

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Christmas #3

And a Beautiful, Ugly Christmas to You!

(Luke 2:1-20)

Introduction: Marketing, 101...

Marketing is a seller's attempt to advertise his wares in such a way as to make his product look appealing to a potential buyer.

As such, marketing is as old as commerce. In recent times, we are more aware of marketing's power to the buying and selling process than ever before.

There is, of course, a dark side of marketing. A seller can "spin" what his product is or does that distorts reality so that BAD looks GOOD.

A few dishonest used car salesmen who turn the odometer backwards or who hide that the car you want to buy was flooded in Hurricane Harvey have given all of them a bad name.

And there are "spin doctors" in every product line.

But there's also a bright side to marketing that truthfully *maximizes* the positive by its messaging and branding.

For instance, if you're opening a new business, you'll want to give some thought to the name you give your business, its logo, and the platforms on which you'll advertise.

You'll want to give thought to how to orchestrate the Grand Opening to maximize positive exposure. Those are some of the concerns of marketing.

And we buyers are glad for honest marketing. Let us know the positives about your product. We really want to know. We expect you to tell us.

We even want it, to help us direct our purchases choices (when we hit the stores after the second Christmas Eve service...).

So, say you work for a marketing firm that has been hired by Heaven to give advice to the Creator as to how to *maximize* the impact of the arrival of His Son to planet earth?

You'd probably have some ideas, but I have a sneaking suspicion you wouldn't have recommended any of what actually happened when Jesus was born two thousand years ago.

In fact, as we look at the birth of Jesus this morning, you may agree with me that what God orchestrated may have been the opposite of what a market-savvy professional would have recommended.

Review...

Over the past two Sundays, we've been making our way to Bethlehem - the town in which Jesus was born.

We began by tracking Jesus' genealogy, as found in Matthew's Gospel. We saw that the journey to Bethlehem began thousands of years before Jesus' birth by tracing His lineage from Abraham, through King David and all the great kings.

Then, last Sunday, Jeff brought us closer to Bethlehem by showing how the faith of Zacharias grew after he learned that his wife, Elizabeth, would bear him a son named "John" (the baptizer).

Yes, at first Zacharias questioned whether this would really happen. But he soon came to embrace God's amazing message. (As you and I well know, things like the growth of faith takes time...)

We also watched as Mary - a young virgin - received the news that she would bear God's Son with world-class grace and faith - **[Luke 1:38] "Behold the bondservant of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word."**

After these "pregnancy announcements", the walk to Bethlehem continued.

Mary stayed with Elizabeth and Zacharias, to whom she was related, in the hill country of Judea while both women were with child.

When the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, Mary returned to her home in Nazareth where her family and her fiancée, Joseph, lived.

And Luke moved from the story of the birth of John the Baptist to the main story of Jesus, which was taking place in the backwater Jewish village of Nazareth.

What happened in Nazareth, though, was greatly impacted by what happened at the center of world power in Rome. Because, in Rome, Caesar Augustus had just issued a decree.¹

The Birth of Jesus, Messiah (vv. 1-7)

Caesar Commands a Census (vv. 1-3)

[1] Now in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census² be taken of all the inhabited earth. [2] This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. [3] And everyone was on his way to register for the census, each to his own city.³

The US government takes a census of the population every ten years, as mandated by the Constitution. It's coming next year.

¹ We have no secular source confirming that Augustus required a universal census around the time of Jesus' birth. But we do know that he reorganized the administration of Roman policy in the provinces (of which Palestine was one) at this time. So, taking a census would have been a logical move for determining taxation rates - and there is certainly no evidence that one was not taken.

We fill out a form, per household, and send it to the US Census Bureau.

Jews living in the Roman Empire were required to travel to their ancestral home to register so that they could be taxed appropriately.

So, the census mandated by Caesar Augustus of Rome two thousand years ago was way more inconvenient and disruptive than the census we will take.

And Rome could force this kind of inconvenience and disruption because the land of the Jews (Palestine) was a conquered land. The Jews had to do whatever Rome told them to do.

