

INTRODUCTION

The 6-year-old kids in their Sunday School class were re-enacting the story of the birth of Jesus. The teacher wanted them to stage it themselves based on their own made-up script, so it was certainly interesting. They had three Marys, two Josephs, six shepherds, two wise guys, and one boy who played the cow. Another boy decided he would be the doctor who would deliver the baby. The teacher consented, so the little doctor went back behind the manger and picked up the doll and carefully wrapped him in a blanket. Then with a big smile on his face, he turned to the Marys and the Josephs and said, "Congratulations, it's a God!"

That little boy had a better grasp of the incarnation than many people much older. The birth of Jesus was an amazing experience of God taking on a human form. Today, we are going to study "The Day God became a Baby."

I've been looking forward to arriving at this text because it is the middle of the summer and, for most of us, the only time we have ever studied this text is during the month of December. As most of you know, we aren't certain about the time of the year when Jesus was born, but it's safe to infer He *wasn't* born around December 25. This is a date the Roman Catholic Church set centuries ago for the wrong reason. When Constantine legalized Christianity in the 4th century, there was already a pagan celebration called Sol Invictus that took place a few days after the winter solstice. It was a celebration of the fact that once again light had conquered darkness. When the Roman Empire became "Christian" they adopted many of these pagan practices and tried to Christianize them (they eventually paganized Christianity), thus we celebrate "Christ's mass" on December 25.

The best clue in the narrative for the time of year was the fact that shepherds were out in the fields at night with their flocks. This was only done during the warm months, certainly not in December. The date of the birth of Jesus isn't the point – the good news is that HE HAS BEEN BORN. For that reason, we should study this event at times other than at Christmas. So, without trees, presents, and crowded stores, let's read about this awesome experience:

(Luke 2:1-20) In those days, Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to his own town to register.

So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in strips of cloth and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a

Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you; You will find a baby wrapped in strips of cloth and lying in a manger."

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests."

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."

So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

You've heard Christmas sermons all your life, and there is so much we could find in this text, but for this study, we will look at only two topics: First, the miracles Mary pondered and, second, the message God proclaimed.

I. THE MIRACLES MARY PONDERED

It's obvious Luke conducted a personal interview with Mary many years later or how else would he have been able to write what he did in verse 19? It says, "Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart." Mary experienced so many miracles that night that she had to store them in her heart as precious treasures. The word "pondered" is a word that Aristotle used frequently; it is the word *sunballousa* which means to "constantly rethink and evaluate even the tiniest details" of an experience. What were "these things" that she pondered? When we look at what took place that night, there were actually three miraculous journeys. Each of these three journeys came to a conclusion that night and they all arrived at the same place in Bethlehem. First, there was

1. The difficult arrival in Bethlehem

The first journey that came to a conclusion that night was the difficult journey Mary and Joseph made from Nazareth to Bethlehem. It was a difficult trek of over 80 miles. The chapter begins with Luke setting this event in a literal historical and political context. Remember, he is writing to Theophilus, who probably was an important official in the Roman government. Luke is careful to ensure that the readers comprehend that the birth of Jesus is firmly rooted in history. It was not a once-upon-a-time story. There was a *real* Jesus just as there was a Caesar Augustus and a governor named Quirinius.

Can you imagine the fear and anxiety Joseph and Mary experienced when they heard that because of this census, they had no choice but to travel to Bethlehem? They knew Mary was

going to give birth any day and it would be a long and difficult trip but they had no choice, did they? After all, the Emperor Augustus was in control. Really? Actually, the heart of this king was in the hand of the Lord, and God was behind this decree. This massive registration plan was simply God's way to get Mary in the correct place for Jesus to be born. The scripture had prophesied 700 years earlier that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem.

Micah 5:2 says, "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans 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." That last phrase literally reads, "whose beginning is from the days of eternity." Caesar Augustus, the adopted son of Julius Caesar, was the first Caesar to be called Augustus. His real name was Octavianus. The Roman Senate voted to give him that title, Augustus, which means "holy or revered." It was a title reserved for gods. They wanted to make the Roman emperor like God. So here was this "Augustus" making his political decree, thinking he was god and he is simply a pawn in the hand of the true God. Man proposes, but God disposes. Augustus was a man who wanted to become a god and what we see in this text is God who is becoming a man – what a contrast!

