

Looking Forward to Christmas
Session 3 (Evangelism Session)
December 15, 2024

Looking Forward to Joy

Session Passage: Luke 2:4-14

Setting. The first two chapters of the Gospel of Luke detail the events surrounding the birth of Jesus. Chapter 1 relates the angel Gabriel's announcements of the coming birth of John the Baptist as well as his announcement to Mary of her miraculous conception of Jesus by the Holy Spirit. Chapter 2 gives the details related to Jesus's birth in Bethlehem.

Luke 2:4-7

Connection to The Point. Jesus was born in Bethlehem, the city of David, just as it was prophesied.

Context. Luke 2:1-3 gives the reasons for Joseph's traveling to Bethlehem. The Roman emperor Augustus Caesar decreed an empire-wide registration, most likely for the purposes of taxation. So everyone was required to go to his hometown to register. Luke's inclusion of this detail illustrates his concern for historical context.

Joseph (v. 4). Joseph was engaged to a virgin named Mary (1:27). However, as Matthew's Gospel details, before they consummated their marriage, Mary was found to be pregnant. It was Joseph's intention to divorce her privately, but through a dream an angel told Joseph that Mary was pregnant through the power of the Holy Spirit, and he was to marry Mary and name the child "Jesus" (Matt. 1:18-21).

Geography. Nazareth was located in the northern region of Galilee, while Judah was located in the southern region of Judea. Galilee and Judea were separated by the region of Samaria. All three regions were under the rule of the Roman Empire.

Nazareth (v. 4). A small village located in the hill country of lower **Galilee** halfway between the Sea of Galilee and the Mediterranean Sea, Nazareth means "branch." The village is not mentioned in the Old Testament. The first-century population of the village was about four hundred people. The primary occupation of the residents was agriculture. A major trade route, the Via Maris, running from Egypt to Mesopotamia passed near the village. That Joseph and Mary **went up** from Nazareth to Bethlehem as they traveled south was due to the low elevation of Nazareth (1830 feet) in relation to Bethlehem (2564 feet).

Judea (v. 4). *Judea* was the Roman province which included Jerusalem and the surrounding area. The Romans appointed Herod the Great as its king about 37 BC, and he ruled until his death in 4 BC.

Bethlehem (v. 4). This small village lies about five miles southwest of Jerusalem, located near a major trade route from Jerusalem to the Negev desert. It is called the “city of David” because it was King David’s birth place and where he grew up. It was the location of several major events on the Old Testament including a significant portion of the events in the book of Ruth (Ruth 1:1-2,19; 2:4; 4:11) and David’s anointing by Samuel (1 Sam. 16:1-13). Its most important feature in the Old Testament was its prophetic designation as the birthplace of the promised Messiah (Mic. 5:2,4; see Matt. 2:3-6).

House and family line of David (v. 4). Because of Joseph’s ancestry of the line of King David he was required to go to Bethlehem to register for the census, a journey of about ninety miles. This was important because Jesus had to be of Davidic lineage to be the Messiah. In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus’s lineage is traced from Joseph to Adam, the first man (3:23-38). Matthew’s Gospel provides Jesus’s lineage from Joseph back to the patriarch Abraham (Matt. 1:1-17). The lineage in Matthew’s Gospel emphasizes Jesus’s relationship with the Jews, the children of Abraham. The lineage of Luke’s Gospel emphasizes that as God’s promised Messiah, Jesus is the hope of salvation for all people, both Jews and Gentiles.¹

Registered (v. 5). Joseph went to Bethlehem to enroll for a census. It was probably not necessary for Joseph to have brought Mary with him to Bethlehem since women were not usually required to register for censuses. But Joseph probably could tell she was going to deliver her child soon and wanted to be with her when the time came. Also, he may not have wanted to leave her in Nazareth where she may have been the brunt of unkind rumors.

Mary (v. 5). Mary was betrothed to Joseph. Her name is the Greek version of the Hebrew “Miriam.” She was a relative of Elizabeth (the mother of John the Baptist, 1:36) and was a young woman of great faith who willingly assented to be the mother of the Messiah (vv. 26-38). Luke 1:34-35 tells of her virginal conception, but she did not remain a virgin after Jesus’s birth (Matt. 1:24-25).

The time came for her to give birth (v. 6). Luke did not say exactly how long Joseph and Mary were in Bethlehem before Mary delivered, just **while they were there**. The important

point is that God used all the circumstances—the emperor’s decree, Joseph’s need to go Bethlehem to register, and his desire to take Mary with him—to bring about the fulfillment of the prophecy that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem (Mic. 5:2).

Firstborn son (v. 7). The Greek term *prototokos* can mean being first in birth order, refer to special status or privilege associated with the firstborn, or being the head over a spiritual family (Rom. 8:29). Jesus is the “firstborn over all creation” (Col. 1:15) in the sense that He existed eternally before all creation.

