

THE Christmas Carol

Christmas Eve – Color: White – December 24, 2004
Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passage

Luke 2:1-20 (NRSV)

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered.² This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria.³ All went to their own towns to be registered.⁴ Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David.⁵ He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child.⁶ While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child.⁷ And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

⁸ In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.⁹ Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.¹⁰ But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people:¹¹ to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.¹² This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.”¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest heaven,

and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.”¹⁶ So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger.¹⁷ When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child;¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.¹⁹ But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

In the last four weeks, we looked at the story of Advent through the words of Scripture and the story-telling of Charles Dickens. In *A Christmas Carol*, we heard the Christian themes of repentance, rebirth, and healing. Christ is present in Dickens' story, though unnamed. Today, we turn to *THE Christmas Carol* and the birth of Jesus, who is named Savior, Messiah, and Lord.

A commonplace birth?

And so the young couple, a carpenter and his pregnant fiancé, made their way southward from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem, a small village five miles from Jerusalem. There would be no welcoming delegation, no trumpets, no parades. Instead they would try to get comfortable in a room where animals were sometimes kept. There, Mary, probably only thirteen or so, would give birth. Nothing was out of the ordinary. Mary would have done what all ancient Palestinian mothers did. She would have cut the umbilical cord, tied it off, and tightly wrapped the newborn in strips of cloth to keep him warm and to help him grow straight. Later, Mary would be visited by some shepherds bearing a most fantastical tale.

No Room at the Inn

When I was young, I pictured Joseph and Mary getting turned away from hotel after hotel until finally they collapsed of fatigue in someone's barn. But this is not the case.

Bethlehem was a tiny place at the time of Jesus' birth, probably too small to have any sort of public inn. Nor did the young couple probably have to find a cave to stay in. Most likely, they were taken in by one of the peasant families in Bethlehem, for all Jews were expected to take in travelers.

Most peasant homes consisted of a single large room, often with the sleeping quarters on a raised platform so that animals (the most important possessions) could be brought into house. Mary and Joseph probably had to make do with the animals' area, hence the presence of the manger (a feeding trough). Note, Luke never mentions the presence of animals though that may be simply because they were commonplace.

In those days, shepherds were only a step above slaves on the social ladder. Yet, they told Mary and her husband that angels had sent them to find a newborn in a feeding trough. But the angels also told the shepherds something much more remarkable. The astonished shepherds told Mary that the angels had been the LORD God's messengers, bearing the Good News, that at long last Israel's Savior and Messiah, the Lord, had been born – and this Lord was Mary's baby.

Pax Romana or Pax Christi?

Preachers will often use Luke's story of Jesus' birth to contrast the humbleness of his birth, this King of Kings, with the priorities and assumptions of our world. For example, everyone in Luke's story is poor and powerless. There are no wise men or expensive gifts, only peasants and shepherds. The important and influential of ancient Palestine are absent. All this is in keeping with Luke's larger portrait of Jesus, for Luke has more to say about the dangers of wealth than do any of the other Gospel writers. Yet, I wonder if we really get it, if we really grasp the gauntlet that is thrown down at the feet of the powerful by the birth of Jesus.¹

Jesus was born in about 6BC.² For more than two decades, Augustus, the adopted son of Julius Caesar, had ruled the empire he created. In the eastern end of the empire, he was even beginning

to be worshipped as a god. Under Augustus, the empire enjoyed the *Pax Romana*.³ To end one hundred years of civil war, Romans had grabbed onto the peace offered by Augustus. But the peace was enforced by the brutal dictatorship of Augustus, his representatives, and his legions.⁴ So far as the Romans were concerned, there could be only one Lord, and that was Augustus!

But God's herald angels brought news of a very different peace: Glory to God! Peace on earth! This would not be a peace brought with the edge of a sword but with the birth of a child. The infant lying in the animals' manger is Savior, Messiah, and Lord. The peace the angels proclaim, the *Pax Christi*, is more than a feeling of rest. It is more than goodwill with our neighbors. This peace is the long-awaited salvation that has now come to earth. This peace, this *shalom*, is the wholeness and well-being of restored persons and a renewed creation. The *Pax Christi* could not coexist with the *Pax Romana* then and it cannot now. The world cannot be divided up into that which is God's and that which is Caesar's. Jesus' challenge to the earthly powers is as direct now than it was then. After all, what is not God's?! There is and can be only one Lord.

Today, you and I can visit the ruins of ancient Rome. Even there, it is hard to imagine the splendor of Caesar's Rome. But Jesus lives! His followers are counted in the billions. And to all those who believe that the world's glory is found in prestige, power, and money, the truth of this world lies in the manger.