So Joseph and Mary finally arrived in Bethlehem, only to find every hotel had a "no vacancy" sign out front. Actually, Bethlehem was such a tiny town, that when it says there was no room in *the* Inn, it means there was only one and it was full. So Jesus was born . . . where, exactly?

The Bible doesn't say. We only know He was laid in a manger, which is a wooden feed box for cows and sheep. That's why we assume He was born in a barn. Most miniature Nativity scenes employ a wooden shack as the barn, but we are fairly certain it wasn't a wooden barn. In Bible times, and especially in the region around Bethlehem, farmers and shepherds didn't have enough wood to build wooden buildings. Instead they used the natural shallow caves that dotted the sides of the limestone hills.

If you ever get the chance to visit Bethlehem with me, we will go down into the Church of the Nativity, and there is a shallow cave, or grotto, that is the traditional site of the birth of Jesus. Of course, this huge church has been built over it, so I try to take travelers to a shepherd's cave outside the city that looks the same today as it might have looked 2,000 years ago.

So Mary and Joseph probably found refuge in or near one of these limestone caves. One of the things Mary pondered in her heart that night was the trip to Bethlehem and the tough experience of having her firstborn child born in less-than-ideal circumstances. But there was a second journey that arrived at the same place that evening. I call it

2. The quiet arrival of God

The Bible teaches that when Jesus comes again there will be the shout of the archangel and the trumpet of God will sound. How different was His first coming. In the silence of a starlit night, Mary simply gave birth to a little baby – and his infant cry was the first time the voice of God was heard speaking through human lips. The journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem was 80 miles. How far was this journey? It was a journey in which the Eternal Son of God laid aside His glory

and traveled down through time and space at the speed of thought and took upon Himself our likeness.

There is a children's movie entitled "The Incredible Journey." It's about a couple of dogs and a cat that travel across the land to be reunited with their owners. That's incredible! But the real Incredible Journey was when God traveled to planet earth and became a baby. If the word "incredible" means "unbelievable," then you can't use it for the incarnation, because it is very believable. One of the best verses about the Incarnation is 2 Corinthians 8:9, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich."

The reason Jesus was born in such a poor humble circumstance was for our sakes. Less than a mile from Bethlehem sitting on top of the tallest hill was the massive palace that Herod the Great had built for himself. Called the Herodium, it had 200 polished marble steps leading to a series of towers and arches. It contained a swimming pool twice as large as an olympic pool. It would have been clearly in sight that night blazing away with its torches and candles.

Why wasn't the King of the Jews born there? Did God know what He was doing? Was it a mistake for the Messiah to be born to such humble surroundings? Shouldn't there have been a palace instead of a cave? Shouldn't there have been a solid gold cradle, not a manger? Shouldn't there have been the finest physicians present instead of just Mary and Joseph? Did God know what He was doing? Absolutely.

Ray Stedman writes: "Now you would think that if God so rules the world as to use an empire-wide census to bring Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem, He surely could have seen to it that a room was available in the inn. Yes, He could have. And Jesus could have been born into a wealthy family. He could have turned stone into bread in the wilderness. He could have called 10,000 angels to His aid in Gethsemane. He could have come down from the cross and saved Himself. The question is not what God could do but what He willed to do. God's will was that though Christ was rich, yet for your sake He became poor. The "No vacancy" signs over all the motels in Bethlehem were for your sake. "For your sake He became poor." God rules all things – even motel capacities, for the sake of His children. The Calvary road begins with a no vacancy sign in Bethlehem and ends with the spitting and scoffing and the cross in Jerusalem."

So quietly, without fanfare or trumpets, God quietly slipped into this world as a little baby. Charles Wesley wrote six thousand hymns. We sang one of his best this morning: "Hark the Herald Angels Sing." Listen again to the teaching in the last verse, "Hail the heaven born Prince of Peace, hail the Son of righteousness, Light and life to all He brings, risen with healing in His wings, mild He lays His glory by," (that's the incarnation), "born that man no more may die, born to raise the sons of earth, born to give them second birth. Hark the herald angels sing, glory to the newborn King." I'm sure these were things that Mary pondered in her heart, but there was another journey that night. She also pondered

3. The surprise arrival of shepherds

Now, picture little Mary for a moment. She is exhausted from the difficult trip from Nazareth, and she is weary from the physical ordeal of giving birth to her firstborn. But she is too excited to go to sleep so she and Joseph are taking turns holding the baby Jesus. Sometime that evening, a group of shepherds arrive and say, "Yes, here He is, just like the angel said . . . what do you know, a baby in a manger, now I've never seen that before."

