

Singing the Songs of the Season

Sermon-Based Study Guide
Good Shepherd Presbyterian Church

Luke 2.1-20
December 22 & 23, 2012

When Angels Sing to Earth

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I. Connecting With One Another

In what settings do you experience the most vivid sense of peace? What things threaten that peace? How did the tragic events in Newtown, CT that unfolded Friday December 14th impact your sense of peace?

II. Introduction to this Study

Isaiah. Mary. Zechariah. All singers of songs that have to do with their role in God's amazing act of incarnation - taking on human flesh and dwelling among us. Isaiah was God's voice foretelling an event to come some 740 years later. Mary sings of her willingness to be used by God any way that is pleasing to her Lord. Zechariah bursts out with conviction that his unexpected child will prepare the way for The Lord.

Our passage this week begins in the peaceful quiet of the Judean hillside pasture land between Jerusalem and Bethlehem. Shepherds tending the flock, resting under the starry night sky, the deafening silence broken only by occasional bleats of a lamb. Then an amazing message of a true Savior and the most Sovereign Lord. And to their astonished ears comes a song sung by heavenly, angelic creatures, that pierces the dark silence and declares the advent of God's peace.

III. Study the Text

- a. Take your time as you read through Luke 2.1-20. Don't let their familiarity cause you to overlook what unfolds in these verses.
- b. As you look more closely at verses 1 through 3 it is helpful to know that under the reign of Caesar Augustus (27 B.C. to A.D. 14) the Roman Empire entered into a time known as Pax Romana. This period extended to around A.D. 108 and was characterized by a unified empire, the absence of civil wars within it, and a period of peace throughout the empire. It is early in this period of Pax Romana that Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census be taken which would also identify all land owners in the empire in order to tax their property. Land owners were required to return to the city in which they owned property and to register there.

What does this suggest about Joseph who is living in Nazareth of Galilee (70 miles north of Bethlehem)? How does this decree break into the peaceful lives of Joseph and Mary?

- c. Verses 4 and 5 describe the trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Joseph was required to make this trip, Mary was not. Did you notice the description of Joseph's lineage?

By the way, do you know the literal meaning of the name Bethlehem? It is "House of Bread." The city is referred to in Micah 5.2 - take a look at the prophet's description of Bethlehem found there. Now look at John 6.32-42. How does Jesus identify himself in this passage? What kind of ruler is this one who is the Bread of Life? What kind of kingdom does he rule over?

Can you think of some reasons Joseph takes Mary with him aside from the fact the child's birth is imminent and Joseph wants to be there for the birth?

- d. Verses 6 and 7 describe the birth of Jesus. It's a simple, almost understated event. What is significant about Jesus being placed in a manger? What does it suggest about his family's status, place in society, or wealth?

Let me attempt to clarify the setting. Joseph was from Bethlehem, from David's lineage, and probably owned property in Bethlehem. This suggests he has many relatives there. The notion that there was no place for them to be provided hospitality from family is an absurd notion to Middle Eastern minds. Hospitality was the family's highest priority. We have grown accustomed to the images of an over-crowded inn (the Greek word for "inn" is "pandochion" as in Luke 10.34). In verse 7 the word translated "inn" is the Greek "katalouma" which really means "guest room." Rather than being turned away from an overcrowded inn it is more likely Joseph and Mary were staying in a relative's house that was crowded with family. There was no guest or spare room - so they placed Jesus in a manger either at the far end of the house or just outside the house where animals would have been kept.

- e. Luke next focuses on a group of shepherds tending to a flock of sheep (verses 8 through 15). Shepherds were deemed to be "unrighteous" because their occupation stood in the way of participating in the Temple rituals. They were marginalized, outcast, unclean.

What happens when the angel of the Lord appears and shatters the peaceful silence? How does the angels' message contrast with the then popular notion that Caesar Augustus was the Savior and Lord who brings peace to the world?

What promise is sung by the angelic chorus in verse 14? How would you describe the effect and the extent of the peace that Jesus gives?

- f. Look at verses 16 through 20. How does this announcement impact the shepherds and their sense of worth? How do they begin to sing the song that the angels had sung (verse 17-18)? How, according to verse 20, have their lives been changed?

IV. Reflect and Respond

- How do you experience the peace of Christ in your life, in relation to others, and in those moments when peace is threatened?
- In what ways can you sing the message that the angels sang - of good news of great joy and of peace with God - to your family, friends, co-workers, neighbors, and others?
- How have you experienced the value, worth, dignity, and significance that God deems you to have?

V. Pray

- For yourself and the Good Shepherd congregation to experience the presence of God and the fullness of God's Holy Spirit, to have a passion for Jesus Christ and for making him known to others, and to continue to be used by God to sing the good news into our world.
- For the people of Newtown, CT who have experienced such devastating loss. For those near and dear to us who find the holidays to be difficult due to the loss of a loved one, financial distress, health problems, or other reasons.
- For our nation's leaders to have wisdom, courage, and integrity in dealing with significant issues like the budget, the role of government, our involvement in military actions, and other challenges they face.