But God, not Caesar, is the Lord of history. And Caesar's census did nothing but ensure that God's purposes would come to pass. The main impact of Caesar's census was that it provided the impetus Joseph needed to travel to Bethlehem.

Joseph - and Mary - Travel to Bethlehem (vv. 4-5)

[4] Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem,⁴ because he was of the house and family of David, [5] in order to register along with Mary, who was engaged to him, and was with child.

Tracing the lineage of Joseph from David

² When Augustus died, he left in his own handwriting a summary of information, such as statistics on direct and indirect taxation, which would most naturally have been derived from censuses.

³ If it seems strange to take a census by ordering everyone to return to his ancestral home, there is a record of the same thing happening in Egypt, around AD 100.

⁴ There is no record of Jesus ever visiting Bethlehem after His birth.

As I just mentioned, Joseph descended from some of the greatest heroes of the Old Testament, including godly kings like Solomon and Jehoshaphat and Hezekiah and Josiah.⁵

Of course, Joseph wasn't a king. He made his living in Nazareth as a handyman.

But royal blood flowed through his veins, so he had to travel to the royal city of Bethlehem, King David's hometown, to register for the census for the purpose of taxation.

Trace the journey of Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem (ugly!)

It would have taken close to a week for Joseph and Mary to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem.

Remember, at this point, they weren't formally married (see verse 5)⁶, but they traveled together to register.

They would have packed their bags and loaded a donkey with all the food and necessary gear, and then headed due east to cross the Jordan River.

Then, once on the other side, they would have gone due south, following the Jordan on the east side to avoid entering Samaria.

Of course, we don't know the exact date of Jesus' birth, and it may or may not have been on the 25th of December.

But, my own studies have led me to conclude that this journey may well have taken place in December, when it could have been as cold in Palestine as it sometimes is in the Hill Country of Central Texas.

No, not a Minnesota arctic blast, but chilly enough to be plenty uncomfortable.

And you may have sometimes wondered that Joseph took Mary with him, since only Joseph was required to go to Bethlehem.⁷

Well, it might be, as many Bible scholars suggest, that it was the treatment she was getting in Nazareth that prompted Joseph to bring her along, and that as difficult as the journey was, it was easier than staying in a place where she was shunned for her unwed pregnancy?⁸

At the end of the roughly one-hundred-mile journey, they landed in the little town of Bethlehem. Luke describes the birth of Mary's Child simply and with restraint.

Mary Gives Birth to Jesus (vv. 6-7)

Labor and delivery (vv. 6-7a)

[6] While they were there, the days were completed for her to give birth. [7a] And she gave birth to her first-born son...

I have observed only three births, firsthand. But I've concluded that giving birth isn't called *labor* for nothing. Under the best of circumstances, childbirth is tough.

For Mary, there was no doctor or midwife present. Certainly, no birthing room, soft background music, nursing staff, or epidurals.

We're not told how long Mary's labor lasted, but at the end, after the exhausting work was done, Jesus was born.

Mary did the honors of laying Him down in His first cradle.

The birthing room (v. 7b)

[7b] ...and she wrapped Him in cloths and laid Him in a manger...

⁵ Along with evil kings, like Amon and Manasseh.

⁶ Luke refers to Mary as Joseph's betrothed because, while they were "married" at this time (Matthew 1:24 - meaning that they were living together), the marriage had not yet been consummated (Mt. 1:25).

⁷ So, most Bible scholars, including Alfred Edersheim.

⁸ There is no explanation given in the Bible for Mary's unnecessary travel to Bethlehem, yet in the sovereign plan of God, it was necessary for her to be there and not in Nazareth when the time came to give birth to Jesus.

We are to take it that since she laid Jesus down in a *manger* (an animal's feeding trough) He was born in a place that housed animals.

Not a barn as we know barns today, but a hollowed-out cave.⁹ And the manger probably wasn't a wooden feeding trough but was more likely something made of stone.

So, yes, fundamentally, the scenes we see at this time of year with animals gathered around a manger/cradle are accurate.

And if we wonder why Joseph didn't find a more pleasant place for the birth of Mary's Baby? Well...