I wonder if Mary had begun to entertain some doubts about the visit of the angel nine months earlier. After all, if her child *was* the Messiah, would she have been out in a cave, putting her child in a feed box? But now these unexpected visitors show up – and they are excited! One of the shepherds proceeds to tell Mary about the angel and then about the whole army of angels who appeared in the sky. This had to be a pleasant surprise as, once again; Mary receives confirmation that this little baby was to be the Savior of the world.

This journey was a round trip of only a couple of miles. They traveled from the fields into Bethlehem, and then they returned to fields, rejoicing and praising God. What a night that was! There were three miracles that caused Mary to ponder God's greatness and grace. The couple arrived safely in the city of David, God arrived in the form a baby, and the shepherds arrived to investigate this unique birth. So now, let's consider

II. THE MESSAGE GOD PROCLAIMED

God delivered a message to all of us, but He first delivered it to these shepherds. Just as it was no accident that Jesus was born in poor, humble circumstances, God's message to shepherds has a deep impact on us as well. The fact that God chose shepherds to hear the first gospel message is not an accident. Shepherds were the lowest people in the socio-economic order of that day; they were a despised class with a bad reputation. Shepherds were known as thieves because they were nomadic, and as they moved their sheep around the country, sometimes they got confused about what was "mine" and what was "thine." They were not allowed to give testimony in a Jewish court of law. Their work made it impossible for them to observe the Jewish ceremonial laws and temple rituals, so they were considered religiously unclean and unacceptable. It's pretty amazing to think this heavenly invasion came to such social outcasts!

The weather was mild at this time so the shepherds of the region kept watch over their flocks in the hills rather than drive them to the shelter of pens. There is some evidence these flocks were being raised to use in the sacrifices at the temple in Jerusalem five miles away. There, an unblemished lamb was slain every morning and evening as an offering to the Lord. Now the angel was about to inform the shepherds that the Lamb of God who would take away their sins by the shedding of his own blood had just been born.

The fact that God delivered the first gospel message to shepherds instead of a king tells us that the good news is for *all* people, not just the wealthy or the educated. Let's notice four things God said to those shepherds 2,000 years ago, because He is saying the same thing to us today. He is saying here's some good news that will give you great joy:

1. You don't have to be afraid

The first thing the angel said to the shepherds was "DO NOT BE AFRAID." As I've said before, encountering an angel in the middle of the night tends to frighten people out of their wits. However, there are fearful people today, who haven't seen an angel, instead they are looking at an uncertain future. Fear is one of the biggest problems we face.

I recall even when I was a kid growing up in South Alabama, my folks would leave the front and back door open at night with only the screen door latched to keep the breeze flowing; we weren't afraid of somebody breaking in. They never locked the car, and often left the keys in the ignition. Times have changed in America.

Did you know that twenty years ago, the most popular dog in the United States was the poodle? At that time, there were less than a thousand Rottweilers (guard dogs). But by 1994, the number of registered poodles had fallen by more than half, but Rottweilers had multiplied a hundredfold to over well over 100,000, so that now there are more Rottweilers than poodles. What does that tell you about how afraid people are today?

God is passing on a good news message today: "Don't be afraid. Whatever happens to you, I am not going to leave you or forsake you." Some of you need to hear His voice of assurance right now.

2. I have become like you so you can know me

Next, God says through the angel, "Today a Savior has been born to you; He is Christ the Lord." I'm glad God didn't say, "today a Savior has been born to Mary . . ." He said, "a Savior born *to you*." That means Jesus was born for each of us. This is God's way of letting us know He wants to enter into a personal relationship with us. Then the angel calls Jesus "Christ" which means "Messiah." He is identifying Jesus as the long-awaited King of the Jews. He also calls Him "Lord" which means "Master." This is His title. From the very first day of His human birth, Jesus is called Savior, Messiah, and Lord. God invaded this planet in the fragile form a little baby. He had to become like us so that we could relate to Him.