In Judaism, the firstborn male child was especially dedicated to God and was to be presented to the Lord at the temple forty days after his birth to be redeemed (Ex. 13:2,12-13; see Luke 2:22-24). That Luke called Jesus Mary’s *firstborn son* indicates that Joseph and Mary had other children after Jesus was born (Matt. 13:55-56; Mark 6:3).

Wrapped him tightly in cloth (v. 7). The phrase *wrapped . . . tightly in cloth* is just one word in Greek: *sparganoo*, meaning literally “swaddled.” Swaddling was the normal practice of childcare of that time. Babies were wrapped in long pieces of cloth which restricted the babies’ movement and provided them with a sense of comfort and security.

Manger (v. 7) Cattle, donkeys, and horses normally fed or drank from a trough (manger) made of stone or wood. Houses often had one major room split between an area for the family and an area for animals with an opening between the two. Other houses had adjacent stables or stalls for animals. The exact location where Mary gave birth to Jesus is unknown. Suggestions include in a house (as above), in a stable, or even in a cave or the courtyard of an inn.

No guest room available (v. 7). The term *kataluma* can be translated *guest room* or “inn.” If the term refers to a guest room it could mean that Mary and Joseph stayed in the area of a house dedicated to the animals because the house’s guest room was already occupied. If the term refers to an inn, they may have been staying in the inn’s enclosed courtyard where travelers’ animals were kept.

Luke 2:8-12

Connection to The Point. Angels announced the birth of Jesus, proclaiming Him to be the source of great joy for all people.

Shepherds (v. 8). Shepherding was a major occupation in ancient Israel. The Bible mentions shepherds and shepherding more than two hundred times. Shepherds were charged with the care and protection of their sheep. At night they would build a sheepfold out of stones or thorny branches in which to keep the sheep. They would lay at the entrance to the sheepfold to guard the flock. Abel, Abraham, Moses, and David were all shepherds. Shepherds became a metaphor for leaders (Jer. 23; Ezek. 34), kings (2 Sam. 5:2), and even God Himself (Ps. 23; Isa. 40:11), while the flocks represented God's people. Jesus called Himself the "good shepherd" who would lay down His life for His sheep, meaning His disciples (John 10:1-18).

Keeping watch (v. 8). Shepherds usually were out in the fields with their sheep from March to November. However, Luke does not specify the time of these events. *Keeping watch* is literally "watching watches" (*phulasso phulake*). Both Greek terms were associated with the military function of keeping guard.

Flock (v. 8). Sheep and goats are basically helpless animals. They must be kept together in groups where the shepherd can keep them under constant observation so they will not wander away or be attacked by predatory animals. In biblical times sheep were allowed to graze in open fields or were kept in closed sheepfolds. It is possible that these particular shepherds were watching over sheep intended to be brought to Jerusalem and used for temple sacrifices.

Angel of the Lord (v. 9). Luke describes how suddenly an angel stood before the shepherds. *Angels* are heavenly messengers whose purpose is to serve God. One of their functions is to deliver special announcements from God to human beings. *Angel* is a transliteration of the Greek *aggelos* meaning "messenger" in addition to "angel." The angel Gabriel had delivered the message of Elizabeth's pregnancy with John the Baptist to her husband, Zechariah (1:11-20) and the message to Mary of her pregnancy with Jesus (vv. 26-38). Luke does not provide the name of the angel who appeared to the shepherds.

Glory of the Lord (v. 9). The term for *glory* (*doxa*) has a wide range of applications and can refer to dignity, glory, honor, praise, and worship. In this context it refers to the manifestation of God's presence, power, and majesty. God's glory is seen in the Old Testament when it settled on Mount Sinai before the Israelites during the exodus (Ex. 24:16-17).

Terrified (v. 9) The Greek term for *terrified* (*phobeo*) can refer to being in an apprehensive state, frightened, or terror-stricken. It can also refer to a strong sense of reverence or

respect. Fear is a basic human emotion in response to unknown circumstances or perceived danger. Apparently the natural reaction to the appearance of an angel is great fear. Zechariah reacted in a similar manner when the angel Gabriel appeared to him in the Jerusalem temple (1:12). The prophet Daniel and those with him had the same reaction when an angel visited them (Dan. 10:7-8). Interestingly, when the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary, the Bible does not say she reacted in fear, but rather that she was “deeply troubled” by the angel’s greeting (Luke 1:28-29).

Don’t be afraid (v. 10). Using the same Greek word (*phobeo*) translated “terrified” in verse 9, the angel immediately assured the frightened shepherds not to be afraid, just as Gabriel did for Zechariah and Mary (1:13,30). It was not the angel’s purpose to scare the shepherds but to communicate to them the incredible news of what God was doing.

I proclaim . . . good news (v. 10). The angel’s declaration translates a single Greek verb *euaggelizo*. We now know it by its noun form as the good news: the gospel (*euaggelion*—from which we get our word *evangelism*). The apostle Paul defined “the gospel” in 1 Corinthians 15:1-4: “Now I want to make clear for you, brothers and sisters, the gospel I preached to you . . . For I passed on to you as most important what I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.”

