

Signs and Glory

December 24, 2025 (8A)

Luke 2:1-20

¹ In those days Caesar Augustus declared that everyone throughout the empire should be enrolled in the tax lists. ² This first enrollment occurred when Quirinius governed Syria. ³ Everyone went to their own cities to be enrolled.

⁴ Since Joseph belonged to David's house and family line, he went up from the city of Nazareth in Galilee to David's city, called Bethlehem, in Judea. ⁵ He went to be enrolled together with Mary, who was promised to him in marriage and who was pregnant. ⁶ While they were there, the time came for Mary to have her baby. ⁷ She gave birth to her firstborn child, a son, wrapped him snugly, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the guestroom.

⁸ Nearby shepherds were living in the fields, guarding their sheep at night. ⁹ The Lord's angel stood before them, the Lord's glory shone around them, and they were terrified.

¹⁰ The angel said, "Don't be afraid! Look! I bring good news to you — wonderful, joyous news for all people. ¹¹ Your savior is born today in David's city. He is Christ the Lord. ¹² This is a sign for you: you will find a newborn baby wrapped snugly and lying in a manger." ¹³ Suddenly a great assembly of the heavenly forces was with the angel praising God. They said, ¹⁴ "Glory to God in heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors."

¹⁵ When the angels returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, "Let's go right now to Bethlehem and see what's happened. Let's confirm what the Lord has revealed to us." ¹⁶ They went quickly and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they saw this, they reported what they had been told about this child. ¹⁸ Everyone who heard it was amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹ Mary committed these things to memory and considered them carefully. ²⁰ The shepherds returned home, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. Everything happened just as they had been told.



Welcome to Christmas Eve. This is a night that we gather each year as a community of faith to hear the traditional Christmas story as told in the gospels. The story is very familiar, whether we are reading from Luke, as we are today, or if we're reading from Matthew's gospel or if we are watching the Charlie Brown Christmas movie. With a story so familiar, I ask, why do we retell the Christmas story again and again, year after year? And on a related topic, if we know the story so well that many – if not all of us – could pretty much tell the story from heart, why do we gather on this night, again and again, year after year?

First, why retell the story year after year? This year, as we gather, I am not the same person I was last year. You are not the same person you were last year on December 24. As we come and hear the story once again, none of us are the same. We have all changed as individuals and as a gathered community. Because we are changed, and if we are really listening, we hear the story differently each year. Maybe something new about the scene jumps out or maybe something different about the shepherds stands out. Maybe something about Mary touches your heart in a new way this year.

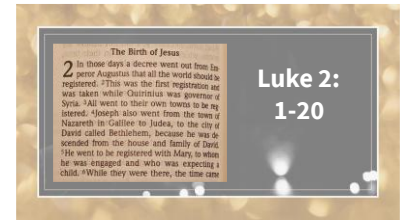
This is why I read the Bible every morning and it is why I encourage all believers to spend intentional time daily in God's word. As I read John 1:1-14 this morning and as I reflected on its meaning and application to my life, God spoke to my heart in new ways because I am not the same person that I was when I last read this passage. The word of God that is alive and active will continue to shape and form us anew each time we invest our lives in reading, studying, and reflecting on God's word. That is why we gather year after year, to hear the same stories of Christ's birth, again and again.

Second, why do we gather as a community, coming together to worship and hear a story that we could read on our own at home or anywhere else for that matter? We gather together to celebrate the birth of Christ and to worship our God who made the intentional choice to become one of us, to take on flesh and dwell among us, because God came to be in relationship with us all and to save the whole world, not just to save you or me or anyone else who professes faith in Jesus Christ. Above all else, our God of love is a God of community and connection. So we gather, year after year, to be in communion with God and with one another on this most sacred of nights. As we do so, please join me in a moment of prayer...

Almighty God, we have waited for a long time for your hope, your joy, and your love to shine in the darkness of this world. Even now, in our gathering here, we await you. In our hearts, we still hope that your light will blaze forth, banishing the shadows of this world and guiding all the people back to you. Yet you did not come into this world in a show of power and glory. You did not shine forth for all of creation to behold. A tiny spark – a newborn baby, visible to parents and curious animals. A host of angels – away from the populated areas, singing to migrant workers. A sparkling star – guiding foreigners to see what neighbors could not.

