

Song of Angels

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Date: 22 December 2024

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[0 : 00] Now I think there is a tendency for many of us to think that if we want to have an encounter with God, then what we need to do is somehow get away from life, right?

Go to the country, go close to nature. And even for some people who don't believe in God, we tend to associate nature as somehow being more spiritual than the hustle and bustle of everyday life. And for that we have the Romantics to thank. This was a period about two or three hundred years ago in Western history where the idea came about that somehow nature was more pure than the city.

You know, the countryside was more pure than the city. And nature was somehow more pure than the mess and mayhem of civilization. And so even now today, and some of you have done this, we go on retreats, don't we?

Where we withdraw from our daily routines in order to get closer to God. Now I'm not trying to be critical of such practices, but I also want us to realize, particularly with today's passage, that God is very much present and acting in the thick of civilization, right where we are.

[1 : 15] In fact, in our passage today, God has chosen to meet humanity, not in the tranquility of nature, but in the mess, in the mayhem of life.

We're reminded that God isn't just there in the Garden of Eden, back in Genesis, but also in the city of Zion, in Revelation. And sadly, thanks to Adam and Eve, actually, Eden is no more.

But thanks to Jesus, as we will see, the new Jerusalem, the city of Zion awaits us. So let's get to the opening verses of chapter 2 here in Luke, where we have set for us the scene that very first Christmas, where God comes to us in the birth of Jesus, in the hustle and bustle of life.

So verse 1, 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 their own town to register.

So just by that word decree, we know that this was not an optional thing. This was a thing imposed on the people that they had to follow. Neither was it a popular one, because censuses were taken usually for the purpose of taxation.

[2 : 40] Right? It was an audit, if you like, so that the Romans could work out how much taxes they could collect, from whom and from where. Now there is some conjecture as to why everyone needed to return to their town to register.

But it appears that actually this rule applied to those who had property, or had an ancestral home. So I think this is what applied to Joseph, because in verse 4 we read, 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. So it's rather like a friend of mine, who was born and lives here in Melbourne, but because he has a family or ancestral home in a small town in Greece, he and his wife would return there from time to time, just to, I don't know, pay the council rates, or make sure that the property is well maintained, whatever.

And so being a descendant of David, the town Joseph needed to go back to was Bethlehem, because this was the city of David. Of course, the timing was far from ideal, wasn't it?

Because Mary was heavily pregnant. Now, it just so happens that I know what it's like to have to bring a pregnant wife home from afar, because Alyssa was pregnant when we returned from living in London nearly 21 years ago.

[4 : 15] Now, thankfully, she was only in her first trimester. So compared to Joseph and Mary, you know, our challenges were small. But for them, you know, just think about this.

They didn't have the luxury of air travel, did they? They would have had to travel along dusty roads and bumpy roads. The distance was about 150 kilometers between Nazareth and Bethlehem. And most likely, Mary was on the back of a donkey. Now, many of you I know have not been pregnant before. But if you want to, you know, get an inkling of what that might feel like, perhaps have a chat with Emily afterwards, how she feels about getting on the back of a donkey and traveling on it for 150 kilometers.

Now, there were also no Airbnb websites at the time. So they couldn't book ahead, could they? And, you know, get confirmation of accommodation and the time of check-in and how they can park their car and donkey or whatever.

And so in verse 6, we discover that they make it to Bethlehem just in time, it would seem. For while they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son.

[5 : 31] She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger because there was no guest room available for them. Now, here, the popular conception, and, you know, we sing carols that sort of indicate that as well.

And you hear, you know, you look at the nativity scene or not. The conception is that Joseph and Mary, you know, had got to Bethlehem and they were looking for an inn and they couldn't find somewhere to put them up.

And so they stayed in the stables and delivered Jesus there. But actually, given what I just said about Joseph's ancestral home, scholars think that what is more likely is that Joseph arrives back at his own ancestral home, which was probably being lived in by a relative or something.