John 1:14 says, "The Word (God) became flesh and dwelt among us." If God wanted to relate to birds, He would have become a bird. If God had wanted to communicate to cows, He would have become a cow. If He wanted to communicate to dogs, He would have become a dog. But God wanted to relate to you and to me, so He became like us – a human being.

It's like the little girl who was afraid of the dark and called out, "Daddy, come in here and be with me." Her father said, "Just hug your teddy bear." The little girl said, "No, Daddy, I want something with skin on it." Jesus is God with skin on, so that you can know him as much as he knows you. This is what happened according to Philippians 2:5-7 "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness."

God did all of this so that we could know him personally. He put on human flesh so He could die for us. This is at the heart of Christian truth. I read of a Hindu man who could not believe in

Christianity because he could not contemplate a God who would so humble himself. Then one day as he came across an anthill he tried to get close enough to study it, but every time he bent low, his shadow caused all the ants to scurry away. He recognized to himself that the only way in which he could ever come to know that colony of ants would be if he could somehow become an ant himself – and that was the moment in which his conversion to Christ began.

Dr. A.W. Tozer writes: "If our greatest need had been information, God would have sent an educator. If our greatest need had been technology, God would have sent us a scientist. If our greatest need had been money, God would have sent us an economist. If our greatest need had been pleasure, God would have sent us an entertainer. But our greatest need was for forgiveness, so God sent us a Savior."

One of the most beautiful titles of Jesus is Emmanuel, which means "God with us." That's the truth of the Incarnation: God has come to be with us in the person of Jesus.

3. I invite you to come and receive my gift

Next, the angel invited the shepherds to travel into Bethlehem to investigate and confirm this message. He said the way they would recognize this Savior/Messiah/King in an unusual way. He would be lying in a feed trough (we have made the word "manger" too religious). To me it is significant that God didn't command them to travel into Bethlehem, He simply delivered the Good News. After the angels left, the shepherds said, "Let's go into Bethlehem to see this thing that the Lord has told us about." (vs. 15)

They heard God's invitation, and by their own choice they accepted His invitation and traveled into the town to find the baby. I can just imagine what must have happened. They hurried into town asking everyone they met if they had heard of a baby being born who was placed in a feed trough; finally they arrive at the correct location and they see Mary, Joseph, and little baby Jesus. The baby is wrapped tightly in strips of cloth and is resting in a wooden feed trough. They had seen enough! The angel was right: the Savior, Messiah, Lord had arrived! They not only heard the announcement, they came into His presence and met Him.

I wonder what happened after they told Mary and Joseph the story of the angels. The Bible doesn't say, but perhaps Mary did what many new mothers say to me when I visit them in the hospital. Do you think she asked, "Would you like to hold Him?" Can't you see one of those rough old shepherds tenderly taking the baby into his arms? This shepherd who daily handled the spotless lambs that would be used for the Temple sacrifice was holding the Spotless Lamb of God.

I don't know if Mary invited them to hold the baby Jesus but I do know God is inviting you today to receive Him into your heart. Like the shepherds, you have heard the Good News and now God simply invites you to come to Jesus and to enter into His presence and receive His forgiveness. It's time for you to RSVP. Have you ever gotten an invitation to attend a special occasion and the initials RSVP appear? You probably know that it stands for *repondez s'il vous plait* which is French for "answer please." It means that a reply is expected; it is considered an insult to ignore an invitation that has RSVP written. God has addressed a special invitation to

you – it has your name on it. He invites you to come into His presence and receive the free gift of eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. He has added RSVP to you invitation. Have you insulted God by not responding? Here's the fourth thing that God is saying to us:

4. Once you meet me, you can't keep it a secret

So these shepherds traveled into the little town and they met the baby Jesus and they were so excited that verse 17 says, "they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child." That means they became the very first evangelists for Jesus. I believe each of those men were changed from having entered into the presence of Jesus. They couldn't keep quiet about what had happened to them since they met Jesus. They were joyfully skipping along, sharing the good news with everyone they encountered. Verse 18 says, "and all who heard it were amazed." You see, once you meet Jesus, you can't stay the same. The birth of this little baby made all the difference in the world.

