
Two Ages

Luke 2:8-20¹

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It is a quiet late spring night. Two parents sit in the stable bathed in the glow of a lantern. A small town is swelled with people so that there is no place to stay. The young woman is quietly and fulfillingly tired. Their journey has ended this day with the birth of their little boy. He lies sleeping in the manger where the animals normally feed. What strange promises, providences, and provision by God have brought them to this moment! There, at that moment, heaven was on earth in baby. In this little one Immanuel comes. While in his future there loomed the darkling shadow of a cross. Here is the end of the beginning and the beginning of the end.

The Messengers of the Old Covenant (v.8-14)

Angels were often messengers in the Old Covenant. They come and appear at dramatic points in the Old Testament to speak to man about God. Now these messengers are sent to the hillsides near Bethlehem. These messengers of the Old Covenant are angels who will point to Christ.

⁸ And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹² And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

In their Appearance (v.8-9)

An angelic visitation had prepared the parents of both the Messiah and his messenger. This angel's awesome appearing means something great is about to break into redemptive history.

There will be revelation in midst of silence. For a God who speaks, the long years of silence have been stunning. Yes, there was the Old Testament scripture where God had spoken and continued His voice. But for 400 years no prophet came

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with a Word from God. No visions. No angelic voices. But now heaven's Word coming to earth sparked new words to those on the earth.

There will be light breaking through the darkness. Make no mistake that the gospel writers are portraying a deep and deadly darkness. The nation was largely unbelieving. The religious leaders were steeped in legalism. Open denial of the supernatural jockeyed for supremacy in Judaism. The Messianic hope was focused on national deliverance. In the beginning, in the first creation, God spoke and light was. In the new beginning, in the new Creation, God sent and the light came.

There will be glory outside the Temple. Luke is careful to record that that angelic person is surrounded by the glory of God. This is *not* the personal glory of a magnificent heavenly being. This is the glory of God surrounding the messenger of the Old Covenant. The glory had departed the Temple, the city and the people. It had not returned after the exile. Now the glory appears once again, not to abide in Herod's temple, but to clothe an angelic messenger. The glory will return, not to dwell in an immense building of stone, but in a tiny body of flesh.

There will be awe among the common people. Shepherds were a lowly lot, a dishonored profession. The glory of Israel's shepherd kings had now fallen into such disrepute that shepherds were not allowed to present their sacrifices themselves. But it is to shepherds that the most public announcement of the Messiah's birth comes. Shepherds have always been at the center of God's covenantal dealings. Moses was a shepherd, 40 years at the flock and 40 years over Israel. Abraham was a shepherd, tending vast flocks across the fields of Canaan. David was a shepherd, anointed as king straight from his flock and first of the Shepherd Kings of Israel. Each served in a common task and was called to an uncommon duty.

So stunning light, revelation, and glory appear as heaven intrudes into earth where common shepherds watch their flocks now washed in awe and afraid.

In their Announcement (v.10-12)

The Old Covenant is coming to a close and the New Covenant is being inaugurated. As these spheres overlap in the announcement of the angel and in the coming of the Anointed, here is the structure of the message.

There is a call to fear not (v.10). The natural reaction to such glory and greatness is fear. That is understandable. The raw, pure glory of God would do nothing but consume our depravity. Who can see the glory of God and live? What folly not to be in fear. The shepherd's reaction is everything the Old Covenant brought – with its lightening and thundering around Mt Sinai, there was glory there. Yes, but what a fearsome, frightening glory. But in the Old Covenant there was also good news and gladness for those with eyes to see and ears to hear. The messenger of the Old Covenant bids fear cease where the gospel comes and gladness flows. It is not just for these shepherds, it is for all the people of the nation. In Luke, it will become for all the peoples across the world.

There is a message to be believed (v.11). The good news is not just good news about there being good news. The good news is about a joy for all people. The good news is a message about a person. It is about the Lord Jesus Christ born as a true human while being God of very God. The good news is about a Savior and a Sovereign. It is about a Redeemer and a Ruler. It is about what all the Old Covenant previewed, preached, prophesied and pointed to. It is not about a future age for a future Jewish nation. It is the Messiah, born in David's city to David's line to become our savior and our king. Now this is only good news if we recognize that we need a savior. It is only good news if the kings that rule our hearts and thus our lives are severe masters and terrible despots. Oh, fear not. Fear not the crushing load of the Law's guilt. Fear not the glorious brightness in Jesus' face. He is the good news of gladness for His people.

There is application to guide obedience (v.12). The sign here is not to authenticate the messenger as do the sign works of Jesus and the apostles. This sign will only be meaningful and helpful if the shepherds believe the message and obey its call. How will they know they have found the one announced? When they have moved among the stables, checking mangers for a baby wrapped in strips of cloths. The glorious nature of the message also moves in practical good for the hearer. Faith does not merely agree with the announcement, it moves toward the one announced. So, God is good to His people in illuminating the useful paths where faith will move. Thus the angelic message gives practical guidance for the obedience of believing hearts.

