

## *Song of Angels*

Luke 2:8-20

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Thank you so much. At this time, I want to invite our children who are four years old to 1<sup>st</sup> grade to be excused to their time of children's church. On Wednesday, October 3 of this year at 2:18 p.m., many of us received the following announcement. "Presidential alert. This is a test of the national wireless emergency alert system. No action is needed." Or at least most of us received that announcement.

Well, what happened as a result of that, many people texted each other. People went to their favorite form of social media, and the debates began. One of the things that was very clear is that oftentimes, announcements are a playground for watching responses. And there were responses galore. Some people loved it. Some people were like, wait a second, how did they get my number? Others were like, wait a second, why didn't I get that alert? Others decided to go, #godarkturnyourphoneoff because I'm concerned that President Trump could somehow directly message me.

And it demonstrated the nature and the situation of our culture. We live in a culture that is so dialed in technologically. We begin to be worried about, wait a second, do I even want to be able to be available to this regardless of who's sending it. Number 2, within our culture of distrust – and whether it's among politicians or us of our politicians – it became a playground for watching a psychological analysis of both announcement and the people who receive it.

That is precisely what we find in the text this morning. As we begin this Advent series, Songs of Christmas, we look at the song of angels which came first as an announcement. And it is important to situate that announcement, not only those who were giving it, but those who were receiving it. And to be reminded that we, as we consider and read through this passage together, we, too, are a part of those receiving the announcement. But how do we situate ourselves in the passage? Not just how do we situate ourselves in the passage, how do we see this announcement still having any application to us today? Because it, indeed, does. In revealing the hand of the Scriptures, we are still a people of Advent.

Our series on Advent, our worship in the season of Advent, is intended to be countercultural. It's not meant to be full of sentimentality or merely great decorations – and I love our decorations. Thank you to the team who did this. But be reminded, it is not just to be a time of poinsettias and songs. This is an announcement that we, as a people of God, are still a people of Advent who are awaiting a king as it has already been said this morning that when He returns, He will restore all things and all kingdoms, all governments, will come to an end.

How do we situate ourselves in receiving that announcement? Let's consider it together. The song of angels, Luke 2:8-14:

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 shown 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 clothes and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising 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, and the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has made known to us." And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Pray with me.

Now, Lord, we ask that you would bring this announcement to us in a way which is fresh which is empowered by your Holy Spirit to challenge us again, drawing us unto you in dependence for salvation and for daily life and as those who are called to be a people who await your return. Help us, O Lord, to sing and to praise along with all of heaven. But to be a people who await patiently, longingly, for the Lord of glory to come again. In Jesus's name. Amen.

So, you'll see in your outline: announcement, praise, and wonder. First, the announcement. The announcement isn't merely the repetition of what had been fulfilled in the songs which had been sung before which we will look at in the coming weeks. But this announcement is unique even among the gospels because it is the only place where these three names are mentioned together – that is, all three together in one place.

The first thing we notice about the announcement, they tell us that it is good news, which we will get to in a moment. And they're delivering it to the shepherds. They tell them not to fear because it's not the angels that they ought to fear. It is the Lord who they are called to fear. And the angels recite to them, "Be at peace. We bring you good news." And what is this good news? This good news is an announcement of a birth and this name which is unique. And it tells us here in verse 11, "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior," that is the first name, "who is Christ," the second name, "the Lord," the third name. Savior, Christ, and Lord all together. And in giving us these names together, it gives us the full scope of what this child, this person, this Son of God was to do.

First, Savior literally means "deliverer." Now this name could be applied, and was applied even to physicians, those who were delivering others from sickness. Savior could be one that is given divinely, or it could also be given to a human. Here, it was given because as anyone who had received this name is because they were recognized for rescuing, delivering others from peril. So, this child who was to be born is to be called Savior. It is commensurate with the words of Matthew that says, "You will give him the name Jesus for he shall save his people from their sin." He shall deliver them from the peril, from the folly, from the brokenness of sin.

The second name, Christ we learn also from the Old Testament, it would've been "Messiah" in Semitic language. It is a name which would have had regal or royal overtones. It would have been One that would've been applied to kings like King David. This One who would indeed be the Messiah, the One who would be the leader, the One who would be the redeemer. So, in some sense, He is a Savior, He is a deliverer from peril, He's a deliverer from sin because He is also the Christ. He is the one for the many. He is the sacrifice. And He would be royal.

And then the final third name, Lord. So far, we've only heard this name in the gospel of Luke in 1:43, but otherwise it is used by God to recognize His absolute sovereignty. And this, for Luke, would be a continued and repeated theme. For Jesus is to be understood as Lord, as One who is the absolute sovereign. So, here you have Savior, Christ, and Lord. He is the deliverer who is the Christ who is the absolute sovereign.

If we remove any one of those facets from our understanding of Jesus, we will have reduced Him to something that He is not. He is the Lord. He is the one who is to be feared. He is the one who's being announced to shepherds. In just a moment, we hear their praise towards the end of the passage. Why would shepherds be praising this idea? Why would this be good news for them? Because they're shepherds, they're on the low rung of the totem pole of culture. The lower you are, the poorer you are, the more great news this is.

