

Evangelism from Heaven, Part 1

Luke 2:8-14

We're continuing this fascinating study, the infancy narratives, which tell us the story about how the Son of God entered the world as a newborn baby, swaddled, laid in a manger. And as you're turning there to Luke 2:8, let me just read a couple of verses from John's gospel. Some of the themes flowing through the current of our text this morning, John highlights in his prologue: themes of light and glory and incarnation. That's a theological focus on the story of Christ. John 1:4 starts with this theme of light. He says, "In Him," that is in Jesus Christ, in Him "the word was life and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." And then down in verse 9 John writes, "The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world." The end of the prologue, verse 14, "The word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth." That's what we're seeing here in Luke Chapter 2, especially in verses 8 to 14, the

climactic section of this narrative that spans from verse 1 to verse 20. “Jesus Christ is the light of the world and whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” And as the light of the world, Jesus Christ is the incarnation, the very embodiment of the glory of God the Father. No one has ever seen God at any time, but the incarnate son of God. He has made him known.

And that begins right now here in our text. Look at Luke 2:8, “Mary wrapped her newborn baby in swaddling cloths, laid him in a manger,” which is a feeding trough for the livestock. Hardly an appropriate place, it would seem, for the glorious Son of God to be laid, but there he was. And then Luke 2:8 says this, “In the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. 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. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was

with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”

We’re looking at the climactic portion of this narrative. This is more than a birth announcement. This is a Gospel announcement. Heaven itself has come down to evangelize these shepherds. Angel of the Lord is giving them the news of salvation there in verse 11. “For unto us is born this day in this city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” Everything else in the narrative is either a build up to or a reaction to the angelic announcement of this good news. The Gospel is what sends the shepherds into Bethlehem to find the sign of the child, verse 15. It’s what causes everyone to wonder, verse 18. It’s what causes Mary in verse 19 to hold these words deep within her heart, to ponder them, to think about them. It’s what causes the shepherds in verse 20 to go away glorifying and praising God. This is the same message that’s changed hearts and transformed the lives of all kinds of people from all kinds of places throughout history around the entire world. It’s a message that transcends time and space. It’s a message that reaches every location, translates into every culture, every language, affects

every single heart; affects ours, as well, doesn't it? It's exactly what you'd expect from the word of the living God, able to penetrate, to get into the heart. And here, at the very beginning of the Gospel story, God has really telegraphed his intent to save sinners in Jesus Christ and sinners of all kinds.

The story is, on the one hand, it's utterly sublime. There's an angel, there's divine glory, there's the heavenly host, but it intersects with normal, very normal, mundane human reality. This happened 2,000 years ago in an actual place on earth, at an actual time. The town of Bethlehem, the time of Caesar Augustus, the Roman Empire was just getting its foundation, just getting its start. It involved normal issues of the administration of government, regional politics, even as something as mundane and normal as a fundamental staple in an agrarian economy, shepherds in a field.

And that's where we're going to start. The first point: A dramatic visitation. Verse 8, "And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field keeping watching over their flock by night." Now, we don't know who these shepherds are, frankly,

there are no names, not even ethnicities here. We might assume they're Jews, but we don't know that for certain; these guys are anonymous. And unlike the previous angelic visitations, to Zechariah first and then to Mary, both of them parents of the child that was announced to them, these shepherds have no relational ties to the child at all. They're outsiders, really, to the story; they're strangers. A couple things to note in that verse: first of all it says, "the same region." That indicates this location. These are the pastures surrounding the town of Bethlehem where the shepherds took care of their sheep. And, then secondly, the shepherds are outside, it says. It says they're in the field, out in the field, away from the comfort of the town. And notice it's nighttime, they're "keeping watch."

