

“Christmas Eve: Jesus is Our Savior” (Luke 1:28-35)

December 24, 2010

Christmas Eve, 2010

5:30 pm

Prelude (if possible)

Lighting of the Advent Candles

Scripture Reading: Micah 5:2-5

“O Little Town of Bethlehem”

Song # 250

Special Music:

Scripture Reading: Luke 2:1-7

“Infant Holy, Infant Lowly”

Song # 279

Special Music:

Message: Jesus was Born to be Our Savior
by Pastor Bronson

Passing of the Light as the congregation sings “Silent Night”

Song # 253

The 9:30 pm service will be the same but with different special music and a different pianist playing the prelude, etc.

Jesus was born to be a prophet, Jesus was born to be a priest, Jesus was born to be a king, Jesus was born to be Lord, and God sent His Son Jesus to be our Savior. Before Jesus was born God sent angels to speak about it to those He had chosen to be involved. Understandably the best known of these angelic visitations was the angel Gabriel’s visit to Mary. You will find it Luke 1:28-35.

“Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!” But she [Mary] was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.’” [Now there had to be something in Gabriel’s tone of voice that caught Mary’s attention, because when she is listening to him, her instant question is, “How?” meaning that she sensed that the angel was saying something was urgently present, and her problem was, she wasn’t married. Not being married, it made the issue of conception difficult. So she says,] *“How will this be, since I am a virgin?” And the angel answered her, ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God.’*

It takes no imagination to appreciate Mary’s need for some special angelic counsel regarding this prospective birth. Not only does she need a little extra guidance, so does the guy she is engaged to! God knew that Joseph, the man to whom Mary was already engaged to be married, needed some counsel as well. Stunned at learning that the woman he was betrothed to marry was already pregnant – oops! – Joseph, we are told, was resolved to do the most decent thing he could possibly do in that age: he was going to quietly divorce her. That might strike us as strange, but to be engaged at that time in history if you were a Jew was the equivalent to being married; it was an unbreakable bond except under certain circumstances, and the pregnancy was one of those circumstances. It was to forestall that action that God sent an angel. In Matthew 1:20-23 we read, *“...behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. For he will save his people from their sins.’ All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: ‘Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel’ (which means, God with us).”* That was the prophet Isaiah.

God was not content, however, with having spoken with Mary and Joseph. On the night of Jesus’ birth an angel was also sent to some shepherds. They were out on the hillsides around Bethlehem. And they were told – this is from Luke 2:10-12 – *“Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.”* As Luke records, the shepherds went with haste and found everything just as the angel had told them.

God sent His Son to be the Savior of the world. It is a virtual certainty that all of those to whom the angels spoke were looking for the coming of a messiah, the anointed one. They surely expected that he would be a savior. He would be the savior, as they anticipated, of God’s people Israel. That is what the shepherds would have heard as they listened to the angel, an impression reinforced by his reference to David and the throne of David. David after all was the great king, the warrior king, the king who had established the kingdom. He was the king who had established Jerusalem as the capital city. He was the king who had arranged to have the temple built. He was the king who had brought the ark of the

covenant. It has been speculated – it cannot be proved, but it is highly likely – that the shepherds with whom the angels spoke in the hills around Bethlehem actually cared for the flocks that were especially raised for temple sacrifices in Jerusalem, the very lambs that were sold to pilgrims who came to the yearly feasts. All that happened in Jerusalem would be very much on the mind of those shepherds. Not that they would be particularly impressed, perhaps, with the temple priests. The temple priests were not known for their generosity or for the working conditions of those who served them. The priests were very wealthy, of course, but that would have little to do with those who earned their living by caring for their needs. The priests paid more attention to Herod than to shepherds. Not just because Herod was pouring vast sums of money into turning the temple into something magnificent. It was undoubtedly safer to take care of sheep than it was to take care of Herod, he being one of the most vicious and destructive kings in the history of man. Herod was a man you had to keep your eye on. For that matter, so were the Romans. We should never forget that Jesus was born into an occupied country where there was a great deal of oppression and cruelty and poverty through excessive taxation.

Joseph, Mary and the shepherds would have agreed that it was high time for a messiah to come. They, however, would not have dreamt that they would be involved. We are told that Mary was thoughtful: well she should be; she would have to carry the child in her womb. Joseph was thoughtful: well he should be. It was his wife who would be pregnant, but not by him. But he would have to endure the questions and the gossip as well as Mary, and he would be responsible to care for the mother and child. Going to Egypt probably had more advantages than just avoiding Herod, but that was an event nearly two years down the road.

The good news was seemingly best for the shepherds. Little was expected of them; just go into town – maybe a couple of miles. Find the family. That’s it: easy and clean. For Joseph and Mary it was very different. The long awaited coming of the promised child who was to be the answer to Israel’s troubles and sorrows, the liberator of the nation, and the restorer of all that was wrong to right was to them more problem than solution, certainly at this point. In fact, he was nothing but problem. If you know the story, Joseph decided to stay in Bethlehem rather than return to Nazareth. We are not told why, but we have reason to believe that the tongues of gossips wagged in Nazareth. However, not far away from Bethlehem Elizabeth and Zechariah lived. Everybody knew about Elizabeth’s remarkable, almost miraculous, pregnancy in old age, just six months in front of Jesus. Probably it was far more interesting to talk about Elizabeth getting pregnant when she was beyond age than it was to talk about this couple from up north who had irregularities in the birthing of their child, so that it was no big deal.

