

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: In the Fullness of the Times...

The “Good News!” Role Models We Didn’t Expect

(Luke 2:1-20)

Introduction: Marketing...

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

Maybe you can think of a recent ad that got you to click “buy” on some home improvement idea, high tech gadget, or workout gear.

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

If the product brings benefits, the marketer does us all a favor by giving it a memorable name, branding it well, having a catchy logo, and promoting it on multiple platforms.

All of that is the concern of marketing.

We consumers are glad for honest marketing. We want to know the positives about a product.

That way, when we leave after Wednesday’s Christmas Eve service, we’ll know what items to pick up at the store on the way home...

So, let’s pretend that God has hired your marketing firm. Your team’s job is to advise the Almighty about how to *maximize* the impact of the arrival of His Son on planet earth.

I doubt that your firm would have recommended much of what God allowed when Jesus was born in Bethlehem. But God had His reasons for arranging (“marketing”) Jesus’ birth the way He did.

Review...

Last Sunday, you and I listened as Matthew told us the story of the birth of Jesus from Joseph’s perspective. He embraced God’s very disruptive Plan C for his life, and served as the only human, earthly father Jesus would know.

On the Sunday before that, we turned to Luke’s Gospel and saw the wonderful, good news story of the birth of John the Baptist to the elderly couple, Zechariah and Elizabeth.

It is an all-around good news story. Elizabeth was the talk and the pride of the town. Zechariah was the proudest papa in town. And John was the most celebrated baby in the hill country of Judea.

Today, we come to the story of the birth of King Jesus, a very different story from that of the birth of John the Baptist.

We’re turning back to the Gospel of Luke, where we’ll see more details of Jesus’ actual birth story than anywhere else in the Bible.

As background, Luke has already brought 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 bondservant of the Lord. May it be 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 assume that Mary lived with Joseph when she returned to Nazareth, but not as husband and wife while she was pregnant.

Before telling us about the birth of Jesus, Luke tells us that the powers in Rome had done something BIG that greatly impacted life in the little, backwater Jewish village of Nazareth.¹

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

Caesar Commanded 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

As mandated by the Constitution, we in the USA take a census of the population every ten years. We receive a form in the mail, fill it out, and mail it back to the US Census Bureau.

In a much more inconvenient way, Jews living in the Roman Empire were forced to take part in their own census.

Three thousand miles away from Israel, back in Rome, Caesar ordered that each head of a Jewish household had to travel to his ancestral home to register so that he could be properly taxed.

Rome could force this kind of burden on the Jews because the Jews were a conquered people. They had to do whatever Rome told them to do.

¹ I have found 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 no evidence that a census 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.

But God, not Caesar, is the Lord of history. And Caesar's census only ensured that God's plans would move forward.⁴

Joseph and Mary Travelled 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 beautiful lineage of Joseph from David

As we learned last week, Joseph was a direct descendant of the greatest kings of the Old Testament, including David and Solomon, Hezekiah and Josiah.

Of course, there hadn't been a Jewish king reigning over Israel for nearly six centuries. And Joseph made his living in Nazareth as a carpenter.

But Joseph came from kings. So, he was forced to travel to the royal city of Bethlehem, King David's hometown, to register for the census so that he could be properly taxed.

Tracing the ugly journey of Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem

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

⁴ Biblically and with respect to God's plan, the main impact of Caesar's census was that it provided the impetus Joseph needed to travel to Bethlehem.

⁵ Interestingly, there is no record in the Bible of Jesus ever visiting Bethlehem after His birth.

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).

They would have packed their bags and loaded a donkey with all the food and necessary gear and left Nazareth.

They would have first 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 might 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.

After passing through Jerusalem, they would have finished their long journey, arriving in Bethlehem.

Luke describes the birth of Mary's Child simply and with restraint.

Mary Gave 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, it certainly would have been hard. For instance, while there may have been help from local women, we aren't told about it.

And there certainly wasn't a comfortable birthing room, soft background music, nursing staff, or epidurals.

But at the end, after the labor, Jesus was born, and 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...

Since she laid Jesus in a *manger* (an animal's feeding trough), we assume that 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.

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

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

Well, it was **[7c] ...because there was no room for them in the inn.**

⁷ Why did Joseph take Mary with him, since only he was required to go to Bethlehem? Many Bible scholars (including the Jewish-Christian scholar, Alfred Edersheim, author of *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*) suggest that it was the treatment Mary was getting that prompted Joseph to bring her along, as she

would have been shunned in Nazareth for her unmarried pregnancy. In God's plan, it was necessary for her to give birth to Jesus in Bethlehem and not in Nazareth.

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.

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 open to opening their home to Joseph and the great-with-child Mary. The callousness of that takes your breath away.

The Great News of what we have seen 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.
- 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. It was an inauspicious beginning for God's Son, and a different sort of marketing ploy. But the night is still young and there is more to come.

Following the birth of His Son, God planned a reception. And, no, it was not the reception a 2025 marketing guru would have orchestrated. Luke turns our attention to fields just outside of Bethlehem, where there were shepherds.

