

To You, from Above

Luke 2:8-14

December 6, 2020
Steve DeWitt

After a long run of consecutive Sundays preaching, I took this past weekend off. When I shared with our girls that Daddy would be home on Sunday, one of them said with great excitement, "Then you can sit with us at home and watch yourself preach on TV!" Actually, sweetheart, I don't think that will work....

Whether you are on campus or online, thanks for joining as we begin an Advent series here in December entitled, *To You, from Above*. It is wonderful that the story of Jesus' coming has so many intriguing facets to consider, from the wonders of the virgin birth, to the mystery of God becoming flesh, to the story itself of Mary and Joseph and Bethlehem. These and many others are what allow God's people to treasure Christmas year after year.

This year we want to consider Jesus' coming as a gift. A gift from whom? A gift for whom?

The Story

"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" (Luke 2:1-7).

I'm currently reading a biography on this Caesar Augustus and his rise to power in Rome. To become Caesar on the heels of Julius Caesar required transcendent political savvy. The literal backstabbing and corruption make our presidential politics look tame. It also required a lot of money. Just like today, governments got money by taxation. At least we don't have to return to our hometowns to do so. Imagine the griping on social media if that edict went out.

So, the global context for Jesus' birth doesn't feel like generosity and gifts. The context is Roman imperial greed. These were days less about giving and much more about taking. And, as one commentator said it, *there was no taxation without registration*.¹ Off Mary and Joseph go on their famous trip to the legacy hometown of Joseph—Bethlehem.

Important details to the redemptive story are noted. Joseph is going to the city of David. Why? He is in the royal line. Unlike the royal family of England, there was no gilded carriage taking these royals. They trudged along by foot. And Mary, his betrothed, is great with child. Earlier Luke tells the story of the angelic visitation when Gabriel told Mary that she would become pregnant as a virgin—a miraculous conception. The virgin birth is a treasured doctrine, but it would be better named, the virgin conception.

¹ Daniel Doriani, *The Incarnation in the Gospels*, Ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, (Philipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2008) 99.

Joseph also had an angelic visit assuring him that Mary and this baby were God's doing. He obviously accepted this; we don't tend to travel with people we don't like.

There are many other details we could note, but they lie outside of the purpose of this message on the gift of Jesus. It is what the angels say, and the prophets say, that emphasize Jesus as God's gift to us.

"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 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.' 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!'" (Luke 2:8-14)

The cast here is renowned. We start with the sheep. These are likely sheep being raised for temple worship and sacrifice in Jerusalem. They are being watched over by the shepherds. They are world-famous now, but back then they were considered the scum of society. The bottom of the totem pole. As a class, they were notorious thieves and viewed as scallywags who missed worship on the Sabbath too much to be viewed as upright Jews. They were the societal bottom of the barrel. That is to say, they were the last folks you'd expect the angels to appear to and the last you'd expect to be the first to seek out Jesus.

Why, Gabriel? Why announce to shepherds? The answer is obvious as Jesus' life unfolds—he came for sinners. If even low-life shepherds are invited into Jesus' life and salvation, then no one could ever wonder if Jesus came for them.

Perhaps you are listening here in person or online or by radio and you honestly wonder if this gift from God could possibly have your name on it too. You read in John 3 that Jesus showed gospel care for Nicodemus, a religious man. Or you think of the Apostle Paul and all his intellectual prowess and his social standing as a Pharisee and citizen of Rome. You may think, *I can see God wanting to gift people like them salvation, but I can't think God would give me a such a precious gift.*

Few of us can relate to people like Nicodemus or Paul, but who here can't relate in some way to the shepherds? Why did the angels come to them? So that all these years later, people like you and me could stare at Luke 2 and think, *well, if God included the shepherds in the Christmas gift, then I suppose God could include me too!*

"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.' 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!'" (Luke 2:10-14)

The Gift

If an angel from God shows up in your space, what do you think? *Am I in trouble?* The angel quickly tells them, *don't be afraid; this isn't bad news, this is good news.* The Greek word there for good news is an important one through the rest of the New Testament. It is

translated, *gospel*. *Gospel* means "good news." I bring you *gospel*. *Of great joy*. This isn't bad news; this is news that produces great joy. This is the greatest news of all time!

"*Unto you is born this day*." Have you ever thought that language strange? If I came to you and said, *a baby has been born to you*, what would you think? Women in our seniors' ministry would faint. Others would say, *I didn't even know I was pregnant!* How was a baby born to the shepherds who weren't pregnant? How is a baby born to all humanity? He wasn't born to us as our progeny, *he was born to us as God's gift*. The angel makes that clear by describing this baby with three titles: Savior, Christ, and Lord.

Savior

Matthew tells us that an angel told Joseph what Jesus' name should be, "*She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins*" (Matthew 1:21). Jesus' name means *Savior*. *Unto you is born this day a Jesus; a Savior*.

In what way is this child a Savior? Not the way people expected. Even this nativity story shows how Rome dictated the lives of the Jewish people. Were all these people excited to travel around and register for taxation by Rome? No more than we would be. They were under the boot of Rome. Many were looking for a *political* savior. Someone to save them politically. Others were looking for an *ethical* Savior. Someone to save them from all the injustice inflicted upon them. Many wanted a Savior from their physical pain and suffering. Think of the blind men crying out, "*Have mercy on us, Son of David*" (Matthew 9:27).

Of course, the holy heart of Jesus cares about all these cries of humanity even to this day. But that is not what the angel declared. *Unto you is born a politician? Unto you is born a revolutionary? Unto you is born a healer? Unto you is born a philosopher?* No. The good news is that unto us is born a *Savior* who will save his people from their sins.

