

Christmas Eve 2024

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[0 : 00] Father in heaven, we thank you for this wonderful declaration given by heavenly hosts, not given to kings or dignitaries, but to lowly shepherds.

Lord, we thank you that you remember the lowest among us. And if we're honest, because of the sin and the brokenness in our own lives, we are amongst the lowest. And yet you have come to us. Lord, we thank you for the gift that is the incarnation. We pray that you would help us to understand in a deeper way the beauty that is Christ coming to us, being born of a virgin, living and dying, and then rising again.

And we pray all this in Christ's name. Amen. We'll be looking at Luke chapter 2. So if you have a Bible, please turn with me to Luke chapter 2. I think there's a few more still at the back welcome table.

You can grab one at any time. At Christmas, we reflect on Christ's humility, and rightfully so. The doctrine of the incarnation represents God's condescension or God's humility in becoming a man.

[1 : 08] He takes on human flesh, fully man and fully God. So we can think of certain verses or chapters in the Bible like Philippians chapter 2 or 2 Corinthians chapter 8 or Hebrews 12.

All of these portions of Scripture speak to God the Son humbling himself, becoming poor and suffering by his own will.

God becoming man, lying in a feeding trough, being a laborer, walking great distances, breathing in Judean dust, walking dirty roads, breathing, all sorts of smells, going hungry, braving choppy Galilean waters, battling crowds, struggling with naysayers, being misunderstood, doubted by his friends and family, being hung on a Roman cross, being treated as a political pawn by a less than noble Roman governor.

Jesus was God, the Son of God, with fully man and fully God on earth. He was humbled. The incarnation begins in Bethlehem, and it was indeed a humble one.

God became man. God became poor. God became vulnerable. God became humble. But why did this have to come to pass?

[2 : 47] Why did redemption have to come about this way? I mean, surely God being all-powerful, all-knowing, perfect in every way, could have found another way for us to be redeemed and ransomed and made right.

But why did it have to be with God humbling himself, taking on in himself human flesh? Why did this have to be? The incarnation, which is what Christmas is all about, it is a key doctrine to the Christian faith.

It is orthodoxy. And what it isn't is a nice thing to think about one time a year, but it is something that has to be real.

It has to be core. It has to be a part of what we'd understand as closed-fisted, non-negotiable. We have to believe it. This is the only way that mankind could be redeemed.

So if we ask the question, why did it have to be this way? I think we will take a look at our text, Luke 2, verses 8 and following, and we'll see that this is actually the only way, and because it's the only way, it is the best way that we could be redeemed.

[4 : 04] Before we get into it, this section here, it's a remarkable portion of the nativity narrative. It draws our attention to the newborn Christ, but specifically from the perspective of these shepherds.

Now, I mentioned in my prayer that these shepherds were lowly. You'd think, well, hold on a second. King David is a shepherd. We think about Psalm 23. Shepherds seem to be held in high esteem, but by the time we get to the first century, the nobility of this job, this vocation, it really diminished.

Shepherds, they were not looked at with fondness, but with suspicion. So it is remarkable that angels come and declare the good news, again, not to dignitaries, not to governors, not to Caesars, but to lowly shepherds.

It's a remarkable thing. And actually, it will help us to understand a bit more about the incarnation. So it's important to consider a few things about angels, because we're going to be looking at angels in our text today.

Angels play a key part throughout the Hebrew Bible, or the Old Testament, as we call it. Many of the key moments in the history of God's people, Israel, they were directed through angelic oversight.

[5 : 27] They are messengers, they're warriors, and they serve at God's command. They visit mankind from heaven, and they return there after completing their task.

Unsurprisingly, then, angels will play a key role in the nativity narrative. They appear to Joseph, to Mary, to Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, and then these unnamed shepherds.

From my survey, six or maybe seven instances within Matthew and Luke where angels are appearing in the nativity narrative.

They play a key, key part. And of course they do, because this is a key part of the history of God's people. But there's a huge difference with this angelic appearance to the shepherds compared to how angels appeared throughout the Old Testament.

So after the initial angel appears, saying good news, he's a messenger, okay, that's in keeping with the Old Testament examples. What happens next is a host of angels show up, and they sing the Lord's praises.

[6 : 42] And this is remarkable, because nowhere else in the Bible, nowhere else in the Bible, do angels sing on earth. They don't proclaim God's goodness, singing on earth as they normally do in heaven.

You think about in heaven, your mind might go to Isaiah chapter 6, might go into portions of Revelation chapter 3 and 4, but nowhere in the Bible on earth do we see angels singing God's praises, except for Luke chapter 2.

So what's going on here? I'm going to read this section one more time, not all the way down to verse 21, but just to verse 15. 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 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 Savior 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.

