

## Scripture Reading:

**Hebrews 1: “1 God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, 2 has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds; 3 who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, 4 having become so much better than the angels, as He has by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they. 5 For to which of the angels did He ever say: "You are My Son, Today I have begotten You"? And again: "I will be to Him a Father, And He shall be to Me a Son"? 6 But when He again brings the firstborn into the world, He says: "Let all the angels of God worship Him." 7 And of the angels He says: "Who makes His angels spirits And His ministers a flame of fire." 8 But to the Son He says: "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever; A scepter of righteousness is the scepter of Your Kingdom. 9 You have loved righteousness and hated lawlessness; Therefore God, Your God, has anointed You with the oil of gladness more than Your companions." 10 And: "You, Lord, in the beginning laid the foundation of the earth, And the heavens are the work of Your hands. 11 They will perish, but You remain; And they will all grow old like a garment; 12 Like a cloak You will fold them up, And they will be changed. But You are the same, And Your years will not fail." 13 But to which of the angels has He ever said: "Sit at My right hand, Till I make Your enemies Your footstool"? 14 Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to minister for those who will inherit salvation?”**

# "Of Shepherds & Wise Men, Part One"

My lovely bride has a theory that time speeds up as we grow older...

- And the older I get, the more I think she is right!

Another Christmas Day has come and gone and we now begin our next journey through the Church calendar. Today we celebrate the birth of Jesus and begin to move through the ministry of Jesus as He was revealed or manifested to the world. Easter will bring us to the Passion Week where we see His triumphal entry into Jerusalem, His trial, death, burial, and resurrection accomplishing the task that was set before Him from the moment of His conception when the angel declared that Jesus was come to save His people from their sins. The risen Jesus tells His disciples they are to be His witnesses in Jerusalem; all of Judea; in Samaria; and then to all the earth: After this Jesus ascends to the Father's right hand of power.

- At Pentecost we see the promised Comforter, the Holy Spirit coming in power to fulfill the work of glorifying the Son as He fills the earth with His Kingdom.

The second half of the church year is what we call ordinary time or normal time: We begin with Trinity Sunday to proclaim the great Triune God whom we serve and then remember week by week each year that we are to trust and obey Him in the ordinary times in our lives. Then we come to Advent which is both the end and the beginning of the church calendar: We celebrate and remember the coming of Christ:

- His coming as a baby to save His people from their sins...
- His coming to His people through the Holy Spirit and right worship...
- And His coming as the judge of all the world at the end of time.

With this season complete, the four advent candles have been lit and now the Christ candle burns brightly reminding us that Jesus has come as the light of the world!

Once again I must thank Theron and Mike for bringing us the Advent messages this year where they rightly reminded us of the Joy, the Peace the Holiness and the Kingdom perspective that we should always have in mind during the Advent season!

- We, as Christians, are those who can truly appreciate the wonder of the God of the Universe coming as a little baby, demonstrating His ultimate power through ultimate weakness.

Submitting Himself to parents and relatives and friends who cared for Him: Some of the very sinners for whom He came to die, fed Him, changed His wraps, taught Him to walk and talk and how to grow & mature in wisdom and knowledge before God and man. A story that only our loving God could conceive of & only our loving God could carry out giving us not only redemption but an example of how we are to humbly live our lives in service to others.

We celebrate all of this each and every year to remind us & our children that this all took place in real history. Just as we remember the birthdays and anniversaries here a Church of the King each week during our fellowship meals: We do so because someone was really born on a certain day and real couples took real vows on certain days. Our age is one where these reminders are important: An age where our children will be told it is all just fairy tales, like Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny... Nice images and stories to make us feel better in a dark and depressing world.

- We, as His faithful witnesses, are to know and proclaim to the world that Jesus DID come as the light of the world and that His coming has changed everything!
- NOT just because we believe it, but because it is REAL!

This year I want to take two weeks to consider two sets of characters involved in the account of how Jesus came into this world: Some shepherds and some wise men. The actual texts that give us the Christmas story are relatively short: Given to us only by Matthew & Luke.