Basically, the picture is this: The shepherds would lead their flocks to local pastures during the day for grazing all around the hills, and then in the evening as it started to get dark, they would bring the sheep back home into these enclosures that kept the sheep sheltered from the weather, the elements, protected from wild animals or even thieves. These sheepfolds, they were constructed around an open space. They were surrounded by rock walls, sometimes high walls. And then sometimes they

were covered over just to protect from the weather and the rain. Sometimes they were open to the sky. Not always, especially in winter, not always the warmest or the most comfortable lodging, but it provided the shelter and the safety and the protection that was needed for the sheep. Some think, because of how this verse describes shepherds sleeping out of doors, that it's unlikely that Jesus was born in the winter months, let alone December 25th. Their spending the night in the sheepfold during this time of year is not necessarily conclusive evidence against a winter birth of Christ. Now, I will say this, we don't know for certain the date. Many people have tried. Many people have attempted to go back, try to reconstruct this and get the precise date of Jesus' birth, but I, I think that's a difficult, difficult task.

Suffice it to say, I think that a winter timeframe and why not December 25th? A winter time frame is very close to the truth. In fact, the fact that these shepherds are keeping their sheep closer to town actually argues in favor of a winter birth. The commentator Joel Green writes this, "In general, shepherds spent warmer, drier months like March through November, spring all the way to early autumn, further afield, and colder, wetter

months, November to March, nearer to towns and cities. Proximity to Bethlehem, then, could speak for a winter birth of Jesus.”

Now the climate in that region, it’s remarkably similar to cities of the same latitude as San Diego, California. I don’t know if you’ve been to San Diego, California in the winter; trust me, it’s not harsh. It’s not like Michigan, it’s pretty mild winter. So it’s not like the shepherds are trudging around in snow, drenched with rain. And they, even if it did rain, they had the means of staying dry, of keeping warm, perhaps even in those times, especially in a heavy period or season of weather, they could rent pen space in town, sheep space in town, sheepfolds, stay themselves in temporary rented quarters. That wasn’t normally necessary. In fact, weather permitting, the shepherds would want to keep their sheep out grazing, wandering around. They wanted happy, well-fed, you might say range-fed sheep, free-grazing because they were preparing them for lambing season around February. So they kept them outside in the fields, sleeping in the sheepfolds with them, taking their own turns to keep the watch at night.

There’s good evidence that the regions around Jerusalem, that would include Bethlehem, that these people around there,

the shepherds around these regions supplied lambs for the temple sacrifices. So a February lambing season could provide lambs, which were definitely within the time span of a year old or less. Those lambs could be provided for sacrifices that were required at Passover that came in March or April. Listen, this lamb providing business, big business at the temple, huge business, a huge, huge moneymaker. In fact, it became corruptly so. Chief priests and the Sadducees would only approve certain lambs for sacrifice, that is, the ones provided by regional livestock brokers with whom they'd made deals, ones sold at exorbitant prices in the temple courts. This was price gouging in the extreme.

Believe me, none of that was lost on these shepherds. These are working-class guys. They know the deal. Even though their own industry was a part of the of whole temple racket, they knew what was going on. They worked for a living after all. They're at the beginning of the supply chain, so they knew the corruption of the temple officials. Unintentionally, without their own involvement, really, the shepherds found themselves complicit in this corrupt system. Even if they didn't agree with it, they were a part of it. But they were at the purest end of



the supply chain, they're at the beginning. They just raise the sheep; then they sold the sheep; they sold the wool; they sold the lambs. Just a hard working group of men trying to make a living providing for their families, which is all a good, good thing.

It's to these men that God sends a very, very important messenger; look at verse 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." It's not hard to see how sudden and how shocking the contrast is here. Have you ever been in a really, really dark room? Your eyes are completely adjusted to the dark, and all of a sudden someone flips on a bright light. It's blinding, isn't it? You wince and you shut your eyes. It's painful even, sometimes. Imagine these shepherds, they're sitting around after a hard day's work, it's nighttime, it's cold. They're gathered maybe around a fire, maybe making plans for tomorrow. They're talking about family, probably talking a little politics as guys tend to do. After all, this Roman census had been the cause of a, a lot of strangers to come into town. And all of a sudden, an angel of the Lord appeared to them. This is shocking. The Greek indicates that the angel stood by them, right next to

them. The Greek scholar A. T. Robertson says, “the angel stepped by their side.” That’s how he puts it. Now, keep in mind the shepherds are here keeping watch, they’re looking out for threats whether they be animals or bandits or something like that, and suddenly, there’s an intruder not only in the camp, but right next to them; standing right there. That had to arouse the adrenaline.

