

Shepherds, Gods, and Kings - *Luke 2:1-20*

Introduction - When a culture forgets the reason for the season, it will come up with its own. Our culture, based on romantic sentimentalism and individual pietism, has re-made Christmas, and the church has led the way with her own errors. "Anti"-Christmas stories emphasize religious sentimentalism (a shot of religious feel-good) and moralism (we really are good people deep down in our hearts). These are antichrist. The Christmas story is the story of sin, promise, redemption, faith and glory. It is also God's story weaving His plans through the lives of the most powerful and prominent as well as through the (seemingly) obscure and lowly.

Bringing the Background to the Foreground (vv1-7) - There are no unimportant details in the Scripture. In thoughtful literature, most if not all of the background information has meaning; it is never simply setting the stage.

Caesar Augustus (v1) - Adopted by Julius, Augustus reigned as Caesar from 27 BC to 14 AD. He took the name "Augustus" meaning "worthy of reverence and worship," and declared himself divine. He was known as "savior" and "lord" and while reigning, Pax Romana had brought "peace on earth." Augustus, like David, ordered a census of his entire kingdom.

Quirinius (vv2-3) - Ancient historians write about this "new man," because he had come to hold his political office on the basis of his own merits rather than by family tradition and inheritance. These two were obeyed, and so "...all went to be registered."

Bethlehem (vv4-5) - The rich and powerful king who called himself "god" (with the help of his self-made governor) perfectly fulfilled the prophecy of the True God by sending Joseph, of the line of king David, to the city of David (Micah 5:2). The whole world was in motion in order for Christ to be born in Bethlehem.

Firtsborn (vv6-7) - Mary brings forth Jesus in poverty. They will offer up turtledoves (2:24) at her purification. He is the firstborn, implying that Mary later had other children, half-brothers and sisters of Jesus (Matt 13:55f). Jesus is laid in a feeding trough, possibly out in a courtyard near an Inn, or even in a cave (which Justin Martyr records in the second century).

The Men, The Messengers, the Message (vv8-20) - But certainly this good news needs to be announced to the world. Who should hear the message first? Who would you have chosen?

Shepherds (v8) - Bethlehem was about 8 miles from Jerusalem. These shepherds were probably caretakers for sheep used in temple sacrifices. Shepherds were not considered the upper-class, nor respected in their day. But this is where the angels would come.

The Angel's Message (vv9-12) - When the angel appeared in glory, the shepherds were greatly afraid (unlike many sentimental depictions). The declaration is "to all people." A "Savior" has been born in the city of the great king, David. He is Messiah, the "Lord." This is a message that is to bring great joy to all people. This is not supposed to be kept secret or private. It is intended to be a general, public, all-inclusive declaration. Nevertheless, God is making this announcement out in the fields and His audience is mostly sheep.

"Glory to God" (v13-14) - Suddenly this angel is joined by an "army" of angels. This military multitude is declaring a different "peace" upon the earth, a peace which comes after a different battle was later won (Col 2:15). For glory was not to go to the god of Rome whose image was on a coin and was emperor of the world, but to God in the highest whose image was on a baby and is King of all heaven and earth.

The Shepherds Go (vv15-20) - After the angelic multitudes recede into the heavens the shepherds go straight to Bethlehem to worship the Lord. The great sign is a little Babe lying in a manger. These shepherds become the first pastor-shepherds for the Great Shepherd (v17) and all those who heard marveled at their proclamation. Then they returned to their vocation, glorifying and praising God.

The Glory of the Story - God's condescension towards us is immeasurable, and His irony as He weaves His story of redemption is wonderful. "Glory to God in the highest" is sung by an angelic host to dirty shepherds in a field. God stoops down to us in the Incarnation, but does so through the lowliest in order to bring forth the greatest. The Good News goes to the lowly first. If you think you are too dirty, too sinful, too unimportant, then hear that Good News - you qualify! Self-made men do not qualify trying to come on their merits. Hopeless messes with nothing to bring qualify. God sent His Son into the world to die for people as messed up as that. Men cannot make or find peace that lasts except by coming to the Prince of Peace.

The Unlikely Messenger - Are you ready to be a shepherd of this message? Are you ready for kingdom work, to join a militant multitude in their message to the world? Do you think the shepherds in the field were?

The Unlikely Time and Place - In the midst of political turmoil, family scandal, or preparations and plans gone south, are you looking for Jesus to show up? And are you expecting Him to show up in some spectacular public way, or in some remote corner of the world, maybe even in our (seemingly) insignificant lives? Do you see how Jesus fulfills all prophecies and promises - but so often in surprising and subtle ways?

When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son (Gal 4:4). The "greatest men" in the world had no knowledge that they were doing exactly what needed to be done to accomplish God's plan. The obscure shepherds were told exactly what was happening, and a little Child was worshipped for He was the Good Shepherd, God on High, and King of kings.