As Theron and Mike clearly demonstrated with their Advent sermons from this year and last, those are not the only places in the Bible where we learn about the details and meaning of the coming of Jesus. From the promised deliverance by the seed of the woman in the opening chapters of Genesis to the closing call for Jesus to come quickly at the end of Revelation, the Bible IS the story of the coming of Jesus!

Our text from Hebrews this morning reminded us that God spoke to His people through the prophets and angels in the Old Testament times, but NOW He speaks to us through His Son! John the Baptist would be the last of the great Prophets preparing the way for Jesus. The angel visitations that we read in the Christmas accounts would be their final messages to mankind because henceforth God would speak through His Son Jesus: The Father proclaims this at the baptism of Jesus and the transfiguration:

- Jesus is the beloved Son in whom the Father is well-pleased and we are to hear HIM!

The accounts that are given by Matthew and Luke tell us the details that we need to know about the birth of Jesus...

- They also remind us about who is to hear the Son: How we are to faithfully hear the Son AND be ready and willing to obey the Son.

Thus I want to consider the shepherds and the wise men. They have much in common and much that is a contrast.

- The shepherds would have been simple men working long hours in a poor region of Palestine.
- The magi or wise men would have been philosophers and leaders coming from one of the richest parts of the world, most likely enjoying lives of luxury.

**And yet God approaches both and in very similar ways:**

- **They are given powerful signs**
- **They are given information about where to find Jesus**

**And both respond in very similar ways:**

- **They follow the instructions and signs that were given**
- **They worship the newborn child as their Savior and King**

**They return to their lives knowing that the world will never be the same!**

**Obviously, it is no accident that we see these contrasts and similarities...**

- **They should certainly remind us that we are to hear and respond to the call of Jesus no matter what our status in life might be at the time.**

**So with that in mind this week we will turn to Luke's account of the Shepherds and learn from them. It is Luke who tells us the details of the night Jesus was born: Luke 2:1 "And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2 This census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria."**

**Let me say just a word here about the historical accuracy of the Bible... Discussing just when Jesus was born is one of the favorite attack points for those skeptics who want to discourage us from believing the Bible and thus to undermine our precious faith... They tell us that we don't even know what year Jesus was born nor even what time of year!**

**Well, the Bible does not give us the exact year, or time of year, so we have to accept that: Knowing that if it was critical it would have been given. However, the skeptics go even further and say the Bible actually contradicts itself about the time Jesus was born. They point out that other records show King Herod died in 4BC which had to be after Jesus was born as we shall see next week.**

**However, they tell us that Governor Quirinius took his famous census in AD 6 or 7 which is almost ten years later. Of course they assume there was only one census, even though Luke specifically references the FIRST census which would imply more than one census so we don't have a conflict.**

**Of course they will say, BUT there is no other record of such a census!**

- **We should be ready to remind them that earlier skeptics, using the SAME type of argument said the same about Pontius Pilate the governor who condemned Jesus.**

**Up until 1961, there was no historical record of such a governor outside of the Gospel accounts and the same type of skeptics said he was a mythical character dreamed up by the Gospel writers. Our simple response was to say the Bible IS reliable and clearly says he was real and of course they insisted that the Bible did not count!**

- **Suddenly in 1961 there was a coin with the governor's inscription discovered: The Bible was right and the doubters had egg on their faces.**

**Since that time his palace and other evidences have been found confirming the historical accuracy of the Gospels.**

**Whether any evidence about the earlier census will be discovered before the return of Jesus does not really matter when you consider how many proofs have already surfaced that confirm the faithfulness of the Scriptures.**

**Sadly, some Christians say these details are not important because the Bible presents the Gospel, the great 'spiritual truth' that is of primary importance...**

**True enough, but if the Bible is wrong about what historical details it does give then why should we believe that Jesus was born of a virgin or any of the other details of His life and work?**

- And so, God uses this census to bring Joseph and Mary to the place where He promised long ago that the messiah would be born.

Luke 2:3 “So all went to be registered, everyone to his own city. 4 Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, 5 to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child. 6 So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. 7 And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.”