¹The phrase *throwing down a gauntlet* refers to the medieval practice of one knight tossing his glove at the feet of another to signal a challenge to combat.

²The makers of the calendar we use miscalculated the year of Jesus' birth. We know that Herod the Great died in 4BC. Since he ordered the killing of all Bethlehem children younger than two in an attempt to kill Jesus, than Jesus must have been born prior to 4BC.

³In Rome, there was an altar to *pax Augusta*, the peace of Augustus.

⁴For example, when Jesus was about ten or so, the Romans executed thousands of Galilean Jews to put down a revolt. One can only imagine the effect such brutality had upon the young Galilean boy.

Savior, Messiah, and Lord

God's angels announce Jesus' birth using three titles for the infant (v. 11).

Savior – God had once saved Israel from slavery in Egypt and the Jews waited fervently for a savior who would deliver them from the hated Romans. The Advent carol, "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" captures well this cry for freedom, for salvation. Luke's Gospel is written so that we understand that Jesus is not only the Savior of Israel, but of the entire world.

Messiah – This title is simply the English form of the Hebrew *mashia*, meaning "anointed one." Kings and prophets of Israel were anointed. The people awaited the arrival of an "anointed one" from King David's family who would usher in God's kingdom. *Christos*, from which we get "Christ," is simply the Greek word for "anointed one."

Lord – Earlier in his Gospel, Luke prepared us for "Savior" and "Messiah," but not for "Lord." God is the Lord! Jews used "Lord" as a substitute for God's name whenever they read Scripture. What could it mean to apply this title to Jesus? Peter makes this clear at Pentecost. We are to call upon Jesus as Lord for salvation from sin and death (Acts 2:14-41).

Daily Bible Readings

(Luke's entire story of Jesus' and John the Baptist's births)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Day 1 Luke 1:5-25 The announcement of the birth of John the Baptist	Day 2 Luke 1:26-38 The announcement of the birth of Jesus
Day 3 Luke 1:39-56 Mary's visit with Elizabeth	Day 4 Luke 1:57 – 2:20 The births of John and Jesus
Day 5 Luke 2:21-40 The presentation of Jesus in the temple	Weekly Prayer Concerns

Sermon Notes

Beginning January 9 – A New Five-Week Teaching Series at 9:30 with Scott Engle in Wesley Hall

Biblical Perspectives on Love, Marriage, and Sex

Beginning in January, St. Andrew is going to offer teaching series with Scott Engle at 9:30 on Sunday mornings in Wesley Hall. These teaching series will be keyed to upcoming sermon series.

Future teaching series will look at *The Seven Last Words of Christ*, *The Apostles' Creed*, *What Methodists Believe*, and more *Kids' Stories All Grown Up!*

Information on classes and registration for the winter Bible Academy session is now available online at www.standrewccl.org

Classes will begin the week of Sunday, January 9. Classes include: *The Balanced Life* (Sunday afternoon); *The Gospel of Luke: Jesus – Savior of the World* (Monday morning & Tuesday evening); *Meeting Jesus: His life and times* (Monday evening); *Beginnings* (Monday evening); *Why me, Lord? – The Book of Job: A study of faith and hope* (Wednesday lunch); *The Letter to the Hebrews: The final sacrifice* (Thursday morning); and *The Gospel of John* (Thursday lunch).

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. There is scandal in the Christmas story. God came to earth as a helpless baby, born in the poorest of circumstances to two inconsequential parents, in a place that could have hardly mattered less in the Roman Empire. Is it really so hard to understand why so many people don't believe this happened? But the Christmas story is no fairy tale. By entering history in this way, God clearly identified himself with the poor, oppressed, marginal, ordinary, and powerless. At St. Andrew, most of us are neither poor nor oppressed nor powerless. How can we go about finding the humility to meet our humble Lord?
2. In Luke's narrative, one can't help being struck by the ordinary sorts of people chosen by God to play most extraordinary roles in human history. Are we prepared for the extraordinary work God wants to do in our lives? Are we prepared to hear God when he asks us to undertake something extraordinary, or seemingly impossible, in the furtherance of his kingdom?
3. Angels figure prominently in the birth stories of John and Jesus. The word "angel" is from the Greek word *aggelos*, "messenger." In the Bible, angels are God's creatures, though not human. Some have chosen for God, such as the herald angels at Jesus' birth, and some have chosen against God, such as Satan. Do you believe in angels? Good angels and evil angels? What role do you think angels play in your life?