

A Call to Praise
The Call of Christmas – IV
December 18, 2016

For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love⁵ he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves.

Ephesians 1:4-6 (NIV)

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world.² (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.)³ And everyone went to their own town to register.

⁴ So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David.⁵ He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child.⁶ While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born,⁷ and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

⁸ And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night.⁹ An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.¹⁰ But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people.¹¹ Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.¹² This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

¹³ Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

*¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”*

¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”

¹⁶ So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger.¹⁷ When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child,¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

Luke 2:1-20 (NIV)

As I mentioned last week, the first people of the first “Call of Christmas,” were all pretty exemplary people. Zechariah and Elizabeth, “righteous and blameless in the eyes of God;” Mary a young virgin who responded immediately after receiving the word of God from the angel Gabriel, “I am your servant Lord, let it be to me according to your word;” and last week we looked at Joseph who seemed to be pretty righteous and of good character himself. But now, this morning, as “The Call of Christmas” goes out, the world gets turned upside down.

Have you ever been faced with something in your sight lines that took your breath away? I've never witnessed it myself but I am told that the first view of the Grand Canyon will do that. Or perhaps it's when your eyes first caught site of Niagara Falls. Sometimes it occurs when you're driving. There are a couple of spots traveling on I-77 in Virginia, or I-75 in Tennessee, that you round that curve and there is that beautiful valley stretched out as far as you can see. Usually the first time you see it that is the best, but it's pretty good each time after as well. Sometimes it's man made. Maybe you're one of the many millions who have witnessed the night sky extravaganza inside the Magic Kingdom at Disney World as the evening fireworks are displayed and they culminate in the grand finale. Each of those instances is a sight to hold, a breathtaking experience, a memorable moment.

But as memorable and great as those moments might have been for you, none of them can compare to what the shepherds experienced in their "Call of Christmas." Nothing on this side of heaven can take the place of the shock and the holy awe the shepherds experienced on the night that heaven came down and kissed the earth. You know that prayer that we pray often, the Lord's Prayer, when we pray "your kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven," this is one of the few times in all of history that it has happened. The Magic Kingdom has nothing on the Kingdom of God when it comes to a heavenly host lighting up the sky and blasting a chorus of praise that proclaimed the first "Call of Christmas" to the shepherds. It was a call to praise! "Glory to God in the highest!" "And on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests." Those were the words the angels proclaimed on the night when their eternal King who was, and is, and is to come, took on flesh and was born in a manger.

Luke's gospel sets the stage of this scene in and around the little town of Bethlehem. That is where the prophecies of long ago foretold that the Messiah would be born. The ruler of the day, Caesar Augustus, thought a new census needed to be taken to update the tax rolls, so all the Jewish people who had migrated away from their hometowns near Jerusalem had to travel back. The fact that they had to travel by foot, or foot and donkey at best, just so they could be counted so they could be taxed at a greater amount, had to make them angry and frustrated. There was no doubt in their minds that they were still under the control of the Roman Empire. That was the news of the day. That was the bad news. But the Good News is about to come. The Good News is that God sends Himself into the fury, to bring peace.

Little did Caesar Augustus know that God was at work through his annoying and frustrating Roman decree. Just as we have learned that God has a way of using all kinds of people, both good and bad, to fulfill his purposes here on earth, he also moves through the affairs of nations to accomplish His purposes. So . . . if you are feeling a little annoyed or frustrated, or maybe even outright furious due to recent events in a certain nation, take heart, God longs to insert Himself into our current situation to bring us peace and give us hope.

God comes into our ordinary lives in extraordinary ways. Three times in our Scripture passage this morning Luke mentions the common manger as the unique sign where the shepherds will find the Christ child wrapped in swaddling clothes. And the splendor of the vision from the angels to the shepherds would forever change not only their lives but also the lives of all those who eventually hear the Good News they will share.

The Advent message the angel had communicated to Mary and Joseph months ago in Nazareth, had finally arrived. Jesus the Messiah was about to be born to Mary the virgin and her faithful husband Joseph, who was by her side all the way. It had been a long 70 mile journey, over many days and many hills of rough terrain from Nazareth in Galilee up to the city of David just outside of Jerusalem; especially for a pregnant woman in her third trimester. Some ask that, “if she was that far along, why did she even go?” But do you really think that Joseph was going to leave her behind after he had answered God’s call to protect her and the baby to come? And it wasn’t like they had a nice hospital with a maternity suite just waiting for them back in Nazareth. The conditions to deliver a baby back in the day were rather stark, no matter where the woman found herself when she was ready to deliver.

But Mary’s delivery was one of the starkest. Traveling the 70 miles by foot or on the back of a donkey while the baby boy was bouncing on her bladder, and then having to deliver in a manger out back, that’s about as stark as it gets. But they made it. And their secret message from the angel soon would be expanded beyond just the two of them. The angels were about to go public with the proclamation of the Messiah’s birth. Up to this point, the angelic encounters regarding “The Call of Christmas” had been one on one. First with Zechariah in the temple, and then to Mary, and then to Joseph. And as we have learned so far, they have all been pretty exemplary people.

