

THE SCOPE OF THE STORY

SERIES: UNTO US

By Danny Hall

When I was a boy, from time to time my parents would take my brother and me to downtown Atlanta on Thanksgiving evening for an event called the Lighting of the Great Tree. A huge department store called Rich's occupied two buildings on either side of Forsythe Street. They were each five or six stories tall, and there was a bridge of walkways between four of the floors. On top of the bridge they put a gigantic Christmas tree, which was more or less the official Christmas tree of Atlanta. As a small boy I thought it seemed bigger than any tree could be. On Thanksgiving evening they would station a different musical group or soloist on each walkway level. They would light the first walkway, and the group on that level would sing a few songs, and there might be a reading or two. Then they would go up to the next level, and then the next level. Finally on the top level, right underneath the tree, was usually the Robert Shaw Chorale, which was the most famous choir in Atlanta in that day, and they would sing wonderful Christmas songs, and the lights would build up. Then for the climax of the evening, they would always have a soprano from the local opera company sing *O Holy Night!* (1) Just when she got to that really high note on the final chorus, somebody would throw the switch, and the gigantic tree would light up. The throng of perhaps a hundred thousand people down on Forsythe Street would start cheering. I was usually sitting on my father's shoulders so I could see over the crowd, and I was filled with wonder and awe at the

pageantry, the beauty, the greatness of this huge tree, and the celebration of all these people together.

What I love about childhood memories like that is that sense of wonder and amazement at things that were glorious and grand. It's one of the things I think I miss the most as an adult. So many times we adults lose the ability to marvel at things that are truly magnificent. We get jaded, we see too much of life, we experience ups and downs and hardships. So we miss something of the mystery and grandeur of life, and even the majesty of God.

As beautiful and amazing as that event was to me as a small boy, imagine what it might have been like to be one of the shepherds on the Judean hillside when angels came to announce the birth of Jesus two thousand years ago. In Luke's telling of the Christmas story, we've been tracing the announcement of Jesus' birth as it was made to key players. Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, was visited by an angel who told him that his wife in her advanced age and barrenness would conceive a child, who would be the forerunner of God's promised Messiah (Discovery Paper 5221). Then an angel came to Mary and told her, "You are going to be the mother of the Son of God" (Discovery Paper 5222). Luke uses these angelic announcements to show us the expanding scope of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Zechariah was a faithful priest and Mary was a pure-hearted and innocent teenage girl. Now the final angelic announcement in Luke comes to the most unlikely recipients of all.

Luke 2:1-20:

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 his 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. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

And 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 them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

**“Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.”**

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 the manger. 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 they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

We're going to focus on the latter part of this passage, but I'll comment briefly on the opening verses that describe the birth of Jesus. It is God's sovereignty behind the Roman emperor's decision to take a census at this time. This census requires all residents of the empire to register for taxation in their respective hometowns. So Joseph, who is from

Bethlehem, the town of David, returns there with his pregnant wife. That is how Jesus ends up being born in Bethlehem.

There have been many retellings of this story, and a good deal of what we see in pageants and nativity scenes is outside of what Luke says in this text. There is no innkeeper in Luke's story. Luke simply says there is no room in the inn. And we have translated this word as "inn" for centuries, but it's actually not a public inn (Luke will use that word in a different place in his gospel). This word can refer to various kinds of dwelling places, from family homes to shelters arranged for a temporary stay. Almost all dwelling places would have attached to them a place to keep animals. So what actually happens we're not altogether sure, but we do know that Bethlehem is crowded with travelers because of the census, and there is no place for Joseph and Mary to stay when the time comes for this baby to be born. So Jesus ends up being laid in an animal trough—the humblest of beginnings for this great act of God.

We've been focusing on angelic announcements in this series, so we're going to move on to the story of the shepherds.

The shepherds who saw glory

Some have speculated that if the shepherds were out on the hills with the sheep, it couldn't possibly have been winter. Actually, sheep grazed year-round in that area. It's

unlikely that it happened in December, but we don't know exactly what time of year it was. Many have speculated that it actually occurred in the fall. Regardless of the time of year, the shepherds were out in the fields, probably not far from Bethlehem. A site traditionally called the Shepherds' Field is two or three miles out of Bethlehem.