Christ

"*For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ*" (Luke 2:11). Even shepherds who haven't been to church in awhile would have picked up on this title. *Christ* is the Greek word for the Hebrew *Messiah*. The long prophesied and long-awaited one who would come. The Son of David. The hope of Israel. The anointed one of God.

Lord

This is the third mention of the Lord in this little passage. In verse 9, it was the angel of the Lord who appeared. In verse 10 it was the glory of the Lord that lit the sky. Now in verse 11 the angel of the Lord lit by the glory of the Lord declares the birth of the Lord.

Lord speaks to his exalted position. His authority. His divine majesty. His greatness. The sharp irony is intentional. *In a manger in swaddling cloths is the Lord of Lords*. Wonder upon wonder. How can this be? How can a feeding trough be the throne upon which sits the one who created the galaxies and who even angels, who are morally perfect and cannot lie, praise as Lord of all?

Savior. Christ. Lord. Are these three gifts from God or one gift from God? I think of the gift of my wife. If you were to ask me about my spouse, you might ask, *are you married to an encourager?* Yes. *Are you married to a helpmate?* Yes. *Are you married to a companion?* Yes. *So, you are a polygamist? You seem to be married to three women. Is that right?* No. My wife Jennifer is a precious gift from God. I have one wife who is simultaneously an

encouragement to me, a helpmate to me, and a companion to me. It may sound like God gave me three wives but actually he gave me one wife who is all three.

God's gift of Jesus to us is like that. He is God's greatest gift to us. If he was only one of these three, he would still be God's greatest gift. But he is Savior, Christ, and Lord all in one gift.

The Story. The Gift. For Whom?

A Gift for Whom?

Please note the pronouns here...

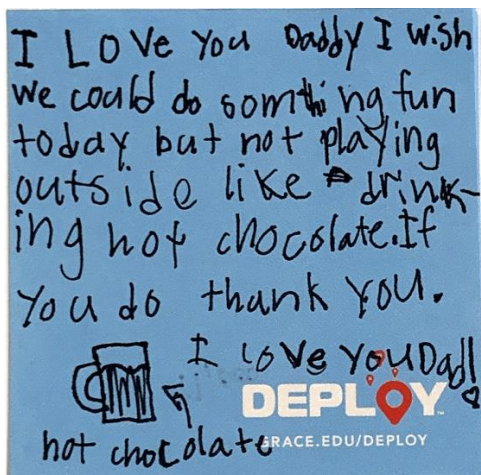
"And the angel said to them, 'Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger'" (Luke 2:10-12, emphasis added).

As we have seen in our series on Romans, answering the question of why Jesus came and died and rose again is a question with a lot of right answers to it. He came to defeat Satan, he came for God's glory, he came in obedience to his heavenly Father, he came to fulfill prophecy, and on and on we could go. But those are not the reasons the angels highlighted to the shepherds, are they? Angels are messengers of God. They told the shepherds exactly what God wanted them to say. *There is a baby whose identity is Savior, Christ, and Lord. He is lying in a manger. But what you need to realize is that he has been born unto you, for you, and for all the people.*

This echoes the emphasis of a famous prophecy of Isaiah: "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6). To us a child. To us a son.

Here is where so many people miss out on the true gift of Christmas because they think salvation is transactional. I do something, and by me doing something, I get God to do something for me. I give you something, you give me something.

This week my 7-year-old daughter wrote me this note on a sticky note:



I love you Daddy. I wish we could do something fun today but not playing outside like drinking hot chocolate. If you do, thank you. I love you Dad. Note arrow and picture of hot chocolate.

I said to Jennifer, "Boy, they start young with the manipulation thing." But what's going on there? She wants hot chocolate. She gives me what I want, *I love you Dad*, so she can get what she wants, *hot chocolate*.

This is human nature and is a great stumbling block to actually receiving the gift of God's salvation through Jesus. If you ask the average person, *when you die are you going to heaven?* If they are mildly religious, they will say, *I think so*. Why? The answer to this question determines whether they believe the true gospel or not.

If the answer is, *because I have _____*. *I live a moral life. I give to the poor. I'm better than most people*. What lies behind that? *Hot chocolate*. I give my heavenly Father what he wants. I do something for him, and then I expect him to give me what I want: eternal life.

How would you answer the question, *why should God allow you into heaven?*

Yet from the very beginning of Jesus' ministry, even the angels want us to realize Jesus is a non-transactional, mono-directional, one-way gift of love from God to us. From God to you. Not because of who you are, your standing in society, your morality, your family, your religiosity. It can't be, because they said this to the bottom-of-the-barrel shepherds, who, if salvation is transactional with God, they had no hope. What do sinners like shepherds need? They need a salvation not based on who they are or what they've done. The Apostle Paul explains salvation as a gift this way, *"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast"* (Ephesians 2:8-9).

You may have no hope to be saved if salvation is based on a spiritual transaction with God, but what if it's a free gift from God? A one-way act of sovereign love and sovereign grace. What if you were one of those shepherds and you ran to see this child in Bethlehem in the manger and on his big toe was tied a note:

*From: God
For: You*

Would your heart be open to receive the gift of Jesus? Christ. Savior. Lord. The words of the angels echo through the ages to us today emphasizing that Jesus is a gift for all who place their trust in who he was: Christ and Lord, and what he did dying on the cross—Savior.

Are you good at receiving gifts? Most of us are. Have you received by faith this gift from God to you?

"Unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:11).

Scripture quotations are taken from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version. ESV® Permanent Text Edition® (2016)*. Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

© 2020 by Steve DeWitt. You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format provided that: (1) you credit the author, (2) any modifications are clearly marked, (3) you do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction, (4) you include Bethel's website address (www.bethelweb.org) on the copied resource.