Great joy (v. 10). *Joy* (*chara*) describes the experience of gladness. It can also refer to a person or thing that causes gladness. The angel’s message was one of real, lasting joy, not just a fleeting sense of happiness. He was proclaiming the news that with the birth of the Messiah a new age had begun that would bring salvation and eternal life to all of God’s people. Joy is part of the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23).

For all the people (v. 10). The term for *people* (*laos*) can refer to a multitude, the people of Israel, a body of people, or a nation. The use of the term in the early chapters of Luke indicates that the people in view are the Israelites (1:68,77; 2:32). Furthermore, every use of the Greek term in Luke–Acts refers to the Jewish people except for two places in Acts (15:14; 18:10). The Jewish peoples’ long-awaited Messiah had been born. Nonetheless, this good news is not for the Jewish people alone. The message comes first to the Jews, but as Luke–Acts details, the gospel of Jesus Christ is to be presented to all peoples (see also Matt. 28:18-20). All who repent of their sins and place their faith in Jesus Christ will be saved. Also, Luke himself was a Gentile, as probably was Theophilus to whom Luke–Acts is addressed (Luke 1:1-4; Acts 1:1-3).

The city of David (v. 11). Both Jerusalem and Bethlehem are called “the city of David.” David was born and grew up in Bethlehem (1 Sam. 16), but as king he ruled Israel from Jerusalem (2 Sam. 5:4-5).

Savior (v. 11). The angel informed the shepherds that a *Savior* was born for them. The term (*soter*) refers to one who is a deliverer or preserver. In the New Testament, it is often used as a title for God (Luke 1:47; 1 Tim. 1:1; 2:3) and Jesus (Acts 5:31; 13:23; Phil. 3:20). Jesus was born to be our Savior through His atoning sacrifice for sin on the cross.

Messiah (v. 11). This is a translation of the Greek term *Christos*. The Hebrew equivalent is *Mashiach*. Both mean anointed one or messiah. While *Messiah* (*Christos*) is a title, the term became so closely identified with Jesus that it is often considered a part of His name—Jesus Christ.

Lord (v. 11). The word for *Lord* (*kurios*) usually refers to someone who has power and authority. It is also used as a term of respectful address. In the New Testament, *kurios* is used of God (Matt. 1:22), Jesus (Luke 10:1), people (“owners,” Acts 16:16,19) and angels (10:4). While some used *kurios* as a simple term of respect for Jesus (like our word “sir”; John 9:36), others used *kurios* as a confession of faith in Jesus (20:28). The angel’s proclamation was that the One who is Messiah is also God.

Sign (v. 12). A *sign* is that which helps one to recognize or validate a truth from God. Often a sign involved a miraculous happening that authenticated a statement and motivated one to believe. The angel gave the shepherds an undeniable way of identifying the Messiah child in Bethlehem and thereby verifying the truth of his proclamation.

A baby wrapped tightly in cloth and lying in a manger (v. 12). While a swaddled baby would not have been unusual, finding a swaddled baby lying in a manger would have been unique. This would validate the angel’s message to the shepherds.

Luke 2:13-14

Connection to The Point. The angels burst into praise of God who brought peace to earth through Jesus.

A multitude of the heavenly host (v. 13). The exact number of the heavenly host or “heavenly army” (1 Kings 22:19) who joined the angelic messenger is not given. It is described as a *plethos*, a large number or a multitude. One of the titles for God is the “Lord of hosts,” “Lord of Armies,” or “Lord Almighty” (1 Sam. 15:2).

Praising God (v. 13) The angels were lifting their voices in praise to God because of the great event that had transpired that night in Bethlehem. Praise is a natural response to God’s greatness and grace, though angels do not understand the need for grace—they have no experiential understanding of God’s grace and salvation. Nonetheless, they knew that the Messiah had a special place in the eternal plan of God.

Glory to God (v. 14). *Glory (doxa)* is the same term used in verse 9. It is an attribute of God, His divine power and majesty. In the New Testament, *doxa* is used only of God and Jesus. The term can also mean praise. The focus of the angels’ praise was on God. All that had transpired in the birth of the Messiah was because of Him, and the praise and glory is due to Him alone.

In the highest heaven (v. 14). The glory is to be given to God *in the highest heaven (hupsistos)*. Heaven is the dwelling place of God (see Matt. 6:9). Giving glory to God is a prelude to what will come next on earth.

Peace on earth (v. 14). *Peace (eirene)* is a state of well-being and harmony. It is somewhat equivalent to the Hebrew *shalom*, which means completeness, welfare, and wholeness. God’s Messiah would bring peace, wholeness, and well-being to those who place their faith in Him; the Messiah would bring peace by reconciling them with God through His atoning sacrifice on the cross.

To people he favors (v. 14). *Favor (eudokia)* means good will, pleasure, approval. Through His Messiah, God in His love gives favor to people who do not deserve it. He grants peace and forgiveness to those who receive Jesus through repentance and faith. Through Him we experience the joy of salvation.

1. Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, vol. 24, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), 142.