He was hoping that maybe the guest room or the spare room would be available for him and Mary to stay at and then for them to have a baby. But instead, because that wasn't, they had to make do with the common living area, like your lounge room, as it were, slightly bigger.

But that was also the place where it was not uncommon to keep your animals, you know, it was on the ground floor. And so it was not, it was usual to bring in the animals and to keep the animals either there or nearby.

[6 : 43] And so it made sense for Jesus, the child, to then be laid in a manger after he was born. Now, either way, the picture that we get is that Joseph and Mary had numerous logistical challenges to contend with.

They had to make do, didn't they? Compromise, even though this was Mary's first child, a precious baby upon whom great things had been prophesied.

It would have been quite chaotic, stressful, messy, and unglamorous. And then meanwhile, out on the hills, verse 8, there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks by night.

And again, the picture is not one of glamour either. For these shepherds, they had to keep awake because predators were real. They had to be watchful and alert.

They were probably owners of their flock, but not rich enough to employ hired hands, which is why they had to look after their livelihood themselves.

[7 : 50] That's why it says that they lived out in the fields with the flock, tending them 24-7. Thus, Luke is describing for us the ordinary and mundane life as it was in first century Palestine.

As you read it, there is no hint, is there, of any sense of spirituality, that somehow God is explicitly present in any way. Rather, it's sort of the kind of things that you might find as you open the Herald Sun or The Age today.

There's politics, global and local. You know, Australia's finances are in budget deficit again, hence more taxes. Costs of living pressures are going up.

The health crisis in rural Australia is real. Or if you go down further into the middle of the paper, you might find stories about someone searching for a missing son or daughter, or how struggling families will celebrate Christmas this year.

And as you read, you might think, is God present in any of these things? Is his hand actively at work amongst it all? Well, on that night in Luke chapter 2, it doesn't seem to be.

[9 : 10] And yet, as we've sung often and often and again and again in our carols, this is the most holy of nights, the time of the first Noel.

Well, why? Because it is on this night of all nights in history that God has chosen and set apart, that's why it's holy, to come into the world in the person of his son.

To enter the world, not with the pomp of a glorious king, but in the humility of a baby boy, in a makeshift maternity ward.

And it happened in the hustle and bustle of Bethlehem. At a time when around the country, people were busy trying to get back to their ancestral home in order to respond to an imperial census. And if anyone was looking to encounter God at that time, the place they needed to be was not in a retreat somewhere in the desert, but actually right there, in that house, in Bethlehem, where the manger was.

[10:18] And so that's exactly what the angel tells the shepherds to do when he appears to them. God, you see, had to send a messenger, messengers, in fact, from heaven to help them, to help us, to help humanity to understand the significance of the events.

Otherwise, no one would appreciate it. What was needed was a divine revelation to show us the way. And so we read verse 9, And the 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 that will cause great joy for all the people. Today, in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you.

He is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you. You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. And so firstly, the angel announces that the birth of Jesus is good news, great news, in fact.

A cause for great joy, not just for Israel, but for all people. This, the angel explains, is in accordance with what God has promised from long ago.

[11:30] God is making good on His word. This baby, he says, is the long-promised Messiah. And that one word, just that one word, Messiah, carries with it all the hopes and dreams of the people and expectations of a coming Savior.

He is the son of David, whom God promised, who would bring salvation and restoration to Israel. And that's why he is born in Bethlehem, the city of David. And so the decree was inconvenient for Joseph and Mary, and Caesar and Quirinius issued it for their own selfish purposes.

But it was part of God's plan, a sign to demonstrate that this baby was the chosen one of God. Now, there are obviously numerous Old Testament passages that speak to this, as to how God's promises are fulfilled.

But the one that was read tonight in Isaiah is a common one. And in particular, we read in verse 6 and 7, For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the greatness of his government and peace, there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever.