But even more than that, notice what the passage tells us. He doesn't just announce the name. It gives us more detail. It says, "For to us is born this day in the city of David who is Christ the Lord." So, we have these names announced, but it is situated in a particular way. It says He is born in the city of David. So, in the event that Christ was not royal or regal enough for us, it says that He was born in the birthplace of David, the city of David, which is to situate for the hearers and to enter us into that these names aren't just names out of context. It is in the context of one who is royal, one who is regal, one who is born in a kingly context.

But more than that, again, he doesn't allow us just to stay there. It goes on and it says in verse 12 that "this will be a sign for you, for you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger." Why is that important? Because of what has already been said to us in the gospel of Luke from Mary as she says, "And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation, he has shown strength with his arm, he has scattered the proud and the thoughts of their hearts." Meaning, He lets the proud get drowned in their own pride. But He's doing something in the midst of it. This has overtones of the Psalms because the psalmist said, I saw the hands of the powerful, it was only growing more powerful; my foot almost slipped, but yet I saw their outcome. You allow them to be full of pride, and in the short run they seem to win. But they will just drown in it in the end.

But more than that, she says, "He has given strength with his arm, he has scattered the proud and the thoughts of their hearts, he has brought down the mighty from their thrones, exalted those of humble estate, and he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty." Meaning, they have already won the lottery, but they don't get to keep it. The point is, He is regal, and He is royal. But watch this. It is also in the context of a birthing trough. Literally translated, "in the birthing trough," meaning He was born in the waiting room of the vet's office. He was born at the vet's office where we take our animals to be cared for.

But as one writer said, "We can't stop there." Not only was this child to be the Christ, the Savior, the Lord born in the royal city of David, but He was born in a birthing trough and His life would end as an execution outside the courthouse. So, there you have the bookends of this One who is the Christ, Savior, and Lord born at the vet's office, executed outside the courthouse. This is an announcement to those who have been cast away, those who are downtrodden, those who are poor in spirit, those who are not welled up in their pride, but those who desire to be delivered. This is an announcement of good news and great joy.

But how is it received? It begins as where all praise begins, not here, but in heaven. The announcement is given by those who gave it, and they erupt in song. As we see here in verse 13, "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.'" This announcement is first heard and reflected in the praise of heaven. Praise does not begin on earth. It always begins in heaven. Our praise is always drawn after the pattern of heaven. What we do here corporately is a mirror picture of what is happening beyond number in the heavenly hosts. Glory to God in the highest, giving to God the highest of praise, an announcement that His weight, and His glory, His sovereignty is worthy of all praise.

But thanks be to God, we worship a heavenly Father who does not simply allow that praise to remain in heaven and give us no earthly good. For isn't that what it says? It says, "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased." So, praise in heaven at this

announcement is linked with our experience of peace here. It is good news because it is an invitation. If you believe in this One who is announced, He invites you to experience that which He will purchase for us, peace, deliverance, the flourishing of what it means to be human, to be reconciled among ourselves, to be reconciled with our heavenly Father through this One who is announced.

What a beautiful picture, that when in the Godhead there is glory and praise at the announcement of this One, there is to be experienced peace among us. That's also the way it should work in our families. When there is love and praise among a father and mother, where there is mutual submission, respect, and honor, the children are blessed. Does it mean they're perfect? No. But they are blessed.

At the passing of George H.W. Bush this week, many have been reminded of the way in which he loved his wife, Barbara. While at war in World War II, he wrote the following words to her:

"I love you, precious, with all my heart. To know that you love me means life. How often I have thought about the immeasurable joy that will be ours someday. How lucky our children will be to have a mother like you. And if you ask them, they'll be the first to say they were."

And to both Barbara and George, regardless of what you think of them in their politics, to their dying day, their children experienced the blessing of the praise and love among their father and their mother. Because that's the pattern that follows the most transcendent pattern.

This praise that breaks out in the heavenly host is the Lord breaking through. And He's saying, do you see what this announcement brings? It doesn't just bring me glory. I mean for it to bring you peace. Our God is a gracious and loving Father. And our constitution, our confessions of faith, our catechisms say that our God is God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, equal in power and glory. And they praise them one among another, not because they are selfish and greedy for praise. But because when the Godhead is glorified, we are invited in and we receive the fruits. There is the link. This is why the announcement is good news.

But then we also have wonder. So, here the announcement has happened. It's been told to them not to feat but to receive it. The praise has broken out in heaven. And now we see the responses. The responses are this, that the shepherds say, okay, let's go. Let's go see this thing that has been announced to us. And it tells us in verse 20 that the shepherds returned glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen as it had been told to them, because what they had done is they heard the announcement, they went to see if it was true, they found Mary and Joseph, they explained to Mary and Joseph what has happened to them. And everyone marvels. And the shepherds go off, and they are praising the Lord because now they've seen. They've heard the announcement, they've seen its fulfillment. They see the praise of heaven. And now they cannot help but rejoice.