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

The Message Proclaimed TO Shepherds (vv. 8-14)

Shepherds out 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.⁹ The shepherds were out there to protect the sheep against thieves and predators.¹⁰

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.

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. They were the least, the last, the lost.

Yet, God chose a group of shepherds to be the first outside of Mary and Joseph to learn of the birth of His Son.¹¹

⁹ A rabbinic rule provided that any sheep found between Jerusalem and a spot near Bethlehem must be presumed to be a sacrificial victim.

¹⁰ The temple flocks were pastured in the open fields around Bethlehem year-round, so the traditional date for Jesus' birth of December 25 might be accurate.

¹¹ How perfect: The angel told shepherds about the birth of the Lamb of God.

The shepherds' quiet night of flock-watching was interrupted by the appearance of an angel.¹²

Frightened shepherds (v. 9)

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

Luke doesn't tell us the name of this angel. He may have been Gabriel, the same angel who appeared to Zacharias and to Mary before the births of John the Baptist and Jesus.

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 expected thing: **"Do not be afraid."**

The angel's "Good News" message (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 human history, the current ruler of Rome, Caesar Augustus, brought optimism about what a leader could accomplish and what a society could achieve.

Rome and Caesar brought the Pax Romana (a three hundred year reign of peace), great roads, a common currency and language, uniform laws, plumbing and aqueducts and more.

Caesar used the Greek word for "Good News" ("Gospel") to describe the GREAT things his reign had brought and would bring.

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

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

While Caesar *thought* his reign announced Good News, the biggest, most wonderful GOOD NEWS of this night was the birth of a Baby 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,¹³ who is Christ the Lord."¹⁴

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 to the "When?" question, the angel 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 this "Christ the Lord" newborn Baby? Easy.

¹² Angels have already appeared to Zacharias, Mary and Joseph.

¹³ This is the only time Jesus is referred to as Savior in the synoptic Gospels.

¹⁴ "**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 most exalted terms possible.

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 One in whom the hopes and dreams of all the years are all fulfilled.”

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 - leading to **“terribly frightened”** on steroids.

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.

In that calm, the shepherds must have been shaking their heads, looking at each other, wondering if they had experienced what they THOUGHT they had just experienced?

They reviewed 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 just a short walk away from this field; that the Baby was Christ the Lord, a Savior. He said that we could find the Baby - in Bethlehem.”

So, off they raced to Bethlehem.

The Message Proclaimed BY Shepherds (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.

Shepherds were used to the open country of the fields. They didn’t frequent cities and villages.

But as they made their way through Bethlehem, 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 - and these shepherds would have noted that Mary and Joseph weren’t at their report.

These two, more than anyone else, knew exactly who Jesus was. So soon after the angel’s messages to them, they might well have expected unusual sightings and angel messages.

The shepherds probably didn’t stay long at the stables, but what they did when they left was predictable.

[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.

They couldn't keep the good news 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. He gave some of the most humble members of first century Jewish society - shepherds! - the first glimpse of the Baby in whom ***"the Word became flesh."*** (John 1:14)

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 good news.

I want you to know that my broccoli and greens are doing great in my garden. If I go camping, I want to let you know about the West Texas star show I saw.

If you ask me how my week was, I want to let you know that God gave me good connection with a few people last week that meant the world to me.

Good News is for sharing!

So, what would you have done if you had heard the news that those shepherds hear on that night? You would have done exactly what they did. You would have told the story to anyone who would listen.

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

If you have heard and believed that message, don't work so hard to keep it all bottled up inside.

Let it burst forth like it did for those first evangelists, the shepherds. Today, let the Bethlehem shepherds be your Good News role models.

Be like those that others thought were nobodies, but who became somebodies by talking non-stop about a Somebody.

There probably wasn't one of them who had ever given a speech to anyone. They probably weren't articulate or lettered men.

But they knew what they knew. And they unleashed the news of what they knew to everybody they knew.

May 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."***

Look back at the text and you'll see the final picture of this passage. It's a picture of a thoughtful Mary.

Mary Treasured the Whole 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 a still-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.

That and no other story is the story of Christmas.

Conclusion:

I suspect that a first-century marketing firm hired to orchestrate the entrance of God's Son into the world would have suggested quite a few edits to the story we've just heard.

I believe that chief among those edits would have been the arrival of the shepherds as Jesus' "welcoming committee."

Their counsel to God might have been something like this: "Lord, shepherds are nice enough folks. I like shepherds. Some of my best friends are shepherds. But trust me on this one - 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."

And those would have been excellent suggestions IF what God had wanted to do was what we usually want to do to announce the entrance of a king.

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, He orchestrated branding that whispered, "*Humility. Sacrifice.*"

Luke included the details he did to highlight the lowlights of Jesus' inglorious entrance into the world He created.

What we have seen - a taxation-driven journey, an inhospitable village, a barn birth, a stone manger, and shepherds - has been exactly what God wanted us to see.

We worship a Savior, who is Christ the Lord, who emptied Himself of the privilege of majesty, who took the form of a bondservant, 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.