[7 : 52] And suddenly, here it is, verse 13, there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly hosts, 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 to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.

Nowhere else in the Bible do we see angels singing on earth. So what does this singing mean? Will this help us to answer the question about the necessity of the incarnation for salvation?

So briefly, let's consider two things. The first, angels are found in God's presence. They surround him. They're like his entourage, so to speak. They do his bidding.

Like I mentioned, they're messengers. They're warriors. They are pure. They're without sin. They perfectly serve God. They are people, they're beings that guard, that direct, that encourage, that give news.

[8 : 56] They herald, literally. They are messengers. They do what God does, and therefore, where God is, angels will be. The second thing to consider, mankind, unlike angels, do not dwell, we do not dwell in heaven.

We dwell here on earth. It may seem obvious, but there's a chasm between heaven and earth, and it's a chasm that can't be transcended.

We can't cross that chasm. The earth is the temporal and finite realm, and heaven is the eternal and perfect realm, and these two things do not mix. And so, just on an aside, it's really hard for us to understand these things, because we have a very 2D understanding of how reality works as

modern people.

As modern people, whatever we see, whatever we can measure, whatever we can touch, whatever we can quantify, that's what exists, but when we talk about metaphysical things or unseen realms, it seems a bit far-fetched, things of fantasy.

It's hard for us to understand such things and to even conceptualize it, let alone believe it. But the ancients knew about this and believed it.

[10:13] They knew that humans were frustrated by their inability to dwell with the eternal divinity, whether they called it the God of the Bible, Yahweh, or some other idea of God.

A chasm existed between us and Him. So the angelic choir in Luke 2, they are singing on earth, and it shows us that this chasm has been breached, or has been breached, that heaven is invading earth, it's breaking into the realm of earth.

Remember, angels only come to earth to complete a divinely given task. They don't spend time on earth doing what they only do in heaven in the presence of God.

And yet, here they are doing a heavenly thing on earth. It's a remarkable thing to consider. The angels worship on earth as in heaven.

Why? Because God, the Son of God, has taken upon Himself human flesh. He is born in the city of David to the Virgin Mary. His name is Jesus.

[11:22] Jesus, truly man and truly God, the presence of God now dwells on earth. So on one hand, we can talk, and it's right to talk about the humility of God, the condescension of God to come to earth.

It's right to talk about Philippians chapter 2 or 2 Corinthians 8 or, what did I say, Hebrews chapter 2 as well. Hebrews chapter 12.

It's right to talk about these things. But it's also right to consider that the majesty of heaven has broken into earth. And angels are recognizing what has happened and they cannot but help to do on earth what they do in heaven.

That is, sing in the presence of God. The incarnation is nothing less than heaven coming to earth. This is what we consider later on in the Gospels, Jesus, when he is teaching his disciples to pray and us as well, he prays, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

[12:32] All of a sudden, we understand this is not just Jesus saying, hey, heaven's great. Let's try to copy good things and do good acts. What he is doing when he is teaching his disciples to pray, it's much more than just a thumbs up to heaven.

It is an acknowledgement of the ongoing act that began with the incarnation, that heaven is breaking into earth. The chasm has been traversed and that the culture of heaven will begin, in a sense, to colonize the culture of earth.

Just wrap it up with this. The pinnacle of this inbreaking of heaven is the restoration and the redemption of mankind. And this brings us back to why the incarnation. To redeem us and make us heavenly, mankind's sin and brokenness, it had to be atoned for.

In God's economy, he is perfect, we are not. He can only have perfection in his presence, in relationship to him, we are not. So in God's economy, this could only be done through a perfect human offering, a perfect sacrifice of atonement to satisfy the perfect justice of a perfect God. And you see the problem with that if you consider that mankind is broken and sinful. Therefore, God became what he was not to make us by grace what he is and that is heavenly.

[14:06] So then it is no small thing that the Lord spoke of the incarnation some 700 years before Christmas and he says of the child to be born of the virgin, his name will be Emmanuel, God with us.

for that is who Christ is. He is God with us. We cannot hope to be with God unless God first comes to be with us.

And it took no less than this to redeem us and to make us heavenly like him. Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you for the incarnation. We thank you that it was the only way and the most beautiful way that you could have redeemed us, that heaven could have come to earth, that we could be made like you, righteous, heavenly.

Lord, no amount of good works, strong will, human ingenuity could ever breach or help us to cross rather that chasm between earth and heaven.

But Lord, only in the incarnation could heaven break into earth. And Lord, we thank you for that. We pray that you would help us to understand the incarnation in greater depths.

[15 : 23] And Lord, as a result, Lord, help us to praise you, to magnify your name, to live in a healthy reality of fear and trembling and yet joy and thanksgiving.

We pray all of this in Christ's mighty name. Amen.