All of a sudden an angel appears to them. Again, this is the third time Luke records that an angel appears to someone. Only in Zechariah's case did the angel identify himself, as Gabriel; in that case it was because of Zechariah's doubting. This may again be an appearance of Gabriel, but we don't know. The word "appear" means to stand alongside. It's a word that Luke often uses for an appearance of God.

Luke says, "The glory of the Lord shone around them." Whenever God manifested his presence among his people in both the Old and the New Testaments, there was an appearance of his glory. It came to be called the Shechinah glory. When God wanted people to see in dramatic fashion that he was there, a shining brightness appeared. I think this is a manifestation of the Shechinah glory.

Of course, the shepherds react as you and I would—they're terrified. In all three stories—Zechariah, Mary, and now the shepherds—the same sequence happens: the angel appears, the reaction is fear, and then the angel says a word of comfort: "Do not be afraid."

Sometimes in the telling of the story the shepherds are portrayed as outcasts, despised, and rejected. That's really not the case. Being a shepherd was actually a noble profession

in that culture. David was a shepherd boy (1 Samuel 16; 17), and Jesus will later describe himself as “the good shepherd” (John 10:11). Being a shepherd was just a lowly, humble profession that didn’t confer power or riches. The shepherds represent the common man in that culture. They are the least likely people to be receiving a king. Yet it is to these common folk tending their sheep, who have no greatness of their own, that the angel makes this glorious announcement.

Let’s look at the angel’s announcement.

Good news of great joy

The angel tells them he brings good news. The expression “bring good news” or “proclaim good news” is actually a single word. Luke uses this verb form a number of times. He loves to tell stories of proclaiming the good news, because as we noted earlier, he is perhaps the only Gentile writer in the whole Bible, and this wonderful good news is going to the whole world, not just to the Jewish people. Luke more than any other writer of the New Testament understands that. He has been a disciple and companion of Paul on missionary journeys for the expansion of God’s kingdom and the proclaiming of this message. So it is part of the fabric of Luke’s life to be a proclaimer of the good news.

This good news, the angel says, is for “all the people.” Luke often uses this phrase to talk about the Jewish nation, but because of the way the story unfolds between his gospel and

the book of Acts, he surely has in mind here the expansion of the gospel to the ends of the earth. This message of good news is for all. And of course, that means in the end it's good news for you and me.

This proclamation is good news, the angel says, because a Savior is coming into the world! He comes out of the house of David, fulfilling the covenant that God made with David that one of his descendants would reign on his throne forever (2 Samuel 7:12-16). This is the One the nation of Israel has been awaiting for centuries.

The angel uses three titles to describe this One who has been born: Savior, Christ, and Lord. The word "savior" means someone who delivers from an enemy. The idea of a savior was part of Israel's history; over and over again, when enemies would oppress them, God would raise up someone among them to lead the nation into battle and throw off the oppression. At this time, after centuries of oppression under foreign rule, currently Roman rule, the Jews long for a deliverer. What they do not understand is that the Savior whom God is sending will not immediately do that. Salvation is not merely political freedom, making the nation of Israel a great nation among others. Salvation is about deliverance from the ultimate enemies: Satan, sin, and death. The rescue that this One brings is the complete rescue that every man and woman in history has yearned for: deliverance from these things that bind them and destroy them.

The title Christ is the New-Testament version of the Old-Testament idea of Messiah. It means king, the one who will come to fulfill the destiny of the nation of Israel.

The title Lord was reserved in Jewish culture for God himself, but it becomes the name by which Jesus is most known. The angels don't explain that to us here. Luke will develop the theme that Jesus is the true Lord across his two books, Luke and Acts. As the story unfolds, Jesus' lordship challenges even the earthly lordship of Caesar. The title Lord is for the One who is the ruler not only of Israel, but also of all creation. The Lord is worthy of our worship.

This tiny baby who has been born is the Savior, Christ, the Lord! So the shepherds have to be sitting there transfixed, amazed at the words this angel has said. I've tried to put myself in their position. Even as shepherd boys they would have some working knowledge of the history of their nation. They would have some—if not a great deal—of hope that one day Messiah would come. And now they are surely wondering, “How can this be happening to us?!” This is a wonderful pronouncement that God is finally fulfilling everything.

