

The song of the angels and shepherds

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Preacher: David Calderwood

[0 : 0 0] the dark night suddenly lit up with dazzling light. An angel appears announcing God's special delivery in Bethlehem.

A special delivery clearly marked God's King and Saviour, Christ the Lord. The salvation package which God had promised many, many years earlier had finally arrived.

Now, big breaking news stories gets a lot of coverage on our social media, our devices. Pop-ups tell you this is a big story.

All the things that go around it, this is a big story, big news feed. But nothing compares to this breaking news. One angel is joined by what I've called before perhaps the first flash mob ever in history.

The sky is filled with angels behind the first angel just singing the praises of God. Why? Because of God's special delivery to his world.

[1 : 0 4] Now, there's something really shocking, actually scandalous about this announcement. The announcement was made to a bunch of shepherds.

Not to high society people who had power and influence, as we might expect a big announcement to be. Not to them. But God chose a bunch of shepherds.

Who, in Jesus' day, were actually a despised group of people. Probably young blokes. Certainly, they were religious outcasts.

The religious outcasts, because of their work, they couldn't actually fulfill the ceremonial law required for them. And so they were on the outside of recognized Jewish religion, on the outside of the temple.

And they were social outcasts. Mostly, they were just uneducated, rough, redneck types. And yet, it's to these people that God made his special announcement.

[2 : 0 6] Why such an exciting announcement to an unlikely audience? Well, I don't think it's just because another baby's been born. Quite literally, around the world that night, there would have been thousands of babies born, quite possibly.

And Luke does emphasize that this was a real baby. A real human baby, born after a real pregnancy, in a real place, in a real time.

But that's not his focus. What makes this so interesting is the identity of the baby. This is an extraordinary baby. And we'll see more about that in a minute.

So we're going to pause now, and then Chris is going to read the passages with that little bit of introduction. And then we're going to have another part of the kids talk. And then we'll sign.

No, we're not. Okay. Is that right? All right. Okay. Well, whatever. Just get on to it then. I was going to say nobody tells me anything, but that's not true.

[3 : 0 7] They did tell me. I just haven't got it right. If you haven't already got your word open or device open, it's Luke chapter 2, starting at verse 1.

And we're going to read 20 verses, not chapters. So Luke chapter 2.

In those days, a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria.

And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.

And while they were there, the time came 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, because there was no place for them in the inn.

[4 : 17] And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them.

And they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.

For unto you is born this day in the city of David a saviour, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you.

You will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased.

When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.

[5 : 28] And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told to them concerning this child.

And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart.

And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. And it had been told to them. And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus.

The name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb. So we've got a sky full of angels and a bunch of shepherds. And they're all just bursting forth in song because of what they'd heard about this announcement of, the most amazing announcement ever of the arrival of Jesus, God's special package.

The second point I want to make is that this package comes with the most amazing gift wrapping ever. Clothed in flesh and humility. So we see the gifts before us.

[6 : 46] The final touch, and this is one I'm not interested in really, but the final touch on any gift is the gift wrapping. I can see it with my girls.

They really, really see a gift as being extra special when it's obvious to them, however that comes to them, it's obvious to them that the gift wrapping has been chosen as carefully as the gift itself.

The whole package speaks, therefore, of the care and the knowledge and the intimacy of the person who gave the gift. But the brutal reality against that is that after Christmas, we see wheelie bins just overflowing with Christmas wrapping.

Most kids and many adults like me just rip the stuff off because we're only interested in what's inside. You might see some girls, adult females, they might linger over the wrapping and just delicately unpick all the little bits of sticky tape.

Everybody else in the room, come on, get on with it. But they're savoring. They're unwrapping, they're savoring, and they want to keep it. But for both groups, the main event is on the inside, the gift itself.

[8 : 06] As the angel announced the arrival of God's special delivery, he also put special attention on the gift wrapping. We're told that this gift comes to us in human flesh.

The sign, as Chris read to us, would be a baby in a manger. But in this case, the gift wrapping was incredibly important.

Indeed, the gift wrapping is inseparable from the gift and would never be discarded. So the message of Christmas is not just that Jesus was born into the world, but that in Jesus, God was born into the world as an extraordinary baby who was fully and completely God, fully and completely human.