In their Acclaim (v.13-14)

Suddenly the night's dark clouds dissolve into the light of a great gathering of the heavenly host. There is great acclaim, for the word of the message is followed by the worship of the messengers. A vast multitude of angelic beings crowd the sky lifting their voices in chanted praise. Don't think choir here. Don't imagine a vast robe clad chorus at the Scalia. The word *host* here is the word for an army. Think rank upon rank of heavenly warriors arrayed behind their leader. The scene would be reminiscent of the immense gathering of a Roman legion who in a thunderous roar cheers the appearance of the Emperor.

I have stood on many occasions with 1,400 men at a pastor's conference and listened to the deep throated praise of male voices filled with glory of the greatness of God. It is something to hear. From heaven's throne to earth's footstool, the angelic army of God raises loud their male voices in a mighty chant of worship. Wondering shepherds gaze with awe as their fear runs away and their faith rises up.

Their worship then is about the glory of God in the highest and the good to men in the lowest. Their worship is first praise of God who is exalted. His glory in the highest is now coming down to be among man once again. So the brightness of glory among men brings the greatness of glory to God.

Their worship is also about God's peace to those who receive His favor. Man is in conflict with God. He is a rebel. He has formally and functionally declared war on the high King. The high King is moving against that rebellion. He has long been planning and pointing to how He would bring peace, reconciliation and reparation. He has now brought that to fulfillment for He has sent the Prince of peace to dwell among men and bring saving peace to the sinners God has chosen to favor. So heaven's warriors celebrate the peace on earth.

Glory to God to God in the highest and on earth, peace to those favored by God for the glory has come in a human babe. So say the messengers of the Old Covenant.

Do the shepherds join in the anthem? Here, the text doesn't say.

The Messengers of the New Covenant (v.15-20)

The angels depart from their view. The light fades and then winks out. The shepherd's eyes adjust anew to the glow of stars and moon and camp fires. They turn to one another. Will the announcement they have heard become an action they will do? Will they believe in an obeying way?

¹⁵ When the angels went away from them into heaven, 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." ¹⁶ And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. ¹⁷ And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. ¹⁸ And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. ²⁰ And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

²¹ And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

In What they See (v.15-16)

These shepherds, having heard what the angel has told them, heed the message. Their faith responds to the angel's announcement. They simply take him at his word and decide to go and see. They excitedly talk among themselves and exhort one another to go. Now, given the quality of men here, someone had to stay and continue to watch over the sheep. But the rest are going!

Luke records for our benefit that they attribute the angelic message to God. They understood that this was the Lord's Word. Yes it was delivered to them in dramatic fashion. But they saw behind the messenger the God who spoke through the messenger. The Old Covenant messenger was still speaking in the new age that began unfolding that very day with the birth of that very child. It is still God's revelation pointing the shepherds in a very real and personal way to their Savior and Sovereign. So they will arise, go and find the One so announced.

Ah, we don't know and it does not matter how many stables they went to in their search. I doubt that it was a wearying search. It was a hurried one. And it was a finding search. They came to the stable where a father and a mother and wee little baby were warmly snuggled in a stable. There lay the Messiah. There lay the Savior. There lay the King of the Universe. There, among men, was the prince of peace. There, excitedly gathered around the infant were men on whom God had favor. The favor of God had declared to them the Word and produced in them faith and caused them to believe with obeying joy.

In What they Say (v.17-18)

So what do the shepherds do next? Do they trudge back down the street, out through the gate and back up to the hillside? Do they just chatter among themselves? Is the first gathering of shepherds with a heavenly message and a genuine experience with Christ a holy huddle? Do they go their way arguing over the theological implications of the swaddling clothes? Do they wonder why there is a drummer boy there with sheep and ox keeping time? Can they possibly see the red clothed fat folly that will in the long coming years surround this holy moment?

No, a thousand times, no. The Word they have received and the reality of their experience sends them out to proclamation. They made known what they had heard and seen. They have seen the Messiah. They have met their Redeemer and Ruler. They have personally been with Christ. So they become New Covenant messengers. In faith they have responded to the Word. They have come to Christ and found Him to be all the Word says. Now they go around and tell others what has happened.

This is what New Covenant messengers do. They hear and heed the Word. They believe in an obeying way. They pursue with all their hearts what the Word portrays. And in finding the joy that is to all people, they declare all that has happened. I am convinced that this is Luke's point. The night that Jesus was born made all the difference in many things. It made all the difference in the transition from the Old to the New Covenant. What had been primarily pointing to what was to come has now begun to be a proclamation of what has already been done, but not yet completely. Even for the shepherds, this savior and king is a baby. His work is not complete. For us, His saving work is complete. Yet there is a distinct longing and speaking for a future culmination.

But look at how what they say is responded to. All who heard it "wondered" or better, "were amazed." Amazement is an important theme in Luke. There is an amazement of disbelief. There is amazement at the wrong things. There is amazement at the wrong times. There is amazement at the message of the Christ coming in this humble way. There is amazement at the mighty acts that Jesus does to prove he is who he is. Here the amazement is arising from two stunning things.

