

Carol Service 1 - Hope that Lasts

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[0 : 00] We read from the Gospel of Luke.

The Gospel of St. Luke in chapter 2. Page 1027 in your Bibles. 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 their 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. And while they were there, the time came for the baby to be born.

[1 : 22] And she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

Now 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 on them, and they were terrified.

But the angel said to them, Don't be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today, in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you.

He is the Messiah, the Lord. And this will be a sign to you. You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.

And suddenly, a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.

[2 : 42] 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 a manger. And when they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them 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 that they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

Thanks be to God. Welcome to you. Thanks, Greg and the band, Martha and Amy, for leading.

[3 : 51] What a joy to be able to celebrate Christmas in a normal fashion, unlike last year, sadly. But before we begin, let me pray for us.

God, our Father, we come to you tonight, and we thank you for this opportunity to hear from you. We thank you for your word given to us.

Won't you speak to us tonight, that we might see the glory of your Son, Jesus, born in Bethlehem 2,000 years ago.

Amen. Well, one of the great traditions of Christmas and things that we look forward to in Christmas is Christmas adverts.

And I've gone out a bit of a limb here. Here's one from a little while ago. You might not recognize it. But there it is. Ingle L's, Ingle L's. What are the holidays without J and B?

[4 : 48] J and B's a whiskey, and it's playing off. The famous song that's sometimes sung at the holidays, Jingle Bells, Jingle Bells.

And you can see what they're getting at. If you drop out the J and B, very ordinary letters, you lose all the meaning and joy and festivity that's found in that song.

And Christmas is a great time of year. We look forward to hanging out with friends and family, going to carols, giving and receiving presents and gifts.

But at Christmas, we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. And so at Christmas, it's very easy for us to experience Christmas, to do all the things of Christmas, but to entirely miss the meaning and significance of the birth of Jesus, and all the tinsel, and all the wonder, and all the joy, and all the busyness of the season.

We might approach Christmas very much like the man in America who bought a picture at a flea market. It cost them the princely sum of \$4. He put it on his wall, and there it sat.

[6 : 00] And he'd go every day, and he'd walk past it, and make a cup of tea, and he'd watch TV, and he'd do all sorts of things. And then one day, he thought he might change the picture in the frame. He liked the frame, but not the picture.

And when he did, he discovered a priceless treasure inside the frame. An original copy of the Declaration of American Independence, signed by all the original founding fathers of America. And there it was, hanging on his wall, and he had no knowledge that it was there. He walked past it all the time. He gave it no thought as to its significance.

And so, very briefly, what we're going to do tonight is we're going to consider the significance of Jesus' birth, in the words of the angel songs, the song that we see in our reading, that Luke reading that we heard earlier.

And if you've got a pamphlet, you can open it up there, and it should be in there. And we're going to look at the words in the middle of it. We're going to try to stick to the middle, verses 8 to 14 there. So do look at that there.

[7 : 05] And I've got three Ps for my points that will help us navigate our way through the passage. Well, at very least, give us some hope that we're coming to the end of the talk.

And the first P is, wait for it, pedestrian. And what I mean is, it's a reference to the very pedestrian and boring nature of the scene.

And this P perhaps refers to how it's easy to miss the significance of Jesus' birth. I wonder if you noticed there. So pedestrian, I mean, it's very unassuming.

It's a very ordinary scene. It's not flashy. There's nothing exciting in the characters in the scene. It plods along.

And so we see Jesus' birth is historical. We get that reference to Caesar Augustus and Aquarius in verses 1 and 2. But it's also very ordinary.

[8 : 03] So just notice there's no kings or important people surrounding Jesus' birth that the angels speak to, but simply ordinary shepherds in verse 8.

Look where they're living. They're living in a field out in the open, not in a palace under the stars. The dew would have rested on them at night.

And look what's around the shepherds. Sheep. Bah. Bah. Bah. It's like Clarkson's farm. Very ordinary. Very boring.