Open our hearts, merciful God, to the sparks of your presence still in this world. Open our eyes, that we might behold your presence in the least likely of places, and among the least likely of people. God with us, kindle your spark within us, that together we may shine forth your light, we might banish the shadows of this world, we might be the continuation of the Christmas miracle: Emmanuel is in this world, God is with us, now and evermore. And now I ask you, Emmanuel, God with us, to bless the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts. You are our rock and our redeemer, our Christ and our king. Amen.

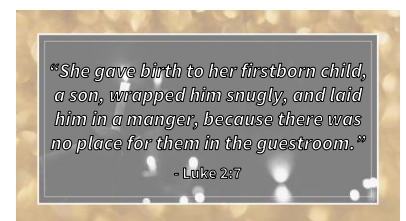
Please turn with me to Luke 2, beginning in verse 1. If you did not bring a Bible or do not have an app on your phone, you can use a Bible found in the baskets underneath the chairs. In the first half-dozen verses we get the facts of the matter. The Emperor, Caesar Augustus, declared that all people needed to be registered on the tax lists. Today we might call this a “census.” To be enrolled in those days, every adult male had to travel to their town of origin. For Joseph, because he belonged to the line of David, that meant traveling to Bethlehem in Judea, David’s hometown.



And for Mary, who was engaged and was nine months pregnant, that trip to Bethlehem was about an 80-something mile journey that would take between four and seven days, depending on how fast Mary was able to travel. Today, walking at a normal pace, the trip would take just over 30 hours on paved, well-marked roads. In Mary and Joseph’s day, the trip was over rough terrain, on a variety of paths worn into the dry soil. Even if Mary rode on a donkey, which is feasible and has some historical support, the trip would be long and very difficult for a very pregnant Mary. While the decree of Caesar made the trip a requirement, it was also necessary to fulfill the many Old Testament prophecies surrounding the birth of the Messiah.

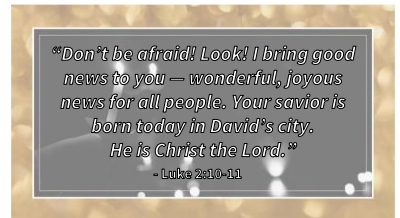


Mary and Joseph arrived safely in Bethlehem. Then, in verse 7 we read, *“She gave birth to her firstborn child, a son, wrapped him snugly, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the guestroom.”* This is the nuts and bolts of the story of Jesus’ actual birth. It is depicted here in the manger scene that sits at the front of the church: rustic, simple.



In verse 8 the story shifts away from the manger, to focus in on the shepherds who were *“living in the fields, guarding their sheep at night.”* Before pressing on, a few words about the shepherds. It is important to be aware of these facts because it makes their choosing so amazing. Shepherds lived outdoors when on duty. Because of the nature of their job, most of that society considered them “unclean,” a designation that would prevent them from proper worship and proper interaction with the “good people” of that time. If this were the temple or a local synagogue at the time of Jesus’ birth, the shepherds would be denied entry.

As we continue in the story, we see that the Lord’s angel appears in glory before the shepherds, causing them to be terrified. Here are the words that the angel speaks to the lowly shepherds: *“Don’t be afraid! Look! I bring good news to you — wonderful, joyous news for all people. Your savior is born today in David’s city. He is Christ the Lord.”* This is indeed good and wonderful news, made even more so because it is good and wonderful news for all people. The Savior of the world was sent to all of the world.



After giving the shepherds directions on how to find this Savior, a choir of angels appears, singing, *“Glory to God in heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors.”* Because God chose to make this glorious announcement through some shepherds, the angels are declaring that these shepherds are among those upon whom God’s favor rests. Before pressing on in the story, let us pause to consider what God favoring these shepherds really meant. God is favoring those whom the rest of that society would consider unclean, whom that culture would shun and exclude. God is telling these “lowly” shepherds that they matter, that they are important, that they too are beloved by God.