No vacancy in Bethlehem's Airbnbs (v. 7c)

[7c] ...there was no room for them in the inn.

With the popularity of "bed and breakfast" lodging today, we get a good picture of what Joseph was seeking in Bethlehem.

He was looking for a home where someone was known to house travelers. On this night, nobody in Bethlehem was game to open their home up to Joseph and the great-with-child Mary.

And, yes, the coldness and callousness of that scene takes your breath away.

Now, the glorious good news of what we have read so far is that Jesus was born. The attending details detract a bit from the celebration.

- Joseph and Mary traveled together to Bethlehem to pay taxes.
- Mary rode (we assume she would have ridden) the one hundred miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem over rough terrain in winter on the verge of labor.¹⁰

⁹ Christian tradition has located Jesus' birthplace in a cave. The Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem is erected over a hollowed-out cave believed to have been the place of Jesus' birth.

¹⁰ Ladies, can any of you imagine a one-hundred-mile donkey ride over rough terrain while on the verge of labor? Men, can you imagine putting your wife through that ordeal?

- They arrived in Bethlehem and were forced to bed down for the night in a barn, there being no room in any of the town's Airbnbs.
- The only available place to lay the just-born Jesus was in an animal's stone feeding trough.

Everything about the birth points to obscurity, poverty and rejection. A rather inauspicious beginning for the Son of God - and the night is young. There is more to come.

Following the birth of His Son, God planned a reception. Maybe not the reception you or I or any marketing agency would plan for the birth of the Son of God.

Luke turns our attention to fields just outside of Bethlehem, where there were shepherds.

The Welcoming Committee for Jesus, Messiah (vv. 8-20)

An Angel Brings a Message to Shepherds (vv. 8-14)

Shepherds are in the fields (v. 8)

[8] In the same region there were some shepherds staying out in the fields and keeping watch over their flock by night.

These sheep on the hills around Bethlehem were likely destined for sacrifice at the temple in Jerusalem, just a few miles away.¹¹ And the shepherds were guarding the sheep lest human thieves or animal predators take them.¹²

Now, the Bible gives an honored place to shepherds, and some of the Bible's great heroes were shepherds:

- Abel, Adam's righteous son, was a shepherd.
- Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and all of Jacob's sons were shepherds.

¹¹ A rabbinic rule provided that any animal (i.e. - sheep) found between Jerusalem and a spot near Bethlehem must be presumed to be a sacrificial victim.

¹² The temple flocks were pastured in the open fields around Bethlehem year-round, so the traditional date for Jesus' birth of December 25 might well be accurate. (Of course, we don't know the actual date for certain!)

- Moses was a shepherd when God called him to lead Israel out of Egypt.
- Amos, the prophet, was a shepherd.
Yet, despite this rich history, in the days of Jesus shepherds were looked down upon and were considered “unclean.”

Their occupation kept them in the fields for much of the year and they regularly missed regular times of worship.

For this reason, they were considered irreligious, and for that reason the Rabbis would often not allow them to participate in worship at all.

It is quite possible that the shepherds who were out in the fields tending their flocks on the night Jesus was born were devout men. But, sadly, they came from a despised class of people.

At the time of Jesus’ birth, shepherds were social nobodies. They weren’t movers and shakers; more like down and outers. They were out of the loop when it came to the day’s big happenings.

Yet, God chose a group of shepherds to be among the first to learn about the birth of His Son.¹³

The shepherds’ quiet night of flock-watching was interrupted by the appearance of an angel.¹⁴

Frightened shepherds (v. 9)

[9] And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened.

While we aren’t given the name of this angel of God, I’m tempted to believe that he is the same angel who was so active during the season leading up to Jesus’ birth, the same angel who appeared to Zacharias and to Mary: Gabriel.

¹³ How perfect: The angel told shepherds about the birth of the Lamb of God.

¹⁴ Angels have already appeared to Zacharias, Mary and Joseph.

¹⁵ This is the only time Jesus is referred to as Savior in the synoptic Gospels.