And just look at the sign that the shepherds are given there. It's not a massive, spectacular, flashy sign. Go look at a baby in a manger. It's incredibly dull and boring.

Babies are fantastic, but they don't do much. They aren't particularly exciting. And then notice where it's lying. It's lying in a manger, literally an animal's feed trough, a feed basket that you'd put hay in for animals.

[9 : 07] And so it's a very boring, unassuming, pedestrian scene. And Bethlehem at this time was perhaps very busy. It was time of the census.

Hundreds, tens, thousands of people might have entered the town and walked past the stable and walked past the feed trough where that baby was lying and paid no attention to the significance of the baby there.

Some of us tonight, we might approach Christmas and we might look at all the nativity scenes and we might see all the things that are going on and all the carols and all this talk of babies and festivities and entirely miss the significance.

We might be put off by all the domestication of it and the ordinariness of what it looks like. We might want God to speak to us if we were to hear from God in a big, exciting way.

And that's the way that we'll hear from God, in a dramatic way. Then we know that God's speaking to us. But not through a very ordinary scene of a baby in a manger.

[10 : 17] But the significance of this baby is anything but ordinary. And we see that in the appearance of the angels in verses 9. So verse 9, just look down at your sheet there.

An angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them and they were terrified. By angel here, we don't mean a fluffy little baby sitting on a cloud in the sky playing a harp. We simply mean someone who brings a message from God, a messenger of God. And the message that the angel delivers is of a God-given promise fulfilled in the birth of this baby, fulfilled in the birth of Jesus.

And that's our second P there, if you're watching out for those. P for promise. And the promise there is really summed up in those three titles that are given to the baby in verse 11 there.

We read that he's a savior. In the town of David, a savior. And then we read that he is the Messiah. And then finally we read that he is the Lord.

[11:21] So very briefly, the baby is the Messiah. And that is, he is the long for, awaited king forever over God's people that God would send to rule and reign forever and ever.

And we see this kingship in the town that the baby's born in. So just look down at verse 11 again. In the town of David, and then if you'll forgive me for straying slightly out our passage, just glance back at verse 4.

And so Joseph also went up to Bethlehem, the town of David, because he belonged to the house of David. And that's a reference to the Old Testament promise, that God would send a king in the line of David.

And David was the greatest of the Old Testament kings over God's people. And that this king would rule forever and ever over all creation and over all God's people.

And that he would reign forever. Messiah there, also Greek in a different language, simply means, also Christ in a different language, simply means anointed.

[12:32] And so when someone is anointed, they are enthroned, they are proclaimed a king or a queen. So a little while back, Queen Elizabeth II, when she started out as Queen of Great Britain, at her coronation, the Archbishop of Canterbury took the ampulla, and that's the gold eagle.

It looks slightly like that. We should have a picture of it. And the spoon, and it's filled with oil and the flask. And the Archbishop pours some of the oil out this flask. Oil of orange, of roses, of cinnamon, of musk, of ambergris.

And he would have anointed the queen. And as he did so, he would have whispered these words. By thy head anointed with holy oil, as kings, priests, and prophets were anointed.

And as Solomon was anointed, by King Zadok the priest, and Nathan the prophet, so you be anointed, blessed and consecrated, queen over the peoples, whom the Lord thy God hath given thee to rule and govern.

And this baby, in this manger, very unassuming, has been anointed king forever over God's people. And we see the title, Lord.

[13:48] And that's simply a reference there to him being God in the flesh. He is God. He's a baby. But he is God of the universe, lying in an animal's feed trough.

And we get a taste of his kingdom and his authority in this passage. So look at verse 9 there. The glory of the Lord shone around. It's glorious. The shepherds are terrified.

And then verse 13. A great company of a heavenly host appeared with the angel. It's literally armies of heaven coming down, row upon row, battalion upon battalion.

And they're singing to this baby, glory to God in the highest. The scene would have been absolutely unimaginable. What would it have been like to be there?

