

The Christmas Gospel

“Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.”

Tell me, is there any event in the history of the world that is more widely celebrated than the event that we are gathered to celebrate today? Can you think of any festival, any holiday that is somehow observed or acknowledged by more people around the world than Christmas? Think about it, over the next 24 hours, there will be 2.5 billion Christians celebrating Christmas. And that doesn't count the billions of other people who are celebrating the spirit of Christmas in one way or another. My daughter lives in Chiang Mai Thailand, a country that is 94% Buddhist. And there are still people handing out gifts on Christmas Day. When I travel to Indonesia, where 87% of the population is Muslim, there were lots of signs I couldn't read and one sign I could read. It read, “Merry Christmas.” Even here in the United States, where the percentage of church-going Christians continues to decline, still 9 out of 10 people celebrate Christmas. In fact, 8 out of 10 non-Christians in the United States celebrate Christmas in one form or another.

Now I realize that celebrating Christmas, “in one form or another,” is a pretty broad category. For some people, Christmas is nothing more than a reason to go shopping, or to have a party, or to break out the eggnog. For others, Christmas is all about the guy dressed in the red suit, who apparently knows when you're sleeping and when you're awake. And for others, Christmas is simply a time of giving, a time of peace and goodwill toward one another.

But no matter what form the celebration of Christmas takes in people's lives around the world, no matter how the celebration of Christmas has evolved down through the centuries, the fact is, something must have got it all started. If I walk into Lambeau Field and every head is turned in the same direction, it's only natural to ask, “What are they all looking at? What caused them to turn their heads?” So it is with Christmas. If a worldwide, centuries-long celebration is the effect, then, what is the cause? What is the original pebble thrown into the pond of this world that ultimately sent ripples to the end of the earth? The answer is found right here in Luke chapter 2. It's what we simply call:

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It's what the angel referred to as the “*good news that will cause great joy for all the people.*” Even though there are a lot of memorable features of the Christmas story, what with the manger and the shepherds and the angels in the sky, the real essence of Christmas is contained in one announcement made by an angel to the shepherds outside of Bethlehem. The angel said: “*Today in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.*” Because there is so much packed into that one statement, we're going to take that statement one word at a time, and we're going to do what the Bible said that Mary did on that very first Christmas. We're going to ponder. We're going to ponder what those words of the Christmas angel mean for our lives today.

The angel begins by saying “today.” Today! Think about the power of that one word. For almost 4,000 years, God's people had been waiting for God to fulfill his promise that he was going to send someone to crush the serpent's head (Genesis 3:15), someone to be born of a virgin mother (Isaiah 7:14), someone who would bear the sins of many and make intercession for the transgressors (Isaiah 53:12), someone who would be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God

(Isaiah 9:6).

For centuries, all those things were going to happen “someday”. But with the angel’s announcement, someday was suddenly today! Suddenly, the God who controls all of history decided to step into history and make it “His Story”. In effect, God put his finger on the calendar and said “Today is the day that I will enter the world as a little baby.” My friends, you realize, that means that the essence of Christmas is more than just a feeling, or a hope or dream. It’s a historic fact. Even though we don’t know the exact day of Jesus’ birth, (Frankly, it took hundreds of years for the Christian church to settle on December 25th as the day to celebrate Jesus’ birth), the point is, the birth of Jesus is an historic event. In fact, Luke tells us that it happened when Quirinius was governor of Syria, and when Caesar Augustus was emperor of the entire Roman world. Those are the historic parameters for when Jesus was born.

But not only does the angel tell us when Jesus was born; he tells us where. Or to put it another way, God not only put his finger on the calendar, he put it on the map. The angel announces, “*Today, in the town of David...*” My friends, you realize, with those words the angel is doing more than merely telling the shepherds where to look for baby Jesus. Those words are the fulfillment of a whole host of promises that God had made about this child who would be from the line of King David, born in the city of David, that is, in Bethlehem Ephrathah, just as the prophet Micah foretold. The point is, Jesus was not born in some random, could-have-been-anywhere-in-the-world location. No, he was born right where God said he would be born—even if God had to have the most powerful ruler in the world issue a decree to move a pregnant woman and her husband 90 miles south to an overcrowded Bethlehem, because that’s where Jesus had to be born.

From there the angel does not go on to say who would be born. He doesn’t say, “His name is Jesus.” He doesn’t say, “He’s the son of Mary.” No, rather than focusing on who this baby is, the angel focuses on something even more important, namely, what this baby is. What does the angel say? “*Today, in the town of David, a savior...*” You might say that that is the most important word in this whole chapter. I mean, you could cut out every other sentence in this account, and as long as you still had that word, a Savior, you would still have the Christmas Gospel. Isn’t that the truth? The good news is not that Jesus came to be a great teacher, to impart spiritual wisdom for the ages. The good news is not that Jesus came to be a judge to bring some justice to our world and make things right again. The good news is not that Jesus is the ultimate example of what it means to love one another. No, Jesus’ number one job is to be a Savior, that is, someone who rescues people from the worst possible consequences. Someone who has come to rescue us from the consequences of our own sins. He’s come to rescue us because we couldn’t rescue ourselves.