The idea of including the “least of these,” as Jesus would call all who were marginalized and outcast and excluded, in the story of the birth of the Savior, well, it speaks to the heart of God. That Luke’s gospel would announce the birth of the one who would become the sacrificial lamb for the sins of the world to the ones who tended the lambs of Israel, that shows us that God favors those who society and culture choose not to favor. If God chose to include and show favor to such as these, then God will show favor to all people everywhere, no matter their occupation, no matter their place in society, no matter what. This is good news for all people. This is a true sign of God’s glory – a love for all of humanity.



Receiving the good news, the shepherds followed the angel’s directions and found “*the baby lying in the manger.*” The shepherds came that night, straight away, bringing with them the smells of the outdoors and of the animals in their care. After confirming what the Lord had told them through the angel, the shepherds told anyone and everyone the story of what had happened to them. They told anyone and everyone how they were keeping watch over their flocks, doing their job, worrying about the predators and the hazards out there in the darkness, when suddenly the sky exploded.

In that instant, they thought their hearts would stop beating in their chests. They probably thought that it was the end of the world. They likely thought that they would never hold their little babies, kiss their wives, or laugh with family again. And maybe they even thought, in that moment, that all their mistakes were returning to trip them up, all their failings, doubts, and brokenness. And then the angel spoke, saying, “*Don’t be afraid!*” Without fear, the message could sink in. To you is born the Savior. To you, not just to the good folk, to the religious folk, to the rich and powerful folk – but to you. To you and to all people.

The Savior of the world was born into their world, literally. Born into a manger. That was their world. The angels came out into the fields at night. That was their world. The divine met them where they were at, met them as they were, and said, *“Your Savior is born today.”* This night, this very day, your Savior, shepherds, he is born to you. Indeed, *“Glory to God in heaven!”* This night, this very day, your Savior, children of God, he is born to you. Indeed, *“Glory to God in heaven!”*

While this night was amazing long ago and while we gather to remember the night that the Savior came into the world, that first Christmas Eve was not meant to be just “one special night.” The presence of Christ was to be with us all of the time. God is with us always, even in the most ordinary situations – like God was with the shepherds, who were just doing their jobs. God is with us always, even situations of difficulty, pain, and uncertainty – like God was with a newborn infant, who was just about the most vulnerable creature in this world. In our deep human struggles, God desires to come alongside us, to be present and to walk with us in this difficult but blessed human journey of life. The message of the incarnation is the good news of Emmanuel, God with us, God among us. God’s presence is most easily seen not in the rich and powerful, but in the poor and simple. God was present to the shepherds, those lower-class folks. God remains present to us all, wherever we find ourselves in this life.

What a glorious night it was for those shepherds. Just keeping watch over the flock by night, when, suddenly, God invited them into God’s unfolding story of salvation and grace. We are all keeping watch over something. So, I ask, what are you keeping watch over? What occupies your time and energy, your attention and your affection? Is it someone or something other than the Savior who was born this night?

Just as God entered into their lives, inviting the shepherds to become a part of the unfolding story of God, tonight God desires to enter our lives, inviting us to make room for God's ongoing story in our lives and into our world. Into our midst, God offers the greatest gift ever. I ask, will you make room for this gift? Are you willing to set aside, at least for some moments each day, that which occupies your time, energy, attention, and affection? If we want Christ to dwell in our hearts, then we need to make room for Christ in our lives.

When we make the intentional choice to make room for the Christ to dwell in our hearts, then we make space for the peace, love, hope, and joy that Christ brings. And when we make space for the peace, love, hope, and joy that Christ offers, all of these things will become a part of who and what we are. When peace, love, hope, and joy become who and what we are, then our lives will reveal the glory of God. It is then that we are the sign of God's glory in the world. May it be so for you and for me. Alleluia and amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. Like the shepherds, what are you keeping watch over? What will you make room for as a response to the birth of Christ? How would this help your faith to grow?
- 2) *Pray*. Spend some time in prayer this week, during a quiet time in the day, simply being in the presence of the one who came into the world to save and rescue the world.
- 3) *Study*. Read Luke 2:25-38. How are the responses of Simeon and Anna further evidence or signs of God's glory? How might your life better reflect this worship of the Savior?