The angel says there will be sign: they will find this baby lying in a manger. The King of kings and Lord of lords, the Savior, the Christ, is in a manger!

They are already overwhelmed by the pronouncement of this one angel, and now all of a sudden a whole heavenly chorus appears and begins to sing a song of praise. If this were a Greek drama, this would be the chorus that would explain and expand upon the plot of the drama. The chorus sings these wonderful words:

“Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.”

There are three contrasts in this song of praise: God and men, earth and heaven, and glory and peace. In this song the angels announce what the birth of this baby is going to mean for God and what it’s going to mean for us. For God, it means glory in the highest. Heaven and earth will be filled with the praise and glory of God. It is the fulfillment of God’s covenant faithfulness to his people and of his love for the whole world. It will testify to his nature and to the hope that is in him. It will proclaim to the world that God is a personal God of love and promise and grace and peace.

While it brings glory to God, it will bring peace to men. This is expressed in a special way: “peace to men on whom his favor rests.” This expression echoes the words of Mary’s song in Luke 1:50: “His mercy extends to those who fear him....” Here we have the wonderful juxtaposition of God in his glory loving the whole world, but calling all of us to respond to that. Those who respond—the ones who have humble hearts to receive the good news of this gift—are those upon whom God’s favor rests, and who will therefore enjoy peace, the *shalom* of God.

When we think of peace, we often think first of a sense of peacefulness. But usually in the New Testament peace means peace with God. Certainly, peace with God issues forth in peacefulness in our own hearts, but it is much more amazing that we now have peace

with God. The story of this wonderful birth opens up the reality that we who have been estranged from God by our own sinfulness can be brought back into harmony with God, into the wonderful, beautiful peace of God.

After all this great drama, this wonderful excitement, this beautiful revelation of the glory and wonder of God, what do the shepherds do?

Praise and proclamation

The most important part of the story for you and for me is what we do with it. It is wonderful to come to church on Christmas Eve and sing beautiful and glorious songs of the greatness of God and the birth of Jesus. It is wonderful to remember the great covenant love of God. It is wonderful to encounter God, as these shepherds do, when he reveals himself in power and clarity to us, and we have a new and deeper understanding of who he is and what his character is like. But the important thing in the end is what we do when the angels are gone.

When the angels depart, the shepherds look at each other and say, “We have to go and see this! We have to find out if it’s true. We just can’t sit here and have a theological discussion about angels. We’ve got to get off this hill and go!” So they hurry off and find Mary and Joseph and the baby lying in a manger just as the angels told them.

Interestingly, when they have seen him, Luke says, they spread the word concerning what has been told them about this child. The way this language is constructed suggests that they actually tell Mary and Joseph about what happened to them on the hillside. Mary and Joseph have gone through an amazing journey of their own, with their own set of angelic visitors and pronouncements of what God was going to do. Now this miraculous baby is born, and unexpectedly shepherds show up and tell them that a great company of angels appeared to them and said this child is the Savior, the Messiah, the Lord! The shepherds tell everyone they see. When they leave the family, Luke says, they return “glorifying and praising God.”

Notice what Luke tells us about Mary. Many have speculated that Luke’s source for these stories was Mary herself; there’s so much inside information, so many times when the story is told from her point of view. Luke adds that Mary treasures up all these things and ponders them in her heart.

I would suggest that when you and I encounter the story, we would do well to imitate what Mary and the shepherds do. First, to ponder is to allow our minds and hearts to deeply absorb the word of God and the story that God has revealed to us about his great work in Christ. It is to think through what it means to us. As Mary sees this story unfolding before her, at each step she ponders, she treasures. She understands that God is doing something amazing, and it’s not enough to just experience it, she wants to think about it. So I encourage you this Christmas season to take time to ponder, to think about the great things that God has done and is doing.

The second thing to imitate is praise. Not only are we to ponder these things, but we are to praise God for them. How wonderful that we can actually bring glory to God and give praise to him for his wondrous works! There's nothing that lifts our spirits and energizes our being like focusing on God and what he has done. These shepherds have gone in one day from being the poorest of the poor out in the fields to being recipients of an angelic message, witnesses to the birth of the Messiah, the Savior, the Lord! They praise God for it wherever they go.

