

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(December 18, 2022)

Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: A Three-Dimensional Christmas
(The birth of Jesus from John, Matthew, and Luke)

Heaven's Marketing

(Luke 2:1-20)

Study #3

Introduction: Marketing, 101...

Each Christmas season, we are over-exposed to the best marketing pitches sellers can come up with to get us to buy their stuff.

If you think back over this past year, you may be able to think of ads that moved you to click “buy” in the big screen or home improvement or high tech or car or food markets.

You were won over by the effectiveness of the ad and spent money because the marketing was good.

After the purchase, you may have discovered the dark side of marketing. Namely, that a seller can “spin” his product’s qualities in such a way that what looked good was really not so good.

The phrase *caveat emptor* didn’t become famous for nothing. The buyer really does need to beware.

But I’ll happily affirm that there is a bright side to marketing. If a product is beneficial, the marketer does us all a favor by advertising a product’s qualities with timely messages and good branding.

For instance, if you’re bringing a better mousetrap to market, you’ll want to give it a memorable name, create a catchy logo, and promote it on different platforms.

Those are some of the concerns of marketing.

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. (It’ll help us know what to buy when we hit the stores after the 5:00pm Christmas Eve service...)

So, let’s pretend that you work for a marketing firm that has been hired by Heaven.

Your job is to advise the Almighty about how to *maximize* the impact of the arrival of His Son to planet earth. I doubt that you would have recommended any of what God allowed when Jesus was born two thousand years ago.

Review...

Two Sundays ago, we listened as the Apostle John described the arrival of the “Word” into the world. The Word was eternal, was with God, WAS, in fact, God, and created everything there is. The Word became flesh when Jesus was born at Bethlehem. And, as many as received Him (i.e., “**believe in Him**”) He gave the right to become children of God.

Last Sunday, we looked into Matthew’s genealogy and saw details proving that Jesus was OF the Jews and FROM the Jews, but not ONLY OF and FROM the Jews. He was OF and FROM Gentiles, too. We also learned that Jesus’ genealogy was redemptive. God used flawed people to bring Jesus into the world, just as He is doing today through you and me.

Preview...

This morning, we are turning to the Gospel of Luke, where we will see more details of Jesus’ birth story than anywhere else in the Bible.

As background, Luke brings us into the story of a young lady named Mary. She received the news that she would bear God's Son with world-class grace and faith. **[Luke 1:38] "Behold the bondslave of the Lord. May it be it done to me according to your word."**

After this announcement about her unprecedented pregnancy, Mary went to be with her relatives Elizabeth and Zacharias, who lived up in the hill country of Judea, north of Jerusalem and Bethlehem.

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

We watch as Luke moves 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 was greatly impacted by what happened at the center of world power in Rome.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 all the people were on their way to register for the census, each to his own city.³

¹ There is no non-biblical source confirming that Augustus required this universal census. We do know that he re-organized Roman policy in the provinces (like Palestine) at this time. So, taking a census would have been a logical move for determining tax rates - and there is certainly no evidence that one was not taken.

² When Augustus died, he left a summary of information, including statistics on taxes received, 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.

Our government takes a census of the population every ten years, as mandated by the US Constitution. We fill out a form, per household, and send it to the US Census Bureau.

In a much more inconvenient and disruptive way, Jews living in the Roman Empire also had to take part in a census.

Three thousand five miles away in Rome, Caesar required each head of a Jewish household to travel to their ancestral home to register so that they could be properly taxed.

Rome could force this kind of burden on the Jews 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 ensured the fulfillment of God's purposes.⁴

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

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

Tracing the lineage of Joseph from David

Joseph, the man to whom Mary was engaged, was a descendant of the greatest heroes of the Old Testament, including kings like David and Solomon, Hezekiah and Josiah.

Of course, Joseph wasn't a king. There hadn't been a Jewish king over Israel for centuries. And Joseph made his living in Nazareth as a handyman.

⁴ The main impact of Caesar's census was that it provided the impetus Joseph needed to travel to Bethlehem.

⁵ There is no record of Jesus ever visiting Bethlehem after His birth.

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!)

This would not have been an easy trip. It would have taken about a week for the still unmarried (see verse 5) Joseph and Mary to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem.⁶

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. They would have crossed the Jordan again at Jericho, and from there made their way to Bethlehem.⁷

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.

My own studies lead me to conclude that this journey could certainly 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.

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 Why did Joseph take Mary with him, since only he was required to go to Bethlehem? Many Bible scholars (including Alfred Edersheim) suggest that it was the treatment Mary 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 unmarried pregnancy. In the sovereign plan of God, it was necessary for her to be in Bethlehem and not in Nazareth when the time came to give birth to Jesus.

After passing through Jerusalem, they finished their one-hundred-mile journey, arriving in 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 time came 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 learned from these 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. There was no birthing room, soft background music, nursing staff, or epidurals.

And, no, we aren't told how long Mary's labor lasted. But at the end, after the labor, 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...

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

It wasn't a barn as we know barns today. It was more likely a hollowed-out cave.⁸ And the manger probably wasn't a wooden feeding trough but was 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.

⁸ 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.

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 Airbnb's (v. 7c)

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

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

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

Now, the Good News of what we have read so far is that Jesus was born. But to be honest, the details do detract from the celebration.