And this event happened, we're celebrating this morning, a bit over 2,000 years ago. And it's in the wrapping that God, we see God's thoughtfulness, we see God's care and attention, we see God's knowledge of us and how much he values us.

God chose a delicate mesh of human fiber, fragile, needy, unremarkable, unremarkable, to make his gift totally suited to his people's needs.

[9 : 41] Clothed in flesh and humility, God became one of us. That's the amazing part of Christmas, that God became one of us.

He came to us in our situation, in our context. How amazing is that? The maker of the universe becomes a small part of the universe.

A baby lying in a cattle trough in a dirty, smelly, nondescript animal shelter.

And for all the grandeur of Jesus' status as the long-awaited Messiah, and that's how he's described, this baby is the Messiah, God's King and Savior, Lord. For all the grandeur of that, for all the authority that that baby had vested in him and in himself to speak and act in this world, his story begins with a rather scandalous display of humility. [10:54] It's shocking. And yet we're told here by the angel that this would be his signature tune. This would be his mark.

This would be the measure of his whole life, and especially, as we'll see later in the story, his death. The mission of Jesus was not just to come into the world, but the mission of Jesus was to come into the world to identify with us and to serve us, his people, by doing for us that which we cannot do for ourselves, establish peace with God.

My friends, there's nothing sentimental about that. There's nothing silent about that. In fact, as Jesus came into the world in the most inglorious and humble manner, God, in a sense, was screaming at his world that this is my thoughtful saving commitment to you, my people, who are so desperately in need of my thoughtful saving commitment.

We're going to pause again. Just checking, just checking. All right, so we've got the sky full of angels, a bunch of shepherds, they're all just overflowing with praise.

It's the most amazing announcement, the most special gift wrapping, and it's the most amazing gift ever. In Jesus, at Christmas, God gives us himself.

[12:42] When we get a gift, it's always lovely, or when we give a gift, it's always lovely to hear the response, whoa, that's the best gift ever.

We actually struck it rich with our grandchildren this year. I think we got a complete agreement that all our gifts were actually cool, which is very special when you're our age.

But that's what you love to hear, isn't it? People appreciate that the gift is just what they want. This is exactly what I need. And when we hear that response, then we realize that all the effort we put into finding that gift has been worthwhile.

Well, in the birth of Jesus, we see how much effort God has put into getting us just exactly the gift we need.

He's described as a Savior, and that's good news. Verse 11, the angel strings together a series of titles from the Old Testament which described this newborn extraordinary baby.

[13:51] He is Savior, Christ the Lord. This apparently fragile, helpless baby is God the Father's firstborn son.

He has the Father's full authority. He's the expression of the Father's glory and power. He's the fulfillment of all God's promises to act or save or deliver His people from their sin.

This baby Jesus would be the one who would sort out the mess that we have caused in God's world, the mess of our own hearts and the mess that overflows from our own hearts.

God would sort that out in Jesus, rescue people from the power of sin and renew us. Why? So that we might have new desire to love and serve and honour the Lord.

In other words, Jesus would do what all the other prophets before Him had failed to do and were unable to do and what we're unable to do for ourselves.

[15:02] Why can we be sure of this? Well, because He is Lord God. He has the power and authority He needs to do the job given to Him.

And all of that is affirmed in His mission by display of God's glory at His birth. This is something the whole of heaven is invested in.

In the most important announcement ever made in our world, both our need is highlighted and also the solution is spelled out.

We need somebody like us to sort out the mess we've caused. And in Jesus, we have somebody who identifies with us but who is also different from us.

He's not part of the problem. He's the solution. Jesus has come to reclaim, to rescue and renew. So when we think of baby Jesus, we've got to think humility, frailty, but we've also got to think grandeur and power and authority.

[16:21] And little wonder therefore is described in verse 10 as good news. Little wonder verse 13, all of heaven bursts into song of praise. And we see that in this series over three weeks.

Every time we have people who get anything of a glimpse of who Jesus is and what he's about, then they erupt in song, a song of praise, a song of thanksgiving. And heaven too erupts because heaven had waited for this moment, for this saving moment, for centuries.