Finally, they proclaim what God has done in their lives. What if as the people of God we engaged with God in our prayers to understand him more deeply and understand better what he is doing, then turned that pondering into joyous praise to God for all that he is and all that he has done, and finally proclaimed that truth in our world? What an amazing thing that would be!

Wonder, fearlessness, and progress

Interestingly, Luke says that the people who hear the shepherds' account are amazed. We don't know what that may mean. They may be amazed that the shepherds would tell such a preposterous story. They may think that the shepherds are just nuts. Maybe they think they were drinking a little too much to keep warm at night up on the hillside. Others who

are amazed may begin to think this could actually be what the shepherds are saying it is—the birth of the Savior, the Christ, the Lord.

But notice that the shepherds are not controlled at all by the response of others. So many times we are controlled by what would happen and how people would look at us if we proclaimed that God was the one who was responsible for the miraculous healing and change and hope and peace and love we have in our life. But God is who defines our experience and who we are. How many times are our praise and our proclamation constrained because we're worried about what other people think? These shepherds at this point display none of that. They're so overwhelmed with what God has done for them that they cannot keep quiet; they praise and proclaim wherever they go.

The shepherds exemplify for us two important characteristics. First, they have a capacity for wonder that you and I need to recapture—to believe that God might do something, that he might actually fulfill his promises, that he might actually act in our life and our church and our community. We need to not be skeptical and cynical, but believe that the God of the universe might show up! The shepherds have a sense of wonder that makes them open to receive what God has for them, to believe it.

Second, they exemplify a marvelous progression in their own encounter. The proclamation came to them through angels; it comes to us as we share the word of God together and read it. Then they believe it, and then they become witnesses to it. Luke will describe this progression in the people of God over and over again in his gospel and in

the book of Acts. As followers of Jesus in the line of the shepherds, we hear the beautiful story of Christmas, we believe in our hearts and God transforms our life, and then we become proclaimers and witnesses of that in our world.

So this warm, fuzzy story that we gather around each year is in reality a much deeper story. It is an act of God reaching out to this world in love, embracing us with all that he is to bring us to the place where we can know him, have peace with him, and be praisers and proclaimers of his greatness and goodness.

This story has taken on new meaning for me in the last week. My dad passed away a little more than a week ago. At his funeral it was my privilege to share reflections about him and his impact on my life. One of the neat things for me was hearing stories that I had never heard about ways that my dad had profoundly affected other people's lives. My dad was a lot like these shepherds. He was a very unassuming man, not ambitious or outspoken, but rock-solid in his character. I never doubted that my dad believed in Christ and loved him. To the best of his ability, he tried to follow him and do the right thing at every stage.

I thought about his life in relation to this story. Sometimes we want to make the human side of the story bigger than it is. But it's really about normal people like my dad and like you and me, who will simply believe, live it out, and honor the Savior by telling people about what God is doing. It's as simple as that. God invites us as he did the shepherds of

old to be participants in his grand story. What a glorious, wonderful, beautiful truth that is!

Take a moment to ponder. One of the themes throughout Luke's telling of these stories is that the angels continually have to say to people, "Do not be afraid." How many times are you constrained because of your fear of what might happen if you follow Christ, how your life might change, how people might react? We like so much to be in control of our lives, and we just don't know what might happen if we step out in faith and trust him. But the voice of God is saying to you today, "Do not be afraid."

Perhaps you're someone who has heard this Christmas story over and over again but has never known God's peace, or known the sense that God's favor rests on you, because it's just been a story. God invites you this day to hear his word and in faith come to him, accept the gift of new life and salvation from this Savior who is Christ the Lord. What a wonderful gift that would be to you and to those all around you! And what a tragedy for us to go through the motions of this season again without encountering the God of the season, who acts decisively in our behalf, bringing glory to himself and peace to us.

Notes

1. John S. Dwight, text, and Adolphe Adam, music, *O Holy Night!*

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Luke 2:1-20

Fourth Message

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