Much has been made about Jesus being born in humble surroundings, but I think much of this misses the point: The reality is that ANYPLACE on this earth would be pretty humbling for the Son of God, the eternal second person of the Holy Trinity to be born! The Old Testament promised that Jesus would be born in Bethlehem and that He would come as the lamb of God... So Joseph goes to Bethlehem and Mary delivers the baby Jesus and puts Him in a manger...

- A place where shepherds would often place a new born lamb.

Thus it should not surprise us that the first announcement of this important event came to.... SHEPHERDS!

8 “Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid.”

*Yes, this is where I need to give my annual warning that all these cute angels that appear this time of year are NOT accurate! Who is afraid of them?*

10 “Then the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. 11 For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”

- Mike will be pleased to see that the angels agree with his sermon last week: Jesus did not grow up to become King or even ascend to be King...
- He was born the King of Kings and Lord of Lords

We see this proclaimed here by the angels, by the wise men with their gifts and by Simeon in the Temple just so we don’t miss that important point!

12 “And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger.”

I think these humble shepherds understood the significance of where they would find the Messiah and this is why we will see them sharing the Good News after their visit to see the baby Jesus!

The birth of Jesus was certainly NOT a secret in heaven:

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, goodwill toward men!”

If you have experienced the beauty of just twenty or thirty well trained choral voices signing in the round or even in a rotunda, then this picture should take your breath away...

- Imagine what this heavenly HOST sounded like that night!

AND as you are trying to take all of this in, remember that they were not performing for the world or even ALL of Jerusalem, but just for these faithful shepherds who were to be the first witnesses for Jesus!

And we know them to be faithful because they demonstrate it with their response:

15 “So it was, when the angels had gone away from them into heaven, that the shepherds said to one another, “Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made

known to us." 16 And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger. 17 Now when they had seen Him, they made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this Child. 18 And all those who heard it marveled at those things which were told them by the shepherds. 19 But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart. 20 Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told them."

- As I mentioned, we will see many similarities with the coming of the wise men, but I will leave that for next week:

For today I want us to consider the very practical lessons that we should learn from the account of these faithful shepherds... First and foremost it reminds us again of the importance of our being faithful in our callings... Any shepherd who had decided that keeping the sheep was just too boring or that this particular night was too cold would have missed that heavenly chorus and the chance to see Jesus!

There are many who wonder if God is real in their lives often looking for some experience or new adventure to get them excited.

- The lesson of the shepherds is that God more often than not meets us where we are faithfully serving in our everyday lives!

And this leads us to the second lesson where we must learn to listen carefully to what God has to say, even when it might seem a little strange: The shepherds were to seek the Messiah in a manger and next week we will see the Wise Men having to leave the great Kingdoms of the East to look for the King of Kings.

- And of course, we must not only hear what God says, but obey His commands as these Shepherds did that night.

Some will object at this point and say that was fine for them, but my Christmas has been pretty dull:

Lots of shopping and other distractions of the season, but no angels singing or special stars to help me along! Here we must remember what Jesus told the rich man who wanted Abraham or Lazarus to return to his brothers to warn them about hell, thinking they would believe it if someone came back from the dead.

- Abraham told this man that they had Moses and the Prophets and if they did not believe them, then even if one did come back from the dead they would not believe what was clearly in God's Word!

We must remember that God did not send His angels to a group of men who had spent their lives apart from the faith, not caring about what God said, hoping to sort of wake them up and we will see next week it was the same with the Wise Men.

### **It is faithful people who are faithful!**

If you have not been faithful, the answer is not to continue in sin until the angels appear to you some night...

- The answer is to begin being faithful...
- Faithful to what God has said in the Bible, His Word!

Each and every one of us can learn these simple lessons:

- Be faithful daily as you serve in your vocation or calling
- Hear what God has to say
- Do what God commands, even when it seems a little strange!

If we do this the result will be what we see as the final lesson:

These shepherds worshipped God, gave Him all the glory and went about telling others about the Good News!

- May it be so with all of us in this New Year!