At least His appearance had the same effect on the shepherds that Gabriel’s appearance had on Zacharias. These shepherds were all ***“terribly frightened.”***

So, the first thing the angel said was the typical “first thing” out of an angel’s mouth.

The angel’s message of the birth of a Savior (vv. 10-12)

Good News/Gospel!

[10] “Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people”

Let’s take a minute to parse the angel’s words here.

More than any other ruler to this point in history, Caesar Augustus brought optimism about what a leader could accomplish and what a society could achieve.

He used the Greek word for “Good News” (“Gospel”) to describe the GREAT things his reign would bring about.

The empire declared Caesar “god” and established rites of worship for him. Most Romans (***“all the people”***) believed that His regime would last forever.

So, Luke knew that a lot of his readers would pick up on the idea that while Caesar *thought* his reign announced “Good News” the REAL Good News of this night was the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem.

The angel continued.

A Savior is born!

[11] “for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior,¹⁵ who is Christ the Lord.”¹⁶

¹⁶ “*Christ, the Lord*” perhaps should be translated “*Christ and Lord.*” As the word appears here, it occurs in this form nowhere else in the New Testament (known as

The prophet Micah (in Micah 5:2) had predicted hundreds of years earlier that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. Jewish hopes for the location of the coming king had long been pinned on Bethlehem.

This angel said, ***“today!”***

Not at some point in the far distant future. By the time the angel appeared to the shepherds, he was speaking history, not prophecy.

So, how will these shepherds recognize Christ the Lord? Easy.

How to recognize Him!

[12] “This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths, and lying in a manger.”

“Go to the city stables. Turn right at the first cave. Can’t miss it. The Baby lying in the stone feeding trough is the Messiah God’s been promising for centuries, the hopes and dreams of all the years.”

In Bethlehem on that night, there might have been lots of babies lying around, wrapped in swaddling clothes. There was only one to be found in a manger in Bethlehem’s stables.

And while the shepherds were taking all of this in, the sky over them erupted as an angelic choir sang a new song proclaiming peace.

The angel choir sings a song of praise (vv. 13-14)

***[13] And suddenly there appeared 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 men with whom He is pleased.”***

If the shepherds had been ***“terribly frightened”*** when one angel proclaimed the “Gospel” of a Savior’s birth, can you imagine the multiplied fear when the angelic multitude started shouting?!

Moments earlier they had been enjoying a quiet night under the stars watching their sheep. Now, all Heaven has broken loose. They are bound to have been shell-shocked.

But as quickly as the heavenly midnight explosion erupted, the angels departed, leaving the shepherds alone in their field. Once again, the night was calm.

In the angels’ absence, were the shepherds shaking their heads, looking at each other, pinching themselves and wondering if they had experienced what they THOUGHT they had just experienced.

They compared notes. They reviewed together what they had just heard from the angel.

“Yes, an angel did just appear to us. He did tell us that a Baby had been born this night in nearby Bethlehem; that the Baby was Christ the Lord, a Savior; that we could find the Baby lying in a manger.”

So, off they went to Bethlehem!

Shepherds Tell Their Own Story (vv. 15-18, 20)

[16] So they came in a hurry and found their way to Mary and Joseph, and the baby as He lay in the manger. [17] When they had seen this, they made known the statement which had been told them about this Child. [18] And all who heard it wondered at the things which were told them by the shepherds...[20] The shepherds went back, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen, just as had been told them.

These shepherds weren’t used to being in “town” - even in a small town like Bethlehem. They were used to the open country of the fields.

ChristLord describes Jesus in the highest possible terms.

a *hapax legomenon*), literally **ChristLord**. In Greek, “Christ” indicates “anointed one.” Here, not “an anointed one” but “THE anointed one” - Messiah.

But they recognized the familiar smell of the town's stables and followed their noses until they found their way to Joseph and Mary.

As they entered the cave, they saw the Baby lying in the feeding trough, just as the angel had told them He would be.

They told Mary and Joseph what the angel had told them, that this Baby was the Savior, Christ the Lord.

They would have noticed that neither Mary nor Joseph looked surprised - either by their message or by the fact that the shepherds had heard the news from an angel. (Mary and Joseph knew exactly Who the Baby was.)