[12:55] The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this. And so the angel also calls the Messiah the Lord, because God himself will come to rule over Israel as their king.

Thus, this child will be called Mighty God, Everlasting Father. It is said of him that he will reign on David's throne forever and ever. And these are really big promises of blessing for Israel and for the world.

And God will fulfill them and we'll see just how in a moment. But now the angel as well is not content with announcing just the news.

It's not information alone that he's giving, but he's also calling for a response of joy and praise and ultimately of worship. So in verse 13, suddenly, joining with him, a great company of the heavenly hosts appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest heavens and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.

This coming of Jesus is a great blessing because God promises peace. And when we look around the world today and we look at some of the conflicts, not just the wars, but some of the strife that we have in our own lives, that's a blessing that we would all want, wouldn't we?

[14:20] To have peace. And yet, as the angel describes this, this peace is not sort of the kind that we think of at first. Because notice, there is a condition there, isn't there?

Peace to those on whom his favor rests. And so we have to ask, on whom does God's favor rest? Now, it's not spelled out in full in this particular passage here, but if you read the rest of Luke, it's pretty clear.

This peace is for those who come to God through his son, this baby, and by faith and repentance find forgiveness of sins. This promised peace, therefore, is firstly peace with God, that of a relationship restored with our Creator, where we firstly admitted that we have ignored and rejected Him, turned away from Him, and now we commit to stop doing that, to come back to Him, to submit to His rule in our lives.

And that's why this is talk of the government of peace and righteousness. That is to submit to His Son, Jesus, come under His kingship, for this kingship is not a physical kingdom, but rather a spiritual one that is being promised.

Friends, I know it's quite easy to be caught up in life's hustle and bustle. Like, we're way down, aren't we? When we wake up, what we think about are things to do with this world, what we need to get to and what we need to do.

[16:02] And especially, particularly for some of us who are older, this is particularly so at Christmas time, isn't it? Because on top of the day-to-day things we need to get to, we now have to prepare for Christmas as well, don't we?

We may not need to travel to another, to our hometown to pay taxes, but we may have to travel if we are bringing family along interstate to be with relatives. We may not have a baby to welcome in our house, but if we're having guests, then there is the food to prepare, the gifts to wrap, and most importantly, the house has to be tidied up.

And of course, if you're already at work and your work is shutting down for the year end, there's a lot of loose ends to tidy up as well. So, all these things, preoccupations in this world, adding up to stress in life, isn't it?

And sometimes, we wish to escape from it all and try and maybe just get away to find peace and quiet to restore our souls. And you know, some of us think, perhaps we just go down to the beach or maybe to some idyllic small country town.

Well, the truth is, at this time of year, everyone else is doing that too, isn't it? And so, you head down to, I don't know, Mornington Peninsula and you find more people there than back here in Melbourne or trying to escape the hustle and bustle of the city.

[17:28] And yet, despite all of this, what we learn in our passage today is that God has given us His Word and in this case, a song from Heaven, one which we can treasure in our hearts this Christmas and actually throughout our lives.

Praise be to God in the highest because He has given us peace in His Son, Jesus. His favor rests on all who trust in Him.

God is not far away. You don't have to go a long way to find Him. In fact, He has come near to us into our very midst so that we can be restored in relationship with Him.

And so, friends, if you're here today, visiting, come for the first time or been for a few weeks and you haven't quite met Jesus yet in relationship, then will you do that this Christmas?

It's not hard to know who He is and what He's done because God has announced it to us from Heaven, given us the words in the Bible to show us that He's fulfilled His promises from the past but also to show us the true identity of this baby, this Son.

[18:41] And you know, we often hear as we walk around in the shopping center or turn on the radio in the car, all the carols that are being played at this time, isn't it? If we stop to just listen to the words for a moment, we will hear actually this same message, the very truths that we've looked at today.