There is amazement at the nature of the message. Who would have thought! After long years of expectation is it possible? How could the Messiah, the Savior and King be born in such lowly and desperate conditions? Why was he not born where he would be recognized and known? The message seems incredible. The rest of the New Covenant writers are going to proclaim a message even more amazing. You think a lowly birth and humble stable are amazing – what about a criminal’s death on a Roman cross? What about a resurrection from the dead? What about a King making up his subjects from every people group and gathering over the long reaches of centuries into a spiritual community among who heaven abides until the new heavens and new earth come? Yes, there is amazement at the message.

There is amazement at the inferiority of the messengers. Shepherds? Not the romanticized rugged handsome shepherds of medieval paintings and our Bible Story watercolors, but the lowly, poor, outcasts of a society once ruled by shepherd kings. It is amazing that God would reveal Himself to them! After the long silence, would we not expect that on that glorious night mighty ones like Moses or Elijah would be happily shouting the wonderful news through the streets of Bethlehem dark? Why these common laborers? Why not priests? Why not religious leaders? Why? God has now ordained that the New Covenant message be entrusted to shepherds, common men with a high office and awesome responsibility. Yes, there is amazement at the messengers.

In Whom they Savor (v.19-20)

In contrast to the amazement of many, Mary quietly stores up all these things as heart jewels to ponder and for praise. Luke is pointing us to a contrast. Mary and the shepherds are different. Amazement and surprise are not necessarily what New Covenant messengers are aiming for in their proclamation. Two faith responses are represented here.

The message of Christ should bring us to ponder. Mary exemplifies meditating on the Words and works of God, both in the big picture as well as in our own lives. She thinks through things and stores them up in her heart. She connects what God has promised, what He said and what He is doing. She watches His providence unfold and interprets it through the lens of the Scriptures. This requires thought and evaluation. It requires faith in God’s Word. It requires diligence in applying it and in using it. It will affect what we treasure and so, what we desire. Do you ponder? Do you meditate on the Word and works of God? Do think over what is going on your life and ask the “what is God doing?” questions?

The message of Christ should bring us to praise. The shepherds hear God’s Word and see God’s works. They hear the announcement and then see the baby. This overflows into praise. There is gladness and gratitude for what God is doing. Now they don’t understand it all. They can only see the implications dimly. But with the light they have they praise God. This is a great challenge to us. May we

hear the wonder of the message of Christ and experience the greatness of His love and grace to us and respond with praise. In this season of the year where there is so much that feels good yet does distract us, may we be like the shepherds. May we tell everyone about the baby who has come. And may it not sound like, "Jesus is the reason for the season." May it resound with wonder, faith, gladness and obedience.

So, the New Covenant messengers are the shepherds who have been personally with Christ. The great New Covenant fulfillment and mission is in the heart of what they say:

We will glorify and praise - *for* all we have heard and seen - *as* it had been told to us.

Our gospel and our gladness are rational and responsible. They are grounded in what we have been told. We will respond because of all the God has said and done for the eyes of our hearts. It makes spiritual sense. It is not the folly of one hand clapping. It is the fullness of a renewed mind informed by the Word and filled by the Spirit that yields gospel talk and glad praise.

We will also respond because it is practical for life and living. They heard about a babe born that evening, placed in a manger and wrapped in cloths. They found it to be wholly true. The practical guide for obedient faith required hard work and resulted in what was expected. Away with the sort of disconnect between what we say is true and how we expect to live. Now, it will be amazing for it will still have the gospel message and gospel messengers. But the word is deeply imbedded in life. The Word became flesh so that we may live out the Word in the world. We will glorify and praise God because it is all very true and very real.

Reflect and Respond

How do we think about this season of the year? If it is just about the great Gift and our gifts, if it is about family and friends, if it is about the season and the holiday, I challenge you to read the story once again. If you are focused just on the story of the nativity, you are not thinking as the Bible does. The birth of Christ is a grand nexus, a meeting of the Old and the New. It is the beginning of the end and therefore the end of the beginning. It is an important place in a much larger story. The story of the birth of Jesus is a chapter in a much larger story. Jesus is not just the reason for the season; He is the reason for the whole glorious and majestic story.

How do you treat the Old Testament? Does it come to you with small truths, dim shadows, words with little force? Or does it ring with grand and awesome power because you have seen the light of God in the face of Christ? Do you tremble and trust? Are you amazed with holy and obedient wonder? Are the shadows of the old covenant now shining with glory because Jesus has come? Do you hear heaven's host of mighty warriors declaring peace among men God has favored?

Does what you claim to believe change your life? Does your faith move toward Christ in practical acts of worship and walk? If not, then it is not faith. An assent to the facts of the Bible is neither salvation nor transformation. Hear *and* heed the Word.

May we all, according to our light and our gifts, be new covenant, gospel messengers. Tell the story in this season with such joy and gladness as to cause wonder and awe. Glorify and praise God for all you have seen and heard as it has been told you.