

The King is Born

Luke 2:1-21

Good morning! My name is Dan, and I am one of the pastors here.

I don't know if any of you have realized this, but we are 4 days away from Christmas! Did that sneak up on anyone else like it did on me? Really, I have no excuse though because, much to my chagrin, the Christmas tree goes up in my house on November 1.

A few days ago, we got all the kids' presents wrapped and under the tree. This is one of them, actually. On the top of this gift is a little tag that says, "To: Asher; From: Mom and Dad."

A short message -- very short, in fact. Yet this short message was met with a lot of excitement when one Asher Westman found it (and several other presents like it) with his name under the tree. Some messages have the potential to bring a lot of joy, don't they?

In August 2010, the country of Chile was sent into panic when the San José mine collapsed without warning. A massive rock fall—estimated at over 700,000 tons—sealed the main access tunnel and trapped 33 miners nearly half a mile underground. The incident was so violent that it destroyed ladders, crushed vehicles, and cut off all communication with the surface. While this was certainly a moment of concern for the nation of Chile, it led to outright panic for the families of those 33 miners who feared that they had lost their loved ones.

For more than two weeks, rescue crews drilled and drilled in hopes of finding some sign of the buried miners. Finally, on the seventeenth day, a drill bit finally broke through the rock into a cavern deep below the earth's surface. When the rescue crew backed the drill out of the earth, they found a note tied to the end: "*Estamos bien en el refugio los 33.*" — "*We are well in the shelter, the 33 of us.*"

The families were notified immediately, and their response was nothing less than whole-hearted joy. In a moment, with one short message -- a message of good news -- despair turned into hope and joy became possible once again.

Today, we are going to look at a very well-known story: the story of the birth of Jesus. The actual event of Jesus' birth, as we will see, is recorded very concisely. But in this concise story, it is clear that the birth of this child is good news. In fact, it's good news that elicits a response. In this passage, we see both heaven and earth respond to the good news of the birth of Jesus. As we walk through our passage this morning, which comes to us in Luke 2:1-21, we will explore these two questions: Why is the birth of Jesus good news? And how are we meant to respond?

Let's jump into our text as we explore these questions together.

The Humble Birth of a King

Luke 2:1-5

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2 This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3 And

all went to be registered, each to his own town. 4 And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, 5 to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.

Here, in these verses, we get the context -- the setting -- into which Jesus was born. Caesar Augustus, also known as the Octavian, the great nephew of Julius Caesar and his successor as the emperor of Rome, had called for a census to be taken. Censuses like this were common in the Roman empire both to keep an accurate record of the people for the purposes of taxation, but also as a not so subtle reminder to the people that they were subject to Rome and must do its bidding, whatever it was.

This particular census required people to return to their ancestral hometown. So Joseph, from the line of David, went to Bethlehem, David's hometown, to be registered.

As Luke recounts these events, however, he does not merely record details to set the historical stage, but rather artistically and creatively uses these details to set the theological stage as well.

Notice the progression -- or rather the *regression* -- that takes place throughout these verses. It begins with Caesar Augustus, the richest, most powerful, and most important man in the world who lived in Rome, the most important city in the world. As the emperor of Rome, Caesar Augustus would have been regarded as divine. Though he did not claim to be a god himself, as his great uncle Julius had, Augustus was content to be known as the "Son of God" -- a title which we have already seen in the gospel of Luke as a reference to Jesus, the coming King. If King Jesus was going to show up anywhere, we would expect it to be to Caesar in Rome. But that is not where Jesus shows up.

From there, we hear of Quirinius, the governor of Syria -- still powerful, still important, but significantly less than Caesar. Still, this man had the power to create and implement a rule of law in Israel that all Jews were obliged to obey under the threat of punishment or death. Perhaps it is to this man that Jesus would appear? But he doesn't.

Then we hear of Joseph, a lowly Hebrew carpenter. He had no wealth or status or power. In fact, here he is seen doing exactly what his Roman overlords had commanded of him because... what other choice did he have?? But Joseph did have something going for him. He was the descendant of a king, King David. The greatest king of Israel. So Joseph and his soon-to-be wife Mary make their way to the city of David. Throughout the Old Testament, the great city of Jerusalem was known as the city of David. This was the capital city, the city where David ruled and reigned. It was God's special city, often called Zion, and it was the city that was meant to be at the centerpoint of God's work of salvation. Surely that is where a Jewish king would be born.

But Joseph doesn't go to Jerusalem. He goes to the *other* city of David, the city where David was born and raised as a young child tending sheep, the city of Bethlehem.

Bethlehem was not the kind of town that you went out of your way to visit. There was no visitor center or famous landmarks. You didn't feel the need to send a postcard from Bethlehem back home on your way through. It was "nowheresville."

