s heart and his intention to harm the baby and so he actually keeps Herod away from some information. He keeps Herod away from the exact location of the baby.

Four birth announcements. Each announcement highly customized to the receiver. Each announcement varies as to how much information was given about Jesus and his birth, how the message was delivered and even who the messenger is. Each of the four examples fall on the extreme ends of the knowledge and power scale. There could be no more difference between the knowledge of the Magi, who would be the equivalent to a scientist in our world to a shepherd who could be the equivalent to someone who did a low skilled job. And then there was the power spectrum, from King Herod to a teenage girl in an ordinary household. But no matter where they were on the knowledge and power spectrum, each of them was informed that the Savior of the world was born in a way that should have got them really excited. You know why? Because God was dramatically changing the knowledge and power dynamics in a world where the Savior was going to rule.

Today 2000 years later, each of us from a worldly standpoint fall somewhere within the knowledge and power spectrum of these four important people in the story of the birth of Christ. And the question is, if the Christmas message was customized from them it must have been customized for you as well. Customized enough that the Saviors birth should generate an excitement in you like no other.

So how does the message, the Savior has been born speak Good News into your life today? I want to share this with you today. If you find yourself closer to the Mary and Shepherds end of the knowledge and power spectrum, then the message of Christmas to you is this, the birth of Christ into our world means that you now have knowledge about the world and about God and about God’s plans that will empower you like nothing else. This knowledge of the world gives you wisdom and power to lead your life in a way that people with all kinds of worldly knowledge and worldly power will not be able to do. The birth of Christ inverts the knowledge and power dynamics of the world. And you see Mary, the teenage girl grasp this fact instantly in Mary’s. Because as soon as the angel announces the news to her what does she say? If you turn to the Magnificat in Luke 1, the whole thing is a song praising God for the inversion of the knowledge and power dynamic that existed in the world. Look at these lines of the Magnificat,

**51**He has shown strength with his arm;
    he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;
**52**he has brought down the mighty from their thrones
    and exalted those of humble estate;
**53**he has filled the hungry with good things,
    and the rich he has sent away empty.

Let me say a word about the sending the rich away empty. What does that mean? This is not applicable to anyone in this room but let me say this for the sake of completeness of the message. Even if you have the knowledge and power at the Herod end of the scale you will not be able to mess with God’s plan for the world. Not in the tiniest way. You will be sent away empty, just as Herod the Great was.

So this is the message of Christmas. God recognizes that this world is messed up and you are caught in the quick sand of this world in all kinds of ways. But do not worry. Be at peace. Your Savior has been born. He will overturn the whole power dynamics of this world to rescue you from everything that is out to destroy you, be it Satan, the systems of this world or even yourself. So rejoice! Your savior has been born. Let there be peace on earth. Let us pray.