Hark! The Herald Angels Sing Glory to the Newborn King Joy to the World O Come All He Faithful which we just sang.

You know, will you pause then if you've just sort of let it wash over you until now, will you pause to carefully consider the meaning of these lyrics? Many of us are searching for meaning in life, aren't we?

And you may be one of those here today. And we run around frantically trying to cope with the demands of life and yet deep down we're searching, aren't we?

For why we do these things and what for? Because instinctively we're searching for meaning and ultimately that is found when we encounter God.

[19:49] So how would you respond when God reveals Himself? When He sends a message from Heaven telling you that He has come to earth to bring peace and joy and salvation.

Well, in the remainder of the passage we find two responses, one from the shepherds and one from Mary. So firstly, the shepherds after hearing this went out to check things out.

And so we read, 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. And when they had seen Him, they spread the word concerning what had been taught them about this child. And all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.

You see, for all they knew, the angels could have been wrong, right? Or they could have been just witnessing an illusion, although that's unlikely because they all saw and heard the same things.

[20 : 47] But they went to verify what the angel had said. And if what the angel had said is true, then this is truly amazing news. Life changing and earth shattering news.

It's like a cancer patient being told that there's now a particular cure for their kind of disease or cancer. Even if that patient is skeptical, right, and had doubts, I'm pretty sure that he or she would at least go and check it out, wouldn't they?

But of course, for the shepherds, they discovered that it was indeed true, that this baby that the angel said was lying in a manger, which is not a normal occurrence, that was the sign, well, he was there.

And so, they believed and started spreading the word to others. Yes, they praised God and glorified Him, these are acts of worship, but then afterwards, they went out to tell others of this amazing news.

likewise, Mary pondered on these things and treasured them in her heart because she knew that she had been part of making history in events that have changed the world.

[22 : 00] And so, friends, if you're here today and you believe in Jesus, then why don't you take the time this Christmas to ponder these things anew? Whatever your circumstances at the moment, and sometimes things may be difficult at the moment, know that you are blessed to be in God's kingdom forever.

You found peace with God. You have His eternal favor. And nothing can take that from you because of what Jesus has already done.

So, yes, there's still the hustle and bustle of life that we cannot avoid. If you have a mortgage, you still have to pay that off, unfortunately. If you have in high school, then you still have to finish year 12.

Sorry to say. Some of you just have, but then you still have to finish something else. But don't let these things obscure the song from heaven.

The great truth that glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth, peace on those on whom His favor rests. If you believe in Jesus, that's you.

[23 : 11] that's God's favor upon you because you trust in His Son, Jesus. And then afterwards, of course, if you get the chance, be like the shepherds who didn't keep the news to themselves, but spontaneously shared it to others so that they too can be blessed.

For as the angel said, this is great news, a source of great joy for all people. God intends for the whole world to know about this. Christmas, and not just in a superficial way, because, you know, in a sense, everyone's heard about Christmas and Jesus, haven't they?

We were in Japan recently, and even in Japan, where there's not a lot of Christians, Christmas is a big thing, isn't it? All the lights, the gifts, giving, and it's the whole same thing as we have here.

And yet, whether it's Japan or here, how many people have truly heard the message of Christmas? The message that yes, there is peace for those who put their trust in Jesus, that God has sent his son to this world to die for our sins so that we may be saved.

That's why Jesus came. That is the message of Christmas that everyone needs to hear, which they do hear, but somehow they don't take in.

[24 : 38] And so we need to, as shepherds, with our joy and our worship, somehow, by God's Spirit, alert them so that they too might receive that message, believe, praise God, and find favor with God.

Let's pray. Father, thank you again for Jesus, and we praise and glorify you for what you have done in him. that even though there is strife in this world which you have promised that one day will come to an end, yet for now, we have peace with you through faith in him.

Help us to ponder these things anew so that our lives are transformed by it. And may those we share the news to this Christmas join us in praise and worship of him.
In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.