Do you realize what that means? Let me see if I can illustrate it. Imagine that you fell into a mineshaft that is a thousand feet deep. You’re stuck at the bottom. It’s dark. It’s cold. You’re having trouble breathing. Things don’t look good. But fortunately, I’m at the top of the mineshaft and I call down to you. “I’ll save you. Here’s what you have to do. Just wedge your knees and elbows against the side of the shaft and work your way up the shaft one inch at a time until you’re all the way out.” Tell me, do you think that would work? No way! You’d be doomed!

But now imagine that instead of me standing at the top and telling you what you had to do, I instead threw you a rope to tie around your waist and then I ran that rope over pulley and tied the other end to my waist, so that as I descended down into the mineshaft you were lifted up to safety. In that way, you will be rescued, not by me telling you what to do, but by me going

into the mine shaft myself. Isn't that what Jesus did? In effect, he traded places with us. He came down into our darkness so that we could be lifted up into the light. In that way Jesus saved us.

But in order to save us, something very important needed to happen to Jesus. Jesus needed to be born, which is the next part of the angel's announcement. "*Today in the town of David a Savior has been born...*" Now, we might take that word "born" for granted. Don't. Think about it. The eternal son of God, the one who has no beginning and no end, chose to take on human flesh and enter this world via a birth canal. God Almighty in the form of a crying, wetting, helpless little baby! Why? Why would God do that? Why would God humble himself to that degree? The answer? Because that's what it took to rescue you and me from the pit of our own sins. Remember, God couldn't save us by standing up in heaven and saying, "Come on, shape up! Do this! Don't do that!" No, he had to come down and take our place. In order to rescue us, he had to live the perfect life that we could not live and then die the death that our sins had earned. You might say that's why Jesus was born. He was born, so that he could live and die, in our place.

Now, if the angel's announcement had stopped right there, with the word "born," we might say, "Wow! That was an amazing birth announcement. Instead of having Mary and Joseph send out little parchment postcard announcing the birth of their son, God sent an angel to announce the when and where of this child's birth." But notice, the angel's announcement doesn't end with the word "born". Rather, it adds two very important words, namely, this "*Savior has been born to you.*"

You think about that a minute. Usually when we say that a child is born to someone, that "someone" is the child's parents. Right? A birth announcement might read Hudson Robert was born to the proud parents, John and Alli Mancl. But obviously that doesn't apply in the case of this birth announcement. It's not like this child was born to the shepherds. So why does the angel say to the shepherds that this child was "born to you"? Because God wanted to make it clear that this child was not born just for Mary and Joseph. This child was born "to you." Yes, to you shepherds, but by extension, this child was born for all of mankind. That's what the angel meant when he said, "*I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people*"? This child is God's gift to the whole world!

Which brings us to the final two words of this announcement, where the angel identifies not what the newborn child would be, namely, a Savior, but rather, who he is, namely, *the Messiah* and *the Lord*. Again, each one of those words is significant. The word Messiah means the Anointed One. In Old Testament, it was the prophets, priests, and kings who were anointed with oil to signify that they had been chosen by God to carry out a very special task. In the same way, Jesus was called the Anointed One, that is, the Messiah, the Christ, because he was anointed with the Holy Spirit to perfectly fulfill the three-fold role of Prophet, Priest and King.

And the reason he could perfectly carry out that role is found in the fact that this baby Jesus is also "the Lord." Who is the Lord? Well, that's the name that God used for himself. In the Old Testament it was Yahweh. In the NT it's the Lord. With this one word, the angel was announcing that this baby was not only the greatest gift from God. In fact, he was the gift of God. That little baby came into this world as God.

The question is, Why? Why did God do that? Why did God leave his throne of glory to be laid on a bed of straw, and then on a Roman cross, and finally in a hole in the ground? He did it for you. He did it so that you can know that no matter who you are, no matter what you've done, no matter what you've been through, no matter whether you are a lifelong Christian, or this is the first time you've stepped into a church. No matter whether you've got a rap sheet a mile

long, or you've done a pretty good job of hiding your sins from others, no matter what, you can know that you have a God who has done everything to make you right in his eyes. Because of that Christchild, you can know that your sins are forgiven; you are loved by God; you are precious to him. He's given you a reason to live your life to his glory and he's prepared a place in heaven for you when you die. And you can know because...*Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.* To which we respond with the angels and billions of believers around the world,
"Glory to God in the highest heaven and earth peace to those on whom God's favor now rests, for Jesus' sake. Amen.