Then, in this backwater town, it was time -- time for that baby to be born.

Luke 2:6-7

6 And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. 7 And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

Four years ago, Linzy was pregnant with our third child, Rhett. His due date was February 17, a day which came and went with no signs of labor. A few days later, labor signs kind of started, but things were moving very slowly and never quite got into gear. Finally, a week after his due date, we called our doula (or birth coach), who came over and started to work her doula's magic. She could tell that the baby was ready but was not in the right position. After having Linzy try this, that, and the other thing, her efforts paid off and Linzy had her first strong contraction. When I said this baby was ready, he was *ready* and things started moving *fast!* Twenty minutes later we were packing the car. Ten minutes after that, we were driving away. We made it one mile from our house before... the baby was born in the car. Since everyone always asks: No, Linzy wasn't driving -- I was. Yes, our doula was in the car with us. No, I didn't pull over -- I kept on driving to the hospital. Yes, mom and baby were just fine!

The next day, as we were getting ready to leave, the hospital staff brought in a form needed to complete the birth certificate. Normally, you just fill in the name and the hospital completes everything else. But there was another blank that we needed to fill in: the address. I looked at this blank for a while without knowing exactly what to write. And now, for the rest of his life, Rhett's birth certificate will say "El Camino Real and Grape Avenue."

I love telling this story to people because it is pretty wild! It holds people's attention. It's got the "wow" factor!

Jesus' birth has one thing and only one thing in common with Rhett's birth: it didn't happen where it was supposed to happen. Rather than her home or the hospital or even in the comfort of an inn, Jesus is born in a stable.

And yet, the way that the birth of Jesus is recorded here is remarkably unremarkable. Jesus is not born in a palace, as a king ought to be. There is no fanfare or celebration. Not even the comfort of a crib could be found. Rather, he was born in animal quarters and laid to sleep in a feed trough.

From Caesar to Quirinius to Joseph. From Rome to Syria to Bethlehem. From a palace to a governor's mansion to the pen of sheep and goats.

This child was born in complete and utter humility. Jesus left the glory of heaven to be laid in a manger. He laid aside his position of power and took on poverty. Though he was the king, he

came wearing diapers rather than a crown. And, as we will see in a moment, when heaven wanted to announce this good news to the world, they did not start with the kings or the nobles, but with the shepherds out in the hill country -- poor, dirty, and forgotten.

The Response of Heaven

As the story continues, we see heaven respond to these events on earth. As they do, they interpret the events for us. **Luke 2:8-12**

8 And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. 10 And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. 11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. 12 And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger."

This is just wild. There is nothing about the first Christmas night that looks royal or regal. There is nothing that sounds remarkable or all that interesting. But then, the skies illuminate with the very glory of God, and we are told that this child, Jesus, is a *king*. He is *the king*. And he is the savior of the world.

As Jesus grows and matures, as he enters adulthood and begins his ministry, most people just cannot figure him out. They just don't understand him. The Romans think he's a threat. The Jewish leaders think he's a heretic or a lunatic. The disciples -- they go back and forth, but in the end they can't wrap their minds around a messiah who will hang on a cross before he sits on a throne.

And you know what, in many ways I don't blame them. What kind of a Savior lets nails be driven through his hands and feet with a crown of thorns puncturing his brow?

The kind who is not born at Stanford hospital in Silicon Valley but in a stable in Bethlehem. The kind who is not put to sleep in an electronic crib that rocks him and soothes him and sings him to sleep, but one who is laid in an animal's feed trough.

Who could have seen that coming? No one. No one. Because that is crazy. But it's also so important because it tells us what kind of king Jesus really is and what kind of people he came to save.

Jesus is gentle and lowly. Humble. Compassionate. Full of love. And the people that he came to save are the ones who recognize him in that place as their true king.

Here is the message that gets repeated through the gospel of Luke: It is so much easier for the poor to enter the kingdom than for the rich. It is so much easier for the sick to enter the kingdom than for the healthy. It is so much easier for the vulnerable, the at-risk, the marginalized, the outcasts to enter the kingdom because they recognize their need for a Savior, and they recognize a king who looks like them.

This is why the angel says that the birth of Jesus is good news of great joy that will be *for all people*. Not just those who are used to good news. Not just those who are expecting good news. But also those never imagined that the good news might be for them.

So here, even in the birth of Jesus, we have an invitation -- an invitation to embrace our vulnerability as Jesus stepped into vulnerability. To embrace our humanity -- with all of it's limitations -- as Jesus took on humanity. And to bow our knee in submission to the king who *submitted himself* to weakness, to frailty, to poverty, to suffering, and ultimately to death for our sakes.

Yes, Luke is recording historical events. But he records them to make a theological point: Jesus, the king of heaven and earth, was born in humility, and all who follow him must walk in humility as well.