Did you ever read Bret Harte's short story "The Luck of Roaring Camp?" Roaring Camp was supposed to be, according to the story, the meanest, toughest mining town in the entire West. More murders, more thefts, it was a terrible place inhabited entirely by men, and one woman who tried to serve them all. Her name was Cherokee Sal. She died while giving birth to a baby.

Well, the men took the baby, and they put her in a box with some old rags under her. When they looked at her, they decided that didn't look right, so they sent one of the men 80 miles to buy a rosewood cradle. He brought it back, and they put the rags and the baby in the rosewood cradle. And the rags didn't look right there. So they sent another of their number to Sacramento, and he came back with some beautiful silk and lace blankets. And they put the baby, wrapped around with those blankets, in the rosewood cradle.

It looked fine until someone happened to notice the floor was so filthy. So these hardened, tough men got down on their hands and knees, and with their hardened and horny hands they scrubbed that floor until it was very clean. Of course, what that did was to make the walls and the ceiling and the dirty windows without curtains look absolutely terrible. So they washed down the walls and the ceiling, and they put curtains at the windows. And now things were beginning to look as they thought they should look. But of course, they had to give up a lot of their fighting, because the baby slept a lot, and babies can't sleep during a brawl. So the whole temperature of Roaring Camp seemed to go down.

They used to take her out and set her by the entrance to the mine in her rosewood cradle so they could see her when they came up. Then somebody noticed what a dirty place that was, so they planted flowers, and they made a very nice garden there. It looked quite beautiful. And they would bring her, oh, shiny little stones and things that they would find in the mine. But when they would put their hands down next to hers, their hands looked so dirty. Pretty soon the general store was all sold out of soap and shaving gear and perfume and those kinds of things. Before long, the men were a totally different bunch of guys ... the baby changed everything.

Have you ever met Jesus? He will change your life too. One of the ways you can tell is that you will be telling everyone you meet that your life is different. When was the last time you acted

like those shepherds and informed everyone you know that you have met Jesus and things are different in your life?

For us, these should be more than words to a song, they should be our daily testimony: What a wonderful change in my life has been wrought, since Jesus came into my heart. I have light in my soul for which long had I sought, since Jesus came into my heart, since Jesus came into my heart, floods of joy over my soul like the sea billows roll, since Jesus came into my heart (Words by Rufus H. McDaniel)

CONCLUSION

I recently read a story of a missionary team that had been invited to Russia to teach Christianity. It was Christmastime, and as they taught the story of Christ's birth at an orphanage; everyone listened in amazement. None of the kids or the staff had ever heard it before. One of the missionaries wrote: "We gave the children some materials and instructed them to create the manger scene that they had just heard about. All went well until I got to one table where little Misha sat; he looked to be about 6 years old and had finished his project. As I looked at the little boy's manger, I was startled to see not one, but two babies in the manger. I called for a translator to ask why. Looking at his completed manger scene, the child began to repeat the story accurately, until he came to the part where Mary put the baby Jesus in the manger. Then Misha started to ad-lib his own ending to the story.

He said, 'And when Mary laid the baby in the manger, Jesus looked at me and asked me if I had a place to stay. I told him I have no mama and no papa, so I don't have any place to stay. Then Jesus told me I could stay with him. So I got into the manger, and then Jesus looked at me and he told me I could stay with him forever.' Putting his hand over his face, Misha's head dropped to the table and his shoulders shook as he sobbed and sobbed. For the first time in his life, he had found someone who would never abandon nor abuse him, someone who would stay with him forever."

My friend, God has delivered a Good News Invitation to you today. He says, "Come to me all you who weary and burdened and I will give you rest." (Matthew 11:28) Your name is embossed on the invitation. He says, "I love you and I want you to live with Me forever." He has added "RSVP" to the invitation. Now, what is your response?

OUTLINE

I. THE MIRACLES MARY PONDERED

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"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans 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."
Micah 5:2

2. The quiet arrival of God

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich. *2 Corinthians 8:9*

3. The surprise arrival of shepherds

II. THE MESSAGE GOD PROCLAIMED

Here's some good news that will give you great joy:

1. You don't have to be afraid

2. I have become like you so you can know me

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. *Philippians 2:5-7*

3. I invite you to come and receive my gift — (RSVP)

4. Once you meet me, you can't keep it a secret



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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes