**AN UNEXPECTED CHRISTMAS**

**Luke 2:1-20**

**INTRODUCTION**

Please open your Bibles to Luke 2. Today we’re going to look at this well-known passage of Scripture as we celebrate the birth of Christ together and consider what the story of Christ’s birth means for how we live and what we believe.

Luke 2 is one of those unique passages of Scripture that have become part of popular culture. Once in a while, you will find elements of Christianity enter into the highly secular world of mainstream media. Mel Gibson’s film *The Passion of the Christ* was one. It made $612 million worldwide. Mercy Me’s song *I Can Only Imagine* is another example. It’s a song about longing to be in the presence of Jesus in heaven, and yet it was being played on popular radio stations not too long ago.

Luke 2 had its moment in the spotlight in 1965 in *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. In that show, Charlie Brown finds himself oddly depressed at Christmas time, mainly because he laments the over-commercialization of the season, but primarily because he has no idea why people celebrate Christmas in the first place. He tries to direct a Christmas play to lift his spirits, but finds that the children in the play have no interest in any of his ideas. After they laugh at him and walk away, Charlie Brown yells out, “Isn’t there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?” That’s when his friend Linus pulls his thumb out of his mouth and says, “Sure Charlie Brown, I can tell you what Christmas is all about.” He then goes on to recite Luke 2:1-20 from memory.

Like Charlie Brown, Christians can also cry out, “Isn’t there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?” But for us, we’re not bothered by the fact that *we* don’t know what it’s about. We’re bothered by the fact that *others* don’t know what it’s about.

I spent some time reading some articles about the true meaning of Christmas published by secular news sources. The general tone of those articles is that the true meaning of Christmas is time with family and good food. One writer on the Huffington Post put it this way:

It’s the coming together of people in warmth and love at the coldest and darkest time of the year in the only life and home we will ever know. That’s the real reason for the season.

When you read comments like that, don’t you just want to shout out, “Isn’t there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?” Don’t you just want to say, “Christmas is about *Christ*. It’s about God’s Son becoming man in order to save sinners like you and me.” This is certainly at the heart of Christmas. But is that all? Is God becoming man what Christmas is “all about”?

What we’re going to find in our text today from Luke 2 is that it can be easy even for Christians to forget what Christmas is *all* about. There are truths in the Christmas story that should surprise us, and that will continue to surprise us, no matter how many times Luke 2 is read.

I have titled this message **An Unexpected Christmas**. We will have three points today:

1. An Unexpected Cradle
2. An Unexpected Audience
3. An Unexpected Child

(1) **AN UNEXPECTED CRADLE**

Our text begins with a royal decree made by Caesar Augustus that everyone in the Roman Empire must return to their home town in order to be registered. Apparently Caesar wanted to conduct a census of his empire, and the only way to do it was for everyone to return to their ancestral homes.

In Chapter 1 we read about the angel Gabriel appearing to Mary, announcing to her that God would use her to carry a special child whose name would be Jesus. He would be called holy, the Son of God, and he would reign on David’s throne forever as the promised Saviour of God’s people.

At the time, Mary was betrothed to Joseph, and the two of them lived in a little town called Nazareth. Joseph’s ancestral home, however, was Bethlehem. This was because Joseph was a descendant of King David, who came from Bethlehem himself. Therefore, Joseph had to make the approximately 140 km trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem in order to comply with Caesar’s decree.

Why is all this significant? One reason is that Luke is trying to prove to his readers that Jesus isn’t just a fictional character. His life is not just a story tale. Instead, Jesus is a historical figure rooted in a historical context. Jesus came from real parents who lived under real governors who required them to move to a real town. That’s one of the reasons Luke writes the way that he does. But it’s not the most important reason.

The more important reason for including these details is to show the sovereign hand of God orchestrating the events leading up to the birth of his Son in order to fulfill prophecies made about him centuries earlier. Eight hundred years before the events of Luke 2, the prophet Micah wrote this about the birth of the coming Messiah:

“But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.” (Micah 5:2)

The Messiah needed to come from Bethlehem. That’s one of the ways people would know that he was in fact the Messiah. But how would this prophecy be fulfilled? Did God just wait for the right opportunity to act? “Ok, if only someone in the world came up with a reason for a descendant of David to go to Bethlehem…waiting…that’s one hundred years…waiting…that’s eight hundred years…aha! Caesar is requiring everyone to go back to their home town. Now’s my chance! Initiate Operation Virgin Conception.” That’s not how God operates. He doesn’t wait for the right events to accomplish his will. He creates them.

God *directed* Caesar to conduct this census. God *directed* Caesar to require everyone to return to their home towns. And he did all this according to his perfect timing. As Proverbs 21:1 says,

“The king’s heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will.”

Here’s the point: if God directed the most powerful figure on the earth at the time to do God’s will, surely he could have directed the little peasants staying at the inn in Bethlehem to leave room for Mary and Joseph so that God’s own Son could be born in conditions of relative comfort. Surely he could have at least ensured that Jesus would be born in a clean, warm environment through the hospitality of a friendly resident of Bethlehem. But God did no such thing. He left no room in the inn, and no room in anyone’s house. Instead, he left them room in a barn, with the animals, so that his Son could be laid in the most unexpected of cradles: a manger, an animal feeding trough.

Why would he do that? Why would the God of all things, the One who is sovereign over the minds and plans of kings, plan for his Son to be born in such poverty? The answer should shock us: God planned such poor conditions for the birth of his Son in order to identify with the poor in spirit. He was making a declaration to the world that Jesus had come not to save those who think they have it all together, but to save those who are broken, those who are needy, those who struggle to make it through life. As Mary sang in her God-inspired song just one chapter earlier:

“He has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.” (Luke 1:52-53).

This is so contrary to how we’re naturally inclined. We are wired to seek independence, to seek self-sufficiency. There’s something broken in us that makes us want to be our own gods. We want to build our own empires, with our own efforts, and we don’t want to depend on anyone but ourselves.

Christmas is a reminder that, if we would have Christ, we need to have humility. If Christ would come to us, we need to come to him in humble dependence. Jesus has no place with those who leave no place for him. But if you would come to him in your need, then he will make his home with you. And by choosing such an unexpected cradle, Jesus has told the broken, the needy, the strugglers, that he knows what that feels like. He can identify with you. So don’t be ashamed of your need. Jesus understands your need because he lived through it himself. He won’t turn you away or frown upon you. He will meet your needs with a compassionate heart and the tenderness of his mercy.

(2) **AN UNEXPECTED AUDIENCE**

This theme continues as our text goes on, as God reveals the birth of his Son to the most unexpected of audiences. We read starting in verse 8 that “there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.” An angel of the Lord appears to them in the glory of the Lord and announces in verses 10-11, “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 Saviour, who is Christ the Lord.”

This is the third angelic announcement in the book of Luke. The first was to Zechariah, a priest who had devoted his life to serving God. The angel Gabriel announced to him that Elizabeth his barren wife would have a son who would become a great prophet. The second announcement was to Mary, a young girl chosen by God for the absolutely amazing task of carrying God’s Son in her womb and raising him as her son. Clearly, the first two angelic announcements were to significant people called to do great things for the Lord.

This third angelic announcement couldn’t be more different. It’s made to shepherds. They didn’t have any fancy titles. They weren’t called to do anything special. They were just shepherds.

When I was studying at McMaster, I used to take my bike to a bike co-op on campus to get fixed. I met some interesting characters there. I’ll always remember one guy in particular who planned to take the next year off school, not to work, not to study abroad, but in order to move to the country and raise sheep. He wanted to experience what it was like to be a shepherd. He spoke about it like it was the best thing in the world, that there was nothing more adventurous, more romantic even, than being a shepherd.

We can do the same when we think about Luke 2. We can romanticize the entire scene, imagining that these shepherds must have been just like the good shepherd, Jesus, who lays down his life for the sheep. We picture them gently carrying their lambs on their shoulders and letting little children pet them. But they weren’t “good” shepherds, let alone the good shepherd. Instead, they were known as great sinners. In his commentary on Luke, scholar Robert Stein writes the following about the general reputation of shepherds at the time of Luke 2:

One should not romanticize the occupation of shepherds. In general shepherds were dishonest and unclean according to the standards of the law. They represent the outcasts and sinners for whom Jesus came. (The New American Commentary)

These are the ones that God reserved the third angelic announcement for. He didn’t send the angels to announce to kings the birth of the King of Kings. He didn’t even send the angels to announce to law-abiding, respectable Jews. Instead, he sent the angels to sinful shepherds.

And so the God who identified with the poor in spirit now reveals his plans to the poor in character. And once again, God is announcing to the world that he has sent his Son into the world not to save those who *think* they’re *righteous*, but to save those who *know* they’re *sinners*. As Jesus himself would say about his mission three decades later:

“Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.”