- Joseph and Mary traveled from Nazareth to Bethlehem to pay taxes.
- Mary rode and walked one hundred miles over rough terrain in winter on the verge of labor.⁹
- Due to the absence of hospitality, they were forced to bed down for the night in a cave.
- The only available place to lay the newborn Jesus was in an animal's stone feeding trough.

Everything about the birth shouts 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. And, no, it was not the reception a marketing guru would have orchestrated 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)

⁹ Ladies, imagine a one-hundred-mile donkey ride over rough terrain while on the verge of labor. Men, imagine putting your wife through that ordeal.

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 at night.

These sheep on the hills around Bethlehem were likely destined for sacrifice at the nearby temple in Jerusalem.¹⁰ The shepherds were out there guarding the sheep to protect against thieves and predators.¹¹

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.
- 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."

It is very possible that the shepherds who were out in the fields tending their flocks on the night Jesus was born were devout men. But their occupation kept them in the fields for much of the year and they missed regular times of worship.

For this reason, they were considered to be NOT devout. And for that reason, the Rabbis would often not allow them to participate in worship at all.

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ 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 with certainty!)

At the time of Jesus' birth, shepherds were religious outcasts and social nobodies. They weren't movers and shakers. They were more like down and outers.

Yet, God chose a group of shepherds to be the first to learn about the birth of His Son.¹²

The shepherds' quiet night of flock-watching was interrupted by the appearance of an angel.¹³

Frightened shepherds (v. 9)

[9] And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood near them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them...

While Luke doesn't tell us the name of this angel of God, I suspect that he is the same angel who appeared to Zacharias and to Mary before the births of John the Baptist and Jesus: Gabriel.

His appearance certainly had the same effect on the shepherds that Gabriel's appearance had on Zacharias. Luke reports that **"they were 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, the then current ruler of Rome, Caesar Augustus, brought optimism about what a leader could accomplish and what a society could achieve.

¹² How perfect: The angel told shepherds about the birth of the Lamb of God.

¹³ Angels have already appeared to Zacharias, Mary and Joseph.

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.

Luke knew all of this about Caesar. So, he leveraged Caesar's words and harnessed them for his own purposes. His message?

Well, while Caesar *thought* his reign announced Good News, the real GOOD NEWS of this night was the birth of the baby Jesus in a Bethlehem cave.

The angel continued.

A Savior is born!

[11] "for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior,¹⁴ who is Christ the Lord."¹⁵

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.

And this angel clearly said, **"today!"**

Not at some point in the far distant future. Now! By the time the angel appeared to the shepherds, he was speaking history, not prophecy. He **"has been born."**

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

¹⁴ This is the only time Jesus is referred to as Savior in the synoptic Gospels.

¹⁵ "**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 a *hapax legomenon*), literally **ChristLord**. In Greek, "Christ" indicates "anointed one." Here, not "an anointed one" but "THE anointed one" - Messiah. ChristLord describes Jesus in the highest possible terms.

How to recognize Him!

[12] “And 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 and around 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 feeding trough in Bethlehem’s stables.

And while the shepherds were taking all of this in, the sky over them erupted.

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

[13] And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly army of angels praising God, and saying, [14] “Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace among people 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 their fear when the angelic multitude started shouting and singing?

Moments earlier they had been enjoying a quiet night under the stars watching their sheep. Now, all Heaven has broken loose. Terribly frightened, indeed!

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

So, in the calm, 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 Bethlehem, just a short walk away from this field; that the Baby was Christ the Lord, a Savior; that we could find the Baby lying in a manger.”

So, off they raced to Bethlehem.¹⁶

Shepherds Tell Their Own Story (vv. 16-18, 20)

[16] And 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 Him, they made known the statement which had been told them about this Child. [18] And all who heard it were amazed about the things which were told them by the shepherds...[20] And the shepherds went back, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen, just as had been told them.

These shepherds were used to the open country of the fields. They wouldn’t have felt quite at home in the town of Bethlehem.

But as they made their way through town, they caught the familiar whiff 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. Mary and Joseph, more than anyone else, knew exactly who Jesus was. They would have expected unusual sightings and angel messages.

¹⁶ [15] *When the angels had departed from them into heaven, the shepherds began saying to one another, “Let’s go straight to Bethlehem, then, and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.”*

Luke 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 Jewish society - shepherds! - the first glimpse of God incarnate, the Word become flesh.

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 would you have done if you had heard Gospel news on that first Christmas night? You would have done exactly what these shepherds did. You would have told the story.

So, have you heard the Gospel? Have you heard the news that at the birth of Jesus a Savior was born? That the Lamb of God who is going to take away the sins of the world has come?

That is, after all, why He came to 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 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 at God's unorthodox orchestration of all the details of her Son's birth, wondering where all of this will lead.

And THAT is the story of Christmas.

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 officials 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.

When God sent His Son to the world, He orchestrated “branding” that shouted, “*Humble sacrifice!*” For that, a taxation-driven journey, a barn birth, a stone manger, and an inhospitable neighborhood worked great.

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

We worship a Savior, who is Christ the Lord, who emptied Himself of the privilege of majesty, who took the form of a bond-servant, who became just like us that we might become the sons and daughters of God through Him.

MERRY CHRISTMAS!!

[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.