What kind of baby was this that commanded this reverence and all? Well, having considered the first two titles, we're going to just consider the third, that of Savior.

[14:52] And this comes under our third P. And this is our final P. So to give you hope there. And that is Jesus comes as Savior and he leads us to peace.

He gives us peace. He's a Savior who brings peace. And in this majestic scene, we get an even greater proclamation. So verse 13 continues.

And on earth, peace to those on whom his favor rests. And so the pedestrian scene becomes a majestic scene with a heavenly army singing not a war song, but a declaration of peace.

On earth, peace. And you might remember those pictures from the end of World War II. And the peace here is not a childlike, empty wish for world peace or maybe the kind of thing that a parody beauty pageant would wish for.

I wish for world peace that you might see in the movies. It's not that kind of picture of world peace. No, the picture here is of heaven's armies that were preparing for war against God's enemies.

[16:02] Sinful people. People who had rejected God, who had said no to God. Shove off God. I am in charge. No to your rule. Who chose to live lives their own way.

Who mucked up his creation and everything good. Who hurt one another in their thoughts and words and deeds. People who do things wrong and sad in God's heart.

People who are very much like you and me. And it's a picture of those armies at war with those people standing down and singing a song of peace.

Declaring peace. And it's a celebration of peace between God and man that God bestows on those on whom his favor rests. And how is this? And the reason for this peace is the birth and the coming of Jesus Christ as a baby.

Well how is this peace between God and man brought about? Well we need to leave the festivities of Christmas and look ahead three months to Easter and to the cross where the grown up Jesus the Messiah God's king forever the Lord dies an innocent death for people's sins.

[17:18] Their hurtful actions their harm horrible their attitudes towards God and in doing so he saves them from God's punishment. In doing so he brings peace between God and man.

On the New Testament letter Romans chapter 4 the author puts it that God shows his favor on men that through Jesus' death God calls the ungodly right.

He calls people who have said no to God right. And what he says there literally is God justifies. He calls them right people who were ungodly who had said no to God through Jesus' death on the cross.

And God announces peace and end to hostilities. Well how should we respond to all this news of great joy of great joy.

well I don't think we can do any better than the shepherds in our story so if you'll forgive me and look slightly further down the sheet you might be here tonight as someone who all of this is quite new.

[18:30] You enjoy all the festivities and fun of Christmas but before tonight the significance of Christmas has never struck you before and that's not something to be embarrassed or ashamed about.

Everyone here tonight who accepts Jesus as their king was once exactly like you. Now I wonder if you might just look down at the shepherds at verse 15 and so the shepherds they said to one another look what they do let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened.

There's lots of ways that we might go and see we might come to another Christmas services we might speak to a friend about it we might open one of the gospels with them we might pray to God that he would show to us his son to us but I want to flag up one way in particular and that is in the new year we're running a life course and you'll get a fly about that later and the life course is simply an opportunity to investigate the promises and claims that we've heard about Jesus tonight and what it is it's a meal and it runs once a week for four weeks and you can ask all the questions you want and find out more and if you'd like to do that please speak to myself or Martin or Amy or someone else after the service and email the church office we'd love to chat to you more about that maybe you're here tonight as someone who's already accepted that Jesus is this king forever and I wonder if you might look at how the shepherds go on to respond in verse 17 when they had seen him they spread the word concerning what they'd been told about this child and then verse 20 the shepherds returned glorifying and praising

God for all that they had heard and seen this is amazing news it's something really to celebrate to be excited about it's the real reason for Christmas so let's pray close in a word of prayer and then I'll hand back to the band I believe loving heavenly father you chose to reveal your glory and the message of your coming king through angels through a song to shepherds as they watch their flocks by night please won't you reveal your glory and the truth of this message to all who have heard tonight please help us not to miss the significance of this please may our hearts be like those of the shepherds who having heard and seen rejoiced glorifying praising God forever amen great