

Watchnight 2022

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[0 : 0 0] movie together. And as we were doing so, we watched the trailer, just the trailer, mind you, of It's a Wonderful Life. And it wasn't long before our four-year-old son objected.

Where have all the colors gone, was his genuine concern. Why has it all gone gray? Well, in the middle of the night, some 2,000 years ago, the shepherds keeping their watch over their flocks that night couldn't have made that particular objection as the night dazzled in the sky with a display that must have put the northern lights to pale in comparison with the glory of the Lord shining all around them. And then into the night sky, the Lord God speaks to these shepherds via an angel. What an amazing scene we have outside Bethlehem.

But that wasn't the most amazing thing that was going on in Bethlehem that night. So let's ask the same God as we come to ponder afresh the birth of Jesus. Let's ask the same God for help. Let's pray to God. Father in heaven, please speak to us this night. Address us even as you addressed the shepherds some 2,000 years ago. Help us to hear what you have to say to us tonight. And we pray that by the Holy Spirit, you would bring the story to life and cause in us great joy as we listen and respond to the message of our dear Savior's birth. For we ask this in the name given him even before he was conceived. The precious name of Jesus. Amen.

Well, it is a familiar story to most of us here, I would guess, a Christmas story that we rehearse year after year. And it was in many ways the most humble and frankly unpromising start for our Savior.

A baby born to a very ordinary couple, Mary and Joseph, miles away from their home. And since there was less chance of getting an Airbnb in Bethlehem during the days of the census than there was in Glasgow during COP26, then they were miles away from home and with a manger for a bed for their baby.

[2 : 3 7] An inauspicious start, perhaps. But this is the single most important birth of all time. The central event, according to C.S. Lewis, the central event in the history of the earth. And at the core of the story that we've just had read for us by Michael, at the core of this story is a message from God that an angel proclaimed to the shepherds. So just read with me again from verse 10.

Do not be afraid, the angel said to them. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all people. Today in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you. He is the Messiah, the Lord.

And so it's a simple message. It's a short message of good news, but it's a message of profound importance and significance to each of us here this evening. And really it's the message of the whole Bible in miniature, the message of the Bible in a nutshell. It's the message about the saving grace of God through the person of Jesus Christ. And this message that was first given to the shepherds by an angelic messenger of the Lord can be summed up like this. It's a message that's here. It's a message that's now. It's a message that's for us. And it's a message about a Savior. It's a message that's here.

It's now. It's for us. And it's about a Savior. And so it's good news, firstly, right here in front of them, under the shepherds' noses, practically. The baby is born in Bethlehem, the town of David, just beneath their grazing flocks. They can't miss him. He's in a manger. And the significance of this is twofold. Both Bethlehem and manger are referred to three times each in the passage. That Jesus was born in a manger, an animal feeding trough, is both a striking mark of his humility and also, verse 12, a sign to the shepherds that they'll know it's him when they get there. Bethlehem, on the other hand, was the town of David, the anointed king of Israel, a former shepherd himself, of course, a shepherd of sheep turned shepherd of God's people. The significance of it being Bethlehem is bound up in the centuries-old prophecy from Micah that the promised Messiah would come from that town.

And out of you, O Bethlehem, will come one who will be ruler over Israel. And so in verse 4, Joseph makes the journey from Nazareth up in the north to Bethlehem. And he makes the bold, if slightly risky decision, in my opinion, to bring his heavily pregnant, betrothed Mary with him.

[6 : 04] And I wouldn't have liked to have made that call, especially when it turned out that there'd be nowhere to stay when Mary was to give birth. And no matter how gracious, undoubtedly, Mary was, one suspects that Joseph might not have been the flavor of the month just at that moment when he discovered that there was nowhere to stay. But isn't it remarkable that the only reason, humanly speaking, the only reason, humanly speaking, that God's chosen king is born in Bethlehem at all is because of the imperial decree across the Mediterranean of Caesar Augustus.

And unbeknownst to him, unbeknownst to Caesar, the Roman emperor was being used as a pawn in God's providence to bring Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem, fulfilling God's promise in doing so. The Lord God himself shepherding his sheep to fulfill his sovereign will. So this is good news that's right here before them, even as it's good news right here before us in the pages of Scripture.

But secondly, it's also good news that's right now. This is good news, verse 11, that is, today unto us is born a child this day. This isn't something for the shepherds to go away and think about and come back later sort of thing. There's an urgency to it. And when the Lord addresses you and calls you like that, you go. And there really is no time like the present. Now is the time, wrote the apostle Paul to the church in Corinth. Behold, now is the day of salvation.

And what if you hear the Lord calling you to come and see Jesus? Well, you don't delay. The shepherds didn't delay. Just look down at verse 15 again. As soon as the angels returned to heaven, the shepherds said to one another, let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that's happened.

And notice also that the timing belongs to the Lord. Caesar decreed a census around the time when Quirinius was governor, but God decreed from eternity that Caesar should decree the census in the first place. God decreed that this would be the day that the Messiah was born.