Then, the Bible goes on to tell us that other people heard the news that night, which must mean that the shepherds couldn't keep the good news (i.e. - Gospel!) to themselves.

They told it to people they passed as they walked out of town, to families in farmhouses on the way to their field and to fellow shepherds on the hillsides.

Mary had said earlier that God exalted those who were humble (Luke 1:52).

Here, He has done exactly that, giving some of the most humble members of first century Palestinian society - shepherds - the first glimpse of God incarnate.

Look at these shepherds. They're all wrapped up in Jesus and they can't stop talking about Him.

And that's just the way it is with Gospel. When you hear it and receive it for the good news it is, you can't keep it in. You've got to share it.

What did the shepherds do as they returned to their field? They told the story and they worshipped God.

What would you have done if you had heard Gospel news on that first Christmas night? You would have told the story and worshipped God.

So, have you heard the Gospel? Have you heard the news that at the birth of Jesus a Savior was born? Have you put your faith in that Savior, asked Him to forgive your sins?

Do you know that if you ask Him to forgive you, He will do it? That is why He came to the earth; to save you from your sins and to give you LIFE!

When you have heard that message and have believed the good news, don't even try to keep it internalized.

Let it burst forth like it did for those first evangelists, the shepherds.

Let it be said of you and me that we have gone from this place ***"glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen, just as had been told them."***

And, if we back up one verse, we'll see the final picture of this passage, the image of a thoughtful Mary.

Mary Treasured the Experience (v. 19)

[19] But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart.

Mary's response is set in contrast to that of the shepherds. They spoke out. She remained silent, reflective. She pondered.

She's an unwed teenaged mother lying on hay watching her newborn Son sleep in a feeding trough, knowing that He is the Savior of the world, the Son of God.

She's wondering where all of this will lead, marveling at God's orchestration of a plan, the details of which she could only guess at.

And THAT is the story of Christmas.

From His birth forward until His death on a Roman cross, the road God intended Jesus to walk was the road of humiliation and poverty and sacrifice. Why that road? So that He might lift US up.

The Apostle Paul said it best in 2 Corinthians 8:9, ***“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich.”***

This morning, we worship a Jesus who did not seek comfort, safety, or ease, popularity or publicity.

We worship a Savior, who is Christ the Lord, who emptied Himself of the prerogative of majesty and glory, who took the form of a bond-servant and was made in the likeness of a man, who became the Son of Man that we might become the sons and daughters of God through Him.

Merry Christmas. May the Jesus who humbled Himself to bring you life find room in your heart this day.

Conclusion:

A marketing consultant reviewing God’s plan for the birth of His Son might have struggled to keep a straight face. He would have had a few recommendations to maximize the impact of Jesus’ birth.

“Let’s change the scenery a bit, Lord. Bethlehem is OK, but there’s a nice hotel just outside Jerusalem, not that far away. It’s a five star. Lots of government official are using it these days. That would be a good place to stage the birth.

“And there should be a reception for Mary and Joseph as they head into town. Let’s bill their trip, ‘David’s Son’s Homecoming to David’s Hometown’ - banners, streamers, crowds, parades, the whole nine yards.

“Also, the engaged bit doesn’t work well. Joseph needs to make the marriage official prior to the birth. Can we take care of that, first?

“And then the shepherds. Shepherds are nice enough folks. I like shepherds. Some of my best friends are shepherds. But trust me on this one, Father - not for the birth of Your Son. The welcoming committee at the birth should be the right kind of people.

“Let’s get the temple officials to come over from Jerusalem, Herod and his family, maybe invite Caesar. The photographers will be there for the shoot.”

And those would have been excellent suggestions IF what God had wanted to do was exalt Jesus at His birth. But that wasn’t what God intended. God had every intention of highly exalting His Son, Jesus - but not at His birth.

What God wanted to “message” was that Jesus would lead a life of humble sacrifice.

For that, a tax-motivated journey, a barn birth, a stone manger, and an inhospitable neighborhood worked just fine.