Wise men came, and they brought remarkable gifts. The trouble is the wise men also brought Herod and his intense jealousy. Immediately after the wise men left, Herod’s soldiers arrived. And even though Jesus along with his mom and dad left town in time, Herod’s soldiers proceeded to kill every child two and under not only in Bethlehem, but in the surrounding region. It is difficult to see this as good news.

As I said, it was easier for the shepherds. It would also be the shepherds who forgot first. As soon as it became apparent that nothing was going to happen very soon – and that would likely have dawned on them within a few days: babies don’t do much on their own – the event would have first become something to talk about with family and neighbors and then something remembered on occasion. “Samuel, I’ve been thinking lately about the time the angels sang. Do you remember?” “Yeah, it’s been a while.” “I wonder whatever happened to them.” “Who?” “Well, the family, you know, the guy and his wife and the

baby.” “O, yeah. I heard they had the baby in a cattle stall.” “I heard they went off somewhere, I think to Egypt.” “Yeah.” “That’s about the time all the babies were killed by Herod’s soldiers.” “Yeah; that was a bad time.” That’s what they would have remembered.

The angel had said, “I bring you good news of great joy” but had not turned out that way. We cannot know what the shepherds expected from the savior. Getting rid of the Romans would be one thing, and likely getting rid of Herod also. He was neither Jewish nor good. In fact, he was dangerously evil. The prophecies led one to believe that peace and prosperity would come to all, that even the common man would have his own house, his own fields and his own vines with children happily playing beneath them. Life was hard enough without the burden of waiting for impossible dreams. Stable born boys do not grow up to become kings.

Gabriel told Mary the boy was to be named Jesus. The name means “Yahweh is salvation”. That was certainly what every Jew expected of the long awaited messiah. And in a sense, stronger in some weaker in others, we all hope that somehow we might receive a gift, THE gift; the gift that will heal our pain, the gift that will remove sorrow, the gift that will bring an end to trouble. What people look for, what they hope for is a fair indication of what they see as real as to the way the world actually works and the possibilities for happiness. Small dreams generally indicate either few problems and much contentment or small hopes and low expectations that anything good can ever happen or any great change occur. Size is not the only issue, whatever size might mean when we talk about dreams. The shepherds in some sense had a large picture of what they wanted to have happen: get rid of the king, get rid of the occupying forces, clean up the priesthood. Those would have been rather sweeping changes, the kind that you and I might dream about, the change of government, the end of corruption, the anticipation of peace and prosperity.

It is very hard for us to say what Mary’s salvation dream would have been, although we can gain some insight from the remarkable song that she composed as she was travelling from Nazareth down to Bethlehem and Judah to visit with her cousin Elizabeth. She composed this; we can imagine she sang it. This is her song:

*My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
For he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.,
For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
For he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is His name.
And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;
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 empty away.
He has helped his servant Israel, in the remembrance of his mercy,
As he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever.*

Think about those words. That is not your typical Christmas carol. Mary is full of anticipation and it appears she is little troubled by doubt. It is not in any degree likely that Mary felt movement or some other such thing from the newly conceived child in her womb as she walked the ninety miles from Galilee to Judah. But even so, as I learned from my wife through six pregnancies to birth, the gestating mother gains an awareness of the child within long before the father has a clue. This is one of the reasons, by the way, why abortions are so devastating. The awareness of a new and distinctly human life within has to be

denied and repressed, and that is as violent as the act of abortion itself. As she traveled, Mary is thoughtful. She remembers what the angel had said and the song indicates she remembers a great deal more. It has often been pointed out that Mary’s song has many echoes from the song of Hannah, the mother of Samuel, a man born before the kingdom of Israel was even founded. She sang that song in triumphant joy when God answered her prayer and she had her first child, who was Samuel. We cannot possibly suppose that the typical Jewish girl in Mary’s day knew Hannah’s song; nothing in the historical record indicates any such thing. But perhaps here we have a small indication as to what was significantly special about Mary. Apparently she knew the Word of God, and she loved it. Whatever her salvation dream was, it was drawn from the Word of God and defined by its promises. We notice from the song that Mary sang she unquestionably takes the long view of things. She thinks in terms of generations. We can think that Mary had in mind some of the proud faces, perhaps, and the condemning voices of the ladies at the well in Nazareth, as she sang of the proud hearted and anticipated that future generations would call her blessed. She affirmed that the Lord’s mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. Her words tell us that Mary was not interested in gaining high social standing, or in gaining wealth. Mary’s hopes were not, in fact, fixed even on the promised throne of David. Notice, she refers to the mighty being pulled down from their thrones. Rather, her hope, as is brought to our attention at the end of the song, was anchored in God’s promise to Abraham. That promise, like the one given to her by the angel, was for a child, a child that would bless the whole world, a child that would be our redemption, our salvation. We worship at Christmas the One whom God sent to be our Savior. The question is, is He? If you are here and you have never made a personal decision accepting the fact that Jesus Christ has died for your sins, I would invite you to do that. It is a simple thing of the most profound meaning. There is no other decision you could make that is equal to that one.

Please pray with me: Father, we celebrate Christmas year by year, and Easter, and our birthdays and all manner of things. But life is not an endless cycle, it is a trajectory that begins [at a point in time,] and it moves to a conclusion. Father, the nature of that conclusion is altogether upon the decisions we make regarding the Child you sent to be our Savior. Grant that we by Your grace might have our hearts and minds open to the truth and we, humbled by Your goodness, conscious of our unworthiness and hopeful because of Your grace, might accept the Child for the reasons that You brought Him to us, that He might be our Savior. Father, it is in Jesus’ name that we pray. Amen.