But before the realization of the angel’s presence can settle in, they’re engulfed in blazing light. Their pupils are opened to let as much light in as possible, and that means as the glory of God surrounds them, their retinas are seared by this blinding light. No wonder they’re filled with great fear, obviously. Not only were they startled by the sudden appearance of a stranger in the camp and right next to them, by the way; not only are they blinded in his presence by this light, now they’re terrified as the spotlight of divine glory shines with brilliant, searching light on their quiet, peaceful night, putting an end to that by the divine presence.

Contrary to popular opinion, contrary to all the contemporary myths about how warm and comforting it is to be in the presence of God, you can see here and from other passages of Scripture, this is an absolutely unsettling experience. The text says they were filled with great fear, literally, “They feared a great fear.” That’s the literal translation. They were terrified. This is absolutely traumatic for them. At this moment, it was something that they hoped would end, not something that they were eager to repeat or continue for a long period of time. Somebody turn off the light!

This is the third of three angelic appearances in the infancy narratives. It follows a similar pattern as the previous two. The first one was when Gabriel appears to Zechariah in Luke 1:8 to 23. Then to Mary in Luke 1:26 to 38. There’s a sudden angelic manifestation that causes fear. And then Gabriel commands both of them, Zechariah and Mary, he says, “Don’t fear, I come in peace.” And then he makes his announcement; then he gives a sign. It’s repetition of that same pattern here, which leads a number of commentators to believe that this unnamed angel of the Lord is Gabriel. Back in Luke 1:11, the angel is called, an angel of the Lord, there as well. But then in verse

19, he gives his name. It's Gabriel. We understand that. So, it may well be Gabriel who visited the shepherds here in Luke 2:9, as well. But there are a number of significant differences between those visits and this one, which makes us wonder if this angel of the Lord, wonder if it's not someone else.

Whether or not we can arrive at a precise identity of the angel, that's really beside the point. What we're meant to see here are all the marks of personal involvement from God himself as he visits. Notice that unlike Gabriel's first two appearances, this angel arrived surrounded by the glory of the Lord. Surrounded, this is none other than the Shekinah glory of the Lord, glory of God. It's the same glory that covered Mount Sinai in devouring fire. It's the same glory that filled the tabernacle in Exodus Chapter 40. This Shekinah glory was the visible manifestation of God's essence. It was his character. And the light represented his holiness, his righteousness, his purity, his truth. It's that same glory that filled the temple that Solomon built, as a house for the ark of the covenant, which was the symbolic presence of God. It was the same Shekinah glory that appeared to Ezekiel when he prophesied in Babylon. You see that in Ezekiel Chapter 1; amazing, amazing sight that defies

description. This is the glory, by the way, in Ezekiel's prophesy that had departed from the Jerusalem temple because of Israel's sin. The glory had not returned to the land of Israel ever since it departed during the days of Israel's divided kingdom when all its leaders, all its shepherds were utterly corrupt. God had written 'î-kābôd all over the nation. 'î-kābôd is a term, kābôd is the Hebrew word, glory. And it kinda has the, conveys the idea of weightiness, gravity, the, 'î-, in front of that kābôd has the effect of negativizing that word, so no glory. God had written, no glory, across the nation of Israel as he removed the manifestation of his glory and his light.