And the direct result of Jesus being born a saviour is that peace would be established. That's what the angel says. Now, at that point, this idea has been distorted and trivialised and sentimentalised as peace and goodwill to everybody.

That's what we hear and it's cringeworthy, isn't it? It's a sentimental notion that says, well, Christmas is all about being nice to people so you have to make sure you don't have a family argument at least on Christmas Day or, well, actually, at least just for the meal anyway. But that's not what it means here. It's much more powerful. The peace that's referred to here is something that's granted by God through Jesus. The peace here is something that Jesus secures and it's not necessarily something that everyone will experience.

[17 : 47] It is peace among those who are granted peace by God's grace, by God's favour, by God's generosity. And that's what makes Jesus really unique in the world.

Jesus was born into a period of unprecedented peace and prosperity. It was called the Pax Romana. Now, this peace and prosperity was a political sort of military peace and it was enforced by the ruthless brutality of the Roman legions under Caesar Augustus.

But interestingly, even in those days, a philosopher of the day, Epictetus, pointed out how limited Caesar's peace really was and he wrote, while the emperor may give peace from war on land and sea, he is unable to give peace from passion, grief, and envy.

Yeah, he could enforce a form of peace from the outside in, but that did nothing to quell the hearts that wants to erupt from the inside out and ultimately cause the violence and terrors of our world. He cannot give peace of heart for which mankind yearns, more even than for outward peace. King Jesus comes into our world to establish spiritual peace, peace between God and man, which means freedom from the fear of rejection by God, confidence that we have a secure home in heaven waiting for us at death.

[19 : 31] And in contrast to Caesar's peace, this will not be achieved by violence and ruthless suppression of those who are their enemies. It will be achieved by Jesus becoming, King Jesus becoming the Prince of Peace.

It will be achieved as God's own Son absorbs the wrath that comes from the Father for our sin. It comes as Jesus dies the death that we deserve to die to secure peace and life for us, his people, with the Father.

Imagine that. We celebrate Christmas as the very basis of fear-free living. Behind every fear, ultimately, I believe, and psychologists would believe, is the fear of being rejected by God. We see it stepped right up. We fear being rejected by those closest to us. We fear being rejected by family. We fear being rejected by community. And so it goes right up the line. And ultimately, there's a deep-seated fear that many of us don't even articulate, fear of when we die, being rejected by God.

The evidence of that is we spend so much time trying to assure ourselves that when we do die, everything will be fine. Rest in peace. Jesus' kingdom is not about political or military power.

[21 : 12] His greatness is that he identifies with those who have nothing going for them. And does for them what they could never do for themselves. That is, he gives restless, fearful, wandering hearts, the peace they desperately crave.

Little wonder the angel says I bring you good news of great joy made available to all people and to you.

At present opening time, every child and most adults, you can see it this morning, they just want the best present to be theirs.

You can see it around the family tree. They're trying very much to be in the moment with their own present, but you can see the eyes going sideways and you can see them evaluating, is my present as good as my brother's present? They just want their present to be the best.

Well, God's announcement is clear. God's gift of himself is as a saviour for you. This saviour is hand-built, as it were, by the Lord, purpose-built, individually and specially wrapped, and it's for you.

[22 : 48] Hand-delivered for you. For you, if you're willing to put your hand out and take the gift which God offers you with all the promise of delight and peace and satisfaction and hope that comes with that gift.

So, I just finish with this challenge on this Christmas morning. It's really over to you. God is offering you this morning in Jesus a wonderful present.

himself, wrapped perfectly as you need it, need him to be wrapped. It demonstrates completely God's love for you and his commitment to giving you the peace that you crave in your heart but haven't been able to find in anything else outside of Jesus.

Jesus is the gift you've always needed but here's the rub. He's the gift you may not always have longed for. But on this Christmas morning he's the gift that's before you one more time.

will you turn your nose up at him for another year and just let this day be sentimentality and a big feat convinced that you might still find peace in your heart in some other place in our world or in your life in some other relationship or will you take God's gift enthusiastically?

[24 : 34] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.