

# “A Place of Redemption”

*Luke 2:8-20*

So far in our ‘Why Bethlehem?’ series we have seen that Scripture portrayed Bethlehem as a place of sorrow; since our Saviour Jesus would suffer also and be able to relate to us as our sympathetic Saviour and High Priest.

But we also saw that Bethlehem was not just a place of sorrow but also a place where God restored his people in their sorrow and brought blessing out of suffering. Likewise, Jesus became victorious over His crucifixion and death and all those who placed their faith in Him will overcome life’s trials and one day find joy in His presence forever. Last week we saw that God portrayed through the prophets that Bethlehem would be the place where our hope would come from. In spite of Jesse’s tree being cut down (the Davidic kingship) the stump remained through which a branch would grow and produce fruit and reign once again over Israel and the world. So we look forward to Jesus returning to establish His rule on earth.

But how would God bring that about? Why is Bethlehem the place of hope? Because in Bethlehem the prophecies of Jesus’ birth are fulfilled but He has something else He must do before He can return and rule. He must atone for the sins of the world. He must pay the price for our sin and redeem us from the curse. And Bethlehem is the perfect place to deliver that message.

So we come to this almost too familiar passage in Luke 2 that we think we know it all because we’ve read it and heard it and seen and performed ourselves many nativity concerts and dramatizations. But do we understand that the message of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem is primarily about forgiveness of sins? About redeeming us from the curse we are all under? Let’s revisit Joseph and Mary’s arrival in Bethlehem and that blessed night.

Due to a census during Emperor Augustus’ reign, Joseph and Mary must head to Bethlehem to be registered because they are both descendants of David. It’s quite possible Joseph and Mary intended to raise Jesus in Bethlehem since they would have known the prophecies but they didn’t know how it would happen. So God providentially arranges a census giving Joseph and Mary the way to get to Bethlehem. And unlike our many Christmas dramas, there is no sense of panic nor are we told Mary gave birth that night and the word for “inn” means guest room so there is no crusty innkeeper who turns them away!

*And while they were there the days were completed for her to give birth and she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid Him in a manger for there was no place for them in the inn. (2:6-7)*

Since it is the birth of the long-awaited Messiah, we need to have some special birth announcement, maybe a party with family and friends. It’s a joyous event and so God marks this event with a special announcement, invites some soon-to-be friends. But instead of an announcement to the political or religious rulers, He has a unique revelation to the humble and ordinary shepherds when no one else is around and who have a unique perspective about the Messiah’s coming to redeem us from sin. Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem demonstrates to us that

**God Accepts the ‘Unacceptable’**

## (2:8-12)

<sup>8</sup> And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. <sup>9</sup> An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

<sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. <sup>12</sup> This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

If God would have forewarned the people of the day He was going to announce the incarnation of Jesus to shepherds, people would have scoffed and said something like 'Those guys! They're always dirty and smell of sheep dung! They don't even let them in the synagogues!' The shepherds weren't quite tax collectors and sinners, but they represented the lowly of society. Yet that's who God chose to reveal His Son's coming, to average, hard working shepherds. God likes shepherds and even refers to Himself in Scripture as Israel's shepherd. God even prophesied that shepherds would be eyewitnesses to the Messiah's birth. In a lesser known prophecy in Micah 4:6

<sup>6</sup> "In that day," declares the LORD, "I will gather the lame; I will assemble the exiles and those I have brought to grief. <sup>7</sup> I will make the lame my remnant, those driven away a strong nation. The LORD will rule over them in Mount Zion from that day and forever. <sup>8</sup> As for you, watchtower of the flock, stronghold of Daughter Zion, the former dominion will be restored to you; kingship will come to Daughter Jerusalem."

'Watchtower of the flock' was actually a well known location outside Bethlehem. It's mentioned by name in Gen. 35 when Jacob buried Rachel in Bethlehem. We read in v.19

<sup>19</sup> So Rachel died and was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem). <sup>20</sup> Over her tomb Jacob set up a pillar, and to this day that pillar marks Rachel's tomb. <sup>21</sup> Israel moved on again and pitched his tent beyond Migdal Eder.

Migdal Eder is the watchtower of the flock. It was the place from which shepherds took turns watching from a distance any threats to the flocks while the other shepherds were in the fields with their sheep. That God chose shepherds to be the first eyewitnesses to Jesus' incarnation and that He revealed His glory to them assures us that

### **God wants people to come into His presence (vv.8-9)**

When we realize the Shekinah glory of God had 'left' the temple in the days of Ezekiel and was prior to that never recorded as being visible since the days of Solomon, this is a big deal. The glory of God appeared to shepherds near Migdal Eder outside Bethlehem and God spoke through angels, another big deal since He had not spoken to the people of Israel since the days of Malachi. God wants people to come into his presence. How else do we know that? By what His angels said

*Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. <sup>11</sup> Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.*

### **He has good news of great joy for each person (vv.10-11)**

The good news (the word gospel) brings great joy when we believe that Jesus, the prophesied Son of David, is the Messiah and Lord and that He alone can save us. This is theological rich statement. The irony of these words is that they mimic a document found that said that Emperor

Augustus was the people's Saviour and God and that all what he says is 'good news'. So don't be fooled by phony Saviours whose promises are empty.