The glory had departed, and it had not returned until this moment, until right here, now. To these humble shepherds, the glory of the Lord has appeared again. God returned. So, God's direct involvement, that's what we're meant to see here. That's what we need to focus on. His involvement is further confirmed in verse 13, where we read, "Suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising," whom? "God." The focus is on him again. Then after the host receded bac into heaven, verse 15 says the shepherds were talking to one another and they said, Hey, let's go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that

happened, "which the Lord has made known to us." Notice it's not what the angel has made known, but "what the Lord has made known to us." Mary, when she talked about Gabriel's visit, she made a distinction between Gabriel and the Lord in Luke 1:38. She said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." She distinguished between Gabriel, who had visited her from the Lord who had sent him, but these shepherds, they don't do that. They've understood this whole experience is an encounter with God himself.

So what if this is Gabriel, which it may be? He's incidental to them in their own mind. I don't want to be too dogmatic here, but there is no rationale in the Greek grammar here for making a distinction between this angel of the Lord and the same angel of the Lord who appeared in the Old Testament. The angel of the Lord who appeared in the Old Testament was called *the* angel of the Lord, a definite article. Those were theophanies, those are the visible manifestation of God himself. And in many cases, they were christophanies, like a pre-incarnate appearance of the second person of the Trinity. So this angel of the Lord, while it may be Gabriel; it's possible, this is a manifestation of God himself visiting, standing by. As I said earlier, the dramatic

visitation doesn't focus on the identity of the angel, though. It's the bright glory of the Lord that dominates this scene that totally floods out and eclipses everything else. It's the presence of God himself that heightens the significance of the words that are about to be spoken.

The scene was set for us earlier when Luke recorded Zechariah's prophecy, Chapter 1 verses 78 to 79, which said, "The sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death." And what's pictured here when the glory of the Lord shines around these shepherds is the trauma of God's holiness. Just as physical light hitting our retinas in full force on a dark night would cause searing, blinding pain, divine truth hitting our minds, our consciences, our lives, it can cause the very same kind of trauma. Isaiah 6:5, Isaiah said this, "Woe is me!" when he saw the glory of the Lord in the temple. "Woe is me, for I am undone; I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell among a people of unclean lips, for my eyes have seen the king, the Lord of hosts." The blazing light of God's holy truth, it can burn at first exposure, cause turmoil.

It can bring difficulty, but that's at first exposure. As our eyes become adjusted to the light, we learn to see again. For our mortal flesh, holiness hurts until God heals us. Isaiah continues describing the scene in verse 6. It says, "Then one of the seraphim." Seraphim is a word that means, literally, burning one. One of the burning ones "flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth and said: 'Behold, this has touched your lips,'" and, "your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.'" Can you imagine? A searing pain coming from a burning coal that is so hot that a seraphim, a bright burning one, has to take with tongs from the altar, it's so hot, even he doesn't hold it. He touches one of the most sensitive parts of the body, the lips, filled with nerves that are designed by God to experience and detect sensations of hot and cold and pull away from things that are hot. This seraph, burning one, touches the burning coal to the lips. That, beloved, is the pain of atonement. That is the pain of holiness. And as our eyes become adjusted to the light of holiness, we also become accustomed to the burning fire of holiness. We don't want to flee, for all of us who've been drawn near, by God, we don't want to flee anymore, we want to draw near. And that's why when Isaiah heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? Whom will go for us?" What was his



response? “Here am I! Send me!” God was gracious in providing atonement for Israel’s sin, for Isaiah’s sin personally, making him a fit vessel to become his prophet. Folks, that is grace. That’s as significant as what we’re seeing right here as well.

This is very, very significant. Our God is both holy and transcendent. At the same time, he’s merciful and immanent. Though he’s high above us, he draws near to us. We couldn’t reach him; he has to come to us. And here, the transcendent God has drawn near to visit these common shepherds, he involves himself personally with them. He draws near to make this first Gospel announcement. And what we’re seeing here is God as the first evangelist. These shepherds, they’ve been blinded by the light of God’s glory. They’re fully awake now, though. And they’re ready to hear God’s Gospel.