

Four Little Words

Sermon-Based Study Guide
Good Shepherd Presbyterian Church

Luke 2.1-20 | December 24, 2017

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I. Introduction to this Study

This week we finish our series engaging the Four Little Words of Advent: Hope, Peace, Joy and Love. In this study we will look at "Love" through Luke's account of the birth of Jesus.

II. Connecting with One Another

What is your favorite Christmas carol and why?

III. Study the Text

- a. Read Luke 2.1-20. Take your time, don't let familiarity cause you to overlook what unfolds in these verses.
- b. As you look more closely at verses 1-3, it is helpful to know that under the reign of Caesar Augustus (27 B.C.—A.D. 14) the Roman Empire entered into a time known as Pax Romana ("Roman Peace"). 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 land. It is early in this era of Pax Romana that Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census be taken which, in part, would 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 register there.

What does this tell us about Joseph, who is living in Nazareth of Galilee (70 miles north of Bethlehem)? How does this decree interrupt the lives of Joseph and Mary?

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

By the way, in case you didn't know, the literal meaning of Bethlehem is "House of Bread." The city is referred to in Micah 5.2—take a look at the description found there. Now look at John 6.32-42. How does Jesus identify himself in this passage? The Bread of Life is born in the House of Bread—cool!

- d. Verses 6-7 describe the birth of Jesus. Let's clarify the setting. Joseph was from Bethlehem, from David's lineage, and probably owned property in Bethlehem. This suggests he has relatives there. The idea that there was no place for them—no hospitality provided from family members—is an absurd notion to Middle Eastern minds. Hospitality was the family's highest priority. We have grown accustomed to the idea of an over-crowded inn, thinking of it like a hotel. (The Greek word for

“inn” is “pandochion” as in Luke 10.34). However, in verse 7 the word translated “inn” is the Greek “katalouma” which means “guest room.” Rather than being turned away from an overcrowded inn/hotel it is much 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. Reread verses 6-7 and see if that makes sense!

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

What happens when the angel of the Lord appears and shatters the 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?

- f. 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?
- g. Look at verses 16-20. 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 (verses 17-18)? How, according to verse 20, have their lives been changed?

IV. Reflect and Respond

- a. What does it mean that a “Savior has been born to you”? What does this say about God’s love for you and God’s love for “all the people”?
- b. In what ways can you sing the message that the angels sang—of good news and great joy and of peace with God—to your family, friends, co-workers, neighbors and others? How can you share the love that has been lavished on you?
- c. What events from your past have you “treasured up” and “pondered” in your heart, as Mary did? What might be God doing right now in your life?

V. Pray

- a. For yourself and the Good Shepherd congregation to experience the presence of God and the fullness of God’s Spirit, to have a passion for Jesus and for making him known to others, and to continue to be used by God to share the good news of God’s love into our world.
- b. For victims of our recent fires to experience the love of God through the kindness, care, provision and generosity of others. To find out what our denomination is doing and how you can help, visit this website: <http://eco-pres.org/socalfirerelief/>