Peace on Earth

After this one angelic messenger announces the good news to the shepherds, the sky lights up even brighter as the watching armies of heaven reveal themselves. Look at **Luke 2:13-14**

13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

*14 "Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"*

The decades that preceded the birth of Christ were bloody and brutal decades in Rome. Beginning with Julius Caesar and his war against the general Pompey, Rome had been locked in battle through both civil war and imperial conquest. After his own bloody rise to power, Octavian, also known as Caesar Augustus, ushered in a new period of peace in Rome, a period known as the *Pax Romana*, the peace of Rome. War had ended. Order had been restored. And a new era of peace had begun. This was Caesar Augustus's main legacy.

But now the armies of heaven, looking down at a king sleeping with sheep and donkeys and announcing the good news to shepherds, begin praising God, saying *true peace has now arrived*.

Everyone desires peace. Some just believe that peace is only possible when you silence your enemies through violence and maintain your power through threat of punishment.

But Jesus comes to usher in a new era of peace. Jesus has something to offer that the world and its rulers never can. He came to bring true peace, a peace that transcends our wildest imaginations. Peace with God. A reconciled relationship with our Creator that makes possible a reconciled relationship with one another.

That is true peace -- peace that causes the armies of heaven to erupt in praise. And, as we will see as we continue in the text, peace that is meant to cause us to praise God as well.

The Response of Earth

We have seen heaven respond to the good news. Now let's see the response of earth. **Luke 2:15-20:**

15 When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." 16 And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. 17 And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. 18 And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. 19 But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. 20 And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

I love the response that we see here. The first response of the shepherds is to **witness** what they have been told. They go and see for themselves. They seek out Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus to confirm with their eyes what they have heard with their ears.

But then their response quickly moves from being witnesses *of* Jesus to being witness *about* Jesus. They begin spreading the news. *You'll never believe what we just saw. You'll never believe what just happened. You will never believe who was just born.*

All who heard this news **wondered** at what they had been told. They were curious. *What is going on?* They had unanswered questions. *How can this be? What does this mean?*

Mary also had some unanswered questions, but she savored this moment, **treasuring** it in her heart, but also **pondering** them. I remember sitting in the hospital, holding our firstborn in the hours after he was born and wondering: How would his life unfold? What kind of a man would he become? How will my life be different because of him? I'm sure Mary had all of the same questions -- while at the same time knowing that her son was the *son of God*. So many unanswered questions. But she treasured these moments as she waited in wonder.

And finally, the shepherds **worshipped** God. They worshipped God, praising him for all that he had done, was doing, and would continue to do.

Witness. Wonder. Worship. This is the response that the good news of Jesus is meant to elicit from us. Witness. Wonder. Worship -- at the good news of great joy that will be to all people. At the peace that can only come from the King who was born in a stable and laid in a manger.

Witness. Wonder. Worship.

So let me ask you these questions. Have you been a witness of all that Jesus has done? Like the shepherds have you gone to see these things that have been told to you? Here's the good news -- you don't have to travel to Bethlehem to do it. You just need to open this book and read it. This advent series is the start of a long preaching series in the Gospel of Luke, and my hope for us in this series is that we will be *witnesses of* all that Jesus has said and done so that we can become *witnesses to* all that Jesus has said and done, sharing the good news of the

Gospel with others just as the shepherds did. So that's the first question, have you been a witness?

Second question: Do you wonder about these things? Do you have questions? Are there things about Jesus that don't quite make sense or dots that you can't quite connect? Do you wonder? Bring those questions to God. Ask them here. We don't have all the answers, but we are happy to explore the questions with you.

Finally, will you worship? Like the hosts of heaven that lit up the sky, like the shepherds who realized that all of history had just changed, will you worship God in response to this good news? Will you bow your knee to this King, plead your allegiance to him, and declare his great worth?

This is the response that is fit for a King.

The Rest of the Rescue

After 17 days of dread, it was discovered that all 33 Chilean minors were still alive. That little note tied to the end of that drill launched a massive effort to recover these trapped men. After weeks of round-the-clock work, all 33 men were safely brought back to the surface. When the first miner emerged from the shaft, he was not met with polite applause. He was met with tears, shouting, singing, and praise.

This first Christmas night was like the day that note was tied to the drill. It was good news that turned despair into hope and made joy possible once again. But it was only just the beginning -- the beginning of a rescue effort that would lead to greater joy and peace than anyone imagined.

In Jesus -- because of who he is and because of what he has done for us in his life, death, and resurrection -- the possibility of greater joy and peace than we ever imagined is before us. And our response ought to be one of witness, wonder, and worship.

That is what we are going to do now as we sing about the first Noel. Let's pray.