This Christmas, are you aware that you are a sinner? If you’re not aware that you’re a sinner, then you will have no need for a saviour, and if you have no need for a saviour, you will have no need for Jesus. Jesus has come to call *sinners* to repentance, not the righteous. Of course, if you think you’re righteous, it’s not that you actually are righteous. It’s just that you either don’t understand what true righteousness is, or you don’t understand yourself. Righteousness isn’t just not doing what you shouldn’t do. True righteousness is also doing what you should do. Righteousness isn’t just outward conformity to rules. True righteousness is inner conformity in your mind and heart to God’s law. And, perhaps most difficult, righteousness isn’t just belief in God. True righteousness is loving God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. If we understood righteousness like this, none of us would have any hesitation concluding that we are sinners in need of a saviour.

And the best thing about this is that God doesn’t just reach out to sinners. He changes sinners. We see that in the shepherds themselves. In verse 16, the sinful shepherds who broke most if not all of God’s laws now obey God’s word by listening to the angel’s instructions to find the baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger. In verse 17, the sinful shepherds with their crude language become God’s spokesmen as they herald the good news of the Saviour’s birth to others. And in verse 20, the sinful shepherds who likely worshipped no one but themselves become true worshippers of God, as they glorify and praise God for his wonderful plan of salvation.

If you find yourself very aware of your sin this Christmas, knowing just how broken you are and just how much you need Jesus, believe that what God did for the shepherds, he can do for you. God never calls anyone to himself whom he doesn’t intend to make like himself. God sanctifies those he saves.

(3) **AN UNEXPECTED CHILD**

This leads to our final point: an unexpected child. This is the most unexpected truth about Christmas, because as shocking as it is that God saves the poor in spirit, and that God sanctifies sinners, the fact that God became man in order to save and sanctify us is the most shocking of all.

We see the angel giving Jesus three titles in verse 11: Jesus is a Saviour, Jesus is the Christ, and Jesus is the Lord. We’ve seen how Jesus is the Saviour, and we’ve seen how Jesus is the promised Christ. Now we will see that Jesus is the Lord.

The Greek word for “Lord” in verse 11 is *kyrios*. Jesus is “the kyrios”. It’s the same word used in verse 9 when the angel is described as “an angel of the Lord”, and when it says “the glory of the Lord shone around them.” It’s the same word used in verse 15, when the shepherds say “let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.”

It’s apparent that every reference to the *kyrios* is a reference to God himself. The angel is God’s angel. The glory shining around the angel was God’s glory. The revelation to the shepherds was God’s revelation. And so, when the angel declares, “For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord,” the angel is saying that this baby born in a manger, wrapped in swaddling cloths, is none other than God himself.

Think about what this means about this little baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger. This child is the lord of the fearsome angel. This child is the source of the glory shining about the angel. And this child sent a heavenly host of angels to declare his praises to the world.

What an unexpected child! This child is the God of angels, the God of glory, the God of revelation! And yet, he emptied himself of his power, majesty, and authority to become a baby needing to be kept alive through his mother’s milk and the warmth of his swaddling cloths. He humbled himself to become man, but he never ceased to be God.

We see the angels declaring this God-man’s praises in verse 14: “Glory to God in the highest!” The angels glorified him not only because he is their God, but because they had seen his stunning act of humility. Their eternal Lord entered time to execute his plan of salvation in history. Their almighty commander made himself low to raise up the lowly. Their uncreated God became as the created ones in order to recreate them in the beauty of his image.

And if the angels had reason to sing, how much more reason do we have to sing? After all, Jesus didn’t come to earth to save angels. He came to earth to save sinful human beings. All that he gave up, he gave up for us. This is something angels will never understand. They can marvel at the glorious humility of Christ. But they can never marvel at the glorious grace of Christ like we can. Only sinners can truly taste the sweetness of salvation. And only sinners can truly worship God for the glorious grace shown to us in the incarnation. As 1 Peter 1:12 says,

“It was revealed to (the prophets) that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look.”

**CONCLUSION**

“Isn’t there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?” Yes, Charlie Brown, there is. God knows what Christmas is all about, and he has told anyone willing to listen through the Scriptures. Christmas is about a God born in a dirty manger so that he could identify with those who are broken, those who are needy, those who don’t have life all together. It’s about a God who came not for those who are independent and self-sufficient, but for those who know that they’re sick with sin and need help. And it’s about a God wrapped in swaddling cloths, laying in a manger, waiting for that day when he would die on a cross for sinners like you and me, so that we could taste the glory of his grace and praise him forever.

This Christmas, may the richest blessings of Christ rest on you and yours, as you come to him in humble dependence, aware of your sin, and aware of your Saviour. And may we all sing, in a way that only saved sinners can, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased.”