[8 : 55] So it's a message that's here and it's a message that's now. Thirdly, it's a personal message that's for you, for each of you here and for the shepherds personally in Bethlehem back then. And announcing the birth of Jesus, the angel didn't appear to Caesar Augustus, didn't appear to Quirinius, didn't appear to Herod or the high priest of the temple or anybody like that, but to shepherds. Ordinary guys going about their ordinary business. And in verse 10, the angel says, I bring you, I bring you shepherds, good news. In verse 11, unto you a child is born. But this personal message to the shepherds isn't restricted to the shepherds, but extends to all people. It is good news, verse 10, that will cause great joy for all the people if only we would make room for Jesus in our hearts. And then in verse 14, when the chorus of angels come to the fore, it's no longer just one, but numerous angels, the whole host of heaven joins together in praise. What a picture as heaven erupts into view.

I suppose the announcement of birth varies from culture to culture. It used to be that you'd make an announcement in a newspaper, perhaps in the Glasgow Herald or the Scotsman or something like that, if a baby was to be announced. And now it's, if it's done at all, it's done on social media.

Well, my wife was born in Latvia some few years before the fall of the Soviet Union. And in those days, as I understand it, the father didn't attend the birth. It wasn't common practice for the father to attend the birth. And I think, in fact, they perhaps weren't even allowed. And I guess the dads were deemed to be more of a hindrance than anything else back then. So when a mother went into labor, that was the cue for the father to go and meet up with his mates and toast the arrival of their newborn.

Well, it was following such a soiree as that that Alice's dad went to the grounds of the hospital to see for himself his newborn child. And Alice was duly held up to the window at the hospital so that her dad could catch sight of her from down below. But her dark hair was not blonde like his, and as he'd been expecting.

Whose child is that? He shouted up. Jokingly, I should add. But in Bethlehem, there could be no case of mistaken identity.

[11 : 48] A congregation of heavenly angels are testifying to just that. And the message of Jesus' birth is amplified, as it were, by the heavenly host in their multitudes.

And there's two aspects here in verse 14 that I want us to pay attention to. The outcome of the good news is glory to God in the highest heaven.

That's the vertical dimension. But the other aspect is that there's peace on earth, those on whom God's favor rests.

In other words, even though God's offer of peace and reconciliation is offered to all, it's only God's chosen people who'll experience it, those on whom God's favor rests.

So if we want to experience this great joy, if we want to be assured of God's favor upon us, then what must we do? Well, we must only have empty, outstretched hands to receive and accept his gracious offer by putting our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

[13 : 06] For it is a message, fourthly, about a savior. And it's a savior unlike any other. We're well used to, in this narcissistic age, to power-hungry politicians and fame-hungry reality TV stars and influencers and people like that.

Well, Caesar Augustus would have given any of them a run for their money. Born Gaius Octavius, Caesar Augustus was his rather self-aggrandizing title, meaning the August One or the Distinguished Emperor.

Apparently, the Roman propaganda machine described them variously as divine, son of a God, savior of the whole world, and Lord.

And if that's the case, in verse 11 of our passage is one angelic slapdown aimed at Caesar, proclaiming from heaven the good news about the real savior, who is the Messiah, who is the Lord.

News then about the long-promised Messiah, the chosen one. King Jesus is the long-promised descendant of King David.

[14 : 27] And you'll have noticed that the Davidic line is emphasized earlier in the passage in the description of Joseph. And so he is the savior because he has come to save the world, to reconcile sinful sinners like us to our holy God.

And the promise of such a savior has been given as far back as the Garden of Eden, when God's response to man's sin included a prophecy that amongst Adam and Eve's offspring, there would be one that would defeat the power of evil and Satan's tyrannical grip on the world.

And so just later on in Luke's gospel, and it's no coincidence that the family tree, Jesus' genealogy goes all the way back to Adam.

And this savior is enabled to save the world, for he is also the Lord. A title that alludes to Jesus' deity as the son of the Most High.

So there we have it, the Christmas message in a nutshell about a savior who is for us here tonight, every bit as much as he was then for the shepherds.

[15 : 43] And so as we close this Christmas Eve, how are we to respond to this joyous message? Well, the shepherds show us how.

First, they go and see Jesus for themselves. And perhaps for one or two of you here this evening, maybe that's all you need to hear.

You've heard the message about Jesus. Now go and see for yourself. Examine the evidence. Read one of the gospel accounts of Jesus' life and death and resurrection.

Come back to our Sunday services at St. Silas. Consider coming along to our life course that we're running in January. But secondly, they become the first evangelists.

Once they realize the amazing truth of the gospel, they can't help but tell all those around them about Jesus. And the gospel news spreads like wildfire.

[16 : 45] And then most importantly, the shepherds turn to praise. Verse 20. Glorifying and praising God for all the things that they'd heard and seen.

And so that's exactly what we're going to be doing now as we continue with our service, as we continue with our sung praise. We're going to be glorifying and praising God for all the things that we've heard and seen.

Amen. Amen.