When the angel shares the message of the Messiah in the first public setting, it was not to a righteous and blameless priest in the Temple near the Holy of Holies, nor to a virgin chosen to be the mother of God, nor to a just man who was faithful Jew; rather, it was out in the fields to a bunch of society’s outcasts.

It is not just a coincidence that the first public “Call of Christmas” comes to some of the lowliest of society in the day, the shepherds. And we don’t really know how many of them there were. Just like we don’t really know how many of the Magi, Kings or Wisemen there were, though we often just assume three because they brought three gifts. And it really isn’t that important how many of either group there were. What is important is who they represent. And in the day shepherds made up one of the lowliest of occupations, they were considered to be some of the most untrustworthy in character, even too ceremonially unclean for worship. That is the first group of people with whom God wants the message to go public with.

What the shepherds experienced out in the field that night was unforgettable. It all but took their breath away which is why the first words from the angel dealt with naming and trying to calm their fear. The angel said to them, “do not be afraid!”

Billy Graham, in his book, “Angels, God’s Secret Agents,” says that “over and over again the presence of angels was frightening to those to whom they came.” The Scriptures tell us that that appearance of an angel was often awe-inspiring, something that initially awakened fear. They represent a presence that has greatness and sends a chill down the spine. One of the first tasks of the angels of light was to calm the fears to those they first appear.

But when the angel had quieted the fears of the shepherds, he brought the message, one which would forever be connected with the Good News:

Behold, I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people.

¹¹ Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”
Luke 2:10b-12 (NIV)

The shepherds did not need to fear because the angel sent by God did not bring bad news but good news. The shepherds already knew the bad news, that the whole human race had sinned and was lost in its sinfulness. The angel came proclaiming Good News, that God was doing something about their lostness, He was sending a Savior, and it wasn't just for them, or a certain group of people, it was for the entire world, “for all people.”

The Good News was that the Savior had come. In the ancient world, a Savior was primarily a deliverer from disease, from danger, or relief from the conditions of the world one found himself or herself in. But Jesus' arriving was to take care of something much greater than that. Jesus' arriving was to take care of our sin problem. Not just other people's sin problem but our own sin problem. The whole human race needed someone who could bring them back into fellowship with God because all the sacrifices and all the blood of bulls and goats could not do it in any permanent way. But the blood of the Savior who had arrived could.

The angel's message is “God has come; redemption is possible. God first sent one angel to the shepherds urging them “not to be afraid, because he has brought Good News, not just for them but for all people. The long awaited Savior, Messiah, Lord and King had been born in Bethlehem. Just as the shepherds are about to catch their breath from that amazing news, a whole host of angels break upon the scene and light up the sky with their presence and praise.

¹³ Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, ¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

This again is one of those unforgettable moments for those involved in the first “Call of Christmas.”

Biblical scholar William Hendricksen makes the point that these angels, having been associated with Christ in heaven before His incarnation, knew already something about His glory, riches and majesty. It is a scene reminiscent of three other chapters in the Bible of what happens, or was prophesied to happen, when heaven and earth meet in the presence of the King. For the sake of time I am only going to look at one of them, Isaiah 6:1-7. The other two are found in the Book of Revelation (4:1-11 and 5:1-14).

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. ² Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. ³ And one called to another and said: “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!” ⁴ And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. ⁵ And I said: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean

lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!”

⁶ Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. ⁷ And he touched my mouth and said: “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.” Isaiah 6:1-7 (ESV)

The angels who had resided in heaven around the throne of God had lived lives that praised and honored God, as well as Jesus. They had become aware of man’s fall and they were first hand witnesses to God providing a way of salvation for all of humanity. How could they not praise God? How could they not shout out, “Glory to God in the Highest!?” The angels desire was the same as God’s, that all creation shall praise His holy name! Their angelic performance before the shepherds that first Christmas night made an indelible impression on those who had a front row seat to what happens when heaven and earth come together. As the heavenly host returned to heaven from where they came, the shepherds soon would heed their Call of Christmas to go and see for themselves, the Savior born in the manger, and then to join in the praising of the one whom they would find **and** the one who had sent Him.

The shepherds knew what they had been told. They way it was told to them there was no way that they were not going to go. And go they did. And when they got there, they told all who were present what the angel had told them. Suddenly the secret was out. It was no longer just a secret from an angel to Zechariah and Mary and Joseph. These men from the fields had been told where to find the Messiah, the baby in the manger wrapped in swaddling cloths. That will be the sign. And that message is what Mary treasured in her heart. It is the message that the shepherds would tell to all whom they came into contact with, not only in Bethlehem, but upon returning to where they had come. The shepherds were the first evangelists of the Good News!

The “Call of Christmas” to Praise God and give glory to Him and His Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, is the primary calling upon our lives as Christians.

Our Call to Worship this morning from Ephesians:

For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love ⁵ he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will— ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. Ephesians 1:4-6 (NIV)

If we don’t feel that primary “Call of Christmas” to praise and give glory to God our Father and Jesus the Son, our Savior and Lord, then something is wrong. Somewhere we have missed it. We have yet to grasp just how sinful we are, how sinful I am, and what God has done for me through the gift of His Son. And what Jesus did for me on the cross. If we grasp that correctly, then we cannot help but answer the Call to Praise Him!