Today, the coming of the promised Messiah was real and this good news is for 'all people'. No doubt even the shepherds probably didn't think beyond Israel but Jesus came and died for the entire world. Yet each one must recognize their need for A Saviour and what Jesus saves us from – the penalty of our sins. All of us because of sin are unacceptable to God. God instituted the sacrificial system to communicate no one can come to God unless blood has been shed. This is why God communicated the coming of Jesus to shepherds, reminding us,

### ***God speaks to people in ways they understand (v.12)***

*<sup>12</sup> This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."*

The shepherds understood what the angel was saying. This messiah, who has just been born, is within findable distance (because He was promised to come to Bethlehem). He was wrapped in strips of cloths like the newborn lambs these shepherds would have raised. We know from Jewish historical sources that the sheep raised in Bethlehem were specifically raised for Passover. Since Passover lambs had to be perfect, these shepherds would have wrapped the newborn lambs in strips of cloth so that their limbs would not be damaged or broken from the mother or trying to get around. This was not an uncommon thing to do for newborn babies either, to ensure their limbs were not broken.

And a manger was a hollowed out depression in a floor or cave for water for the animals to drink from. Again, all too familiar to shepherds, but unusual for a baby. So the message is simple and understandable to everyone so we can become acceptable to God. How does that happen?

### **Everyone Has to Act on the Word of God (2:13-15)**

God spoke. He revealed His presence to people and invited them to discover the truth for themselves. And when people act on the Word of God by faith, believing what he says is true, they discover

### ***Peace with God comes through grace (v.13)***

*<sup>14</sup> "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests."*

The angels praise God for revealing Himself to the world through the shepherds and assure us that peace (shalom – wholeness) comes on those whom His favour rests. The word for favour is the same word for 'grace'. The shepherds weren't told they had to clean up before they could discover who and where Jesus was. They weren't told they must do something beforehand. They were told that they could discover the truth for themselves because God in His grace made truth available to them.

Paul would later say in Rom. 10:17, *'Faith comes from hearing the message and the message is heard through the word about Christ.'*

God sent Jesus to save us from our sins. This is what Gabriel told Joseph in the dream. He is 'Immanuel', God with us because He will save His people from their sins.' But I can't be saved unless I acknowledge I have sin that separates me from God and that I confess that Jesus alone paid that for

me on the cross. And when we have peace with God because we acted on believing His Word, we experience His

### ***Joy which comes through discovering the truth from God (v.15)***

V. 15 is perhaps the most crucial verse here because unless you choose to discover truth for yourself you will not find joy in a relationship with God.

*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." <sup>16</sup> So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger.*

Let's go now and see what the Lord made known to us. Isn't that the key to our own joy? Acting in faith as we live out the Word of God. Not just study it for the sake of learning but actually living it out. For example; we're told to forgive others as God has forgiven us. We're told to treat others the way we want to be treated. Have you ever obeyed verses like that and discovered the unexplainable joy that comes from obeying the Word? I'm always a little concerned when Christians tell me how much they love studying God's Word. 'Oh I was in this great study in ....' That's wonderful but unless you act on the Word you learned it was just head knowledge. When we obey the Word and not just learn it, it will stick with us. And then we get joy that only comes through obedience. I love studying God's Word too. But study alone without application, James says in James 1, is self-deception.

And the best way to act and obey God's Word is to share it. And we learn from the shepherds that ...

## **Each one of us is Responsible to Share God's Message of Redemption (2:17-20)**

*<sup>17</sup> When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; <sup>18</sup> and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. <sup>19</sup> But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. <sup>20</sup> The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.*

Boy oh boy, those shepherds sure didn't know how to share the gospel. They forgot to pray first ... they didn't take any evangelism course ... they didn't do a spiritual gifts assessment on whether they had the gift of evangelism ... they didn't seem to wait for the Holy Spirit's leading ...

They were just so excited that the truth of God's Word was real and wanted to share that with anyone they encountered. The key to sharing Jesus with others is found in v.17

*... they made known what had been told them about [Jesus]*

That's how we share the gospel. We share what we know is true from God's Word to those who don't have truth in their life. Perhaps our own reluctance to share Jesus is our lack of excitement about knowing Jesus. We who've been saved for too long take the gospel for granted and it no longer wows us like it once did. I like the response people had: those who heard it were amazed.

And the shepherds went back to their normal routine as keepers of sheep but as changed people. These shepherds got the message of redemption more than we realize. Since they raised

sheep for the Passover, these sheep had to be cared for carefully. A Passover lamb had to be spotless without imperfections. Jesus' birth was not unlike a new lamb. Wrapped in strips, his bed a feeding trough, this perfect, sinless child would one day become the Passover Lamb and take upon himself all our imperfections and uncleanness. After John baptized Jesus he announced to his followers, 'Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.' Jesus came to save us. First from our own sins and the second time to remove us from the presence of sin once for all. The shepherds who knew what to look for to find a spotless lamb, were the first ones to announce that God's spotless lamb, His Son, had come to save us. And they shared the good news of great joy with others. The greatest gift we could give anyone is to make known what we have been told about Jesus from God's words. Will we do that sometime over Christmas? Will we offer God's message of redemption through Jesus by grace? Will we pray for lost family members and friends to have peace with God?

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If you have any questions or comments about this message please contact us  
at [olivet@rideau.net](mailto:olivet@rideau.net)