But then you also have the wonder of Mary. Mary, it says in verse 19, "But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart." I used this word "wonder" because that is precisely what is happening here in the text when it says that she treasured it up, that she pondered it. It means that Mary does something even more deep, if you will, than what the shepherds did. She now reflects on this at a much deeper level, this idea of pondering. It is an idea of, she's rolling it around in her mind. She's rehearsing it. And she is caught up in wonder. Because now the shepherds and now Mary are no longer in the dark about who this Jesus is to be. It's not that they won't struggle and battle with it and doubt at times. We certainly see that in the gospels. But here in this moment, we see that their wonder is directed to what God has revealed, not what they cooked up in their hearts.

Because, you see, the shepherds came, and they announced, this is what the heavenly angels announced to us. And we see that they all marveled at it. Mary's starting to put all the pieces together, oh, this is why He's given the name Jesus. What that's going to look like, she doesn't know fully yet. But she's putting the pieces together because it has been revealed to her, not made up by her. The shepherds are

the same. They're not applying their wishes and desires onto this announcement. It has been revealed to them.

What are we waiting for? We're to be a people of Advent. We're not just rehearsing and going back and congratulating ourselves that we're still thinking about Advent, the first one. We are in Advent. Who are we expecting to return? Who do we imagine Jesus to be? This has been a cultural thing for a long time. Regardless of what part of the country you're from, regardless of what you grew up in, we have some idea or imagining of what this Jesus is like.

Several years ago, a popular film gave an absurd example of this. And I'm going to use absurdity to draw us to the conclusion. This is an argument among a family at dinner. And they're praying. Well, they're trying to pray to the Lord. And the wife is upset with the husband because he keeps praying to the baby Jesus. And she says,

"Hey, you know, sweetie, Jesus did grow up. You don't always have to call him 'baby.' It's a bit odd and off-putting to pray to a baby."

And he responds, "Well, I like the Christmas Jesus best. I'm saying grace. When you say grace, you can say it to the grown-up Jesus or the teenage Jesus or the bearded Jesus, whoever you want."

"Well, you know what, I want you to do this grace so good that God will let us win tomorrow."

"Okay. Dear Jesus, in your golden fleece diapers with your tiny little balled up fists –"

"Hey, he was a man! He had a beard."

"Look, I like the baby version of Jesus best. Do you hear me? I win races and I get the money."

Somebody else at the table says, "I like to picture Jesus in a tuxedo t-shirt 'cause it says, 'I want to be formal, but I like to party, too.' Because I do like to party, and I like my Jesus to party."

Another person at the table, "I like to picture Jesus in a ninja fighting off an evil samurai."

Another person, "I like to think of Jesus like he has giant eagle wings and singing the lead vocals for Lynard Skynard, with like an angel band. And I'm in the front row."

And so, the debate goes on. Now, while that is keenly absurd, we have all kinds of pictures of who Jesus is. And we want to think back on His first Advent and thinking of Him as this child who was born in a trough and He had swaddling clothes. But this text will not allow us to sentimentalize Jesus born as an infant. Because He was given a name which was announced which is good news to those who trust in the Lord. But if you do not, this is not good news. It is threatening news. If you don't believe or trust that you need to be delivered from sin, this is offensive. But we're still called to ask, who do you picture this Jesus to be? Jesus came and was born in a feeding trough at the vet's office. And He would die outside Jerusalem among criminals. But He was raised again on the third day. And when He ascended into heaven, He said, "I will return again."

And so, we remain a people of Advent. This is the day of the Lord's salvation. The praise that was announced is still being announced in heaven. And we are still invited to receive and are invited into the peace that can be ours through Christ the Lord who is the Savior. But if we do not, we run the risk of awaiting a day which is promised to come. And when He comes again, He will come as Lord and Judge. For that is who He is. But today, as a people of Advent, let us have our picture of who Jesus is, not who we imagine Him to be created in our own hearts, but who He's revealed Himself to be. He is Savior, Christ, and Lord. And as the angels sing, we, too, are called to sing and rejoice. For He is our Savior who delivers us from sin and peril, and who shares the riches of heaven with all those who depend upon Him. Let's pray.

Father, we ask that you would hear our prayers, for you are a Lord of promise. For in this announcement of good news, you remind us of it as a people of Advent still, that this is good news. Your Son, our Lord, the Christ who is our Savior, Jesus. Deliver us from our sin. Redeem us, restore us,

reconcile us to our heavenly Father. Bring peace among us. And while we wait, may you build in us by your Spirit a hope of who Jesus had been revealed to be, who is the Son of God, who will come again to judge. But you, Lord, now invite us to rejoice in our Savior. Help us to do that. Help us to do that anew in this Advent season as we are reminded we are longing for the Lord of restoration to make all things new. We ask this in Jesus's name. Amen.