

Jason Upchurch - Christmas Day 2022 - Luke 2:8-24 - Responding Rightly to the Incarnation

Well we are privileged this morning in that we celebrate the Lord's birth as we worship on the Lord's Day. It's like having our cake and eating it too.

And what I want to do for this morning's sermon is just walk through the very first Christmas. In Mark's gospel the writer jumps over many of these details and dives into the ministry of Jesus. John does essentially the same but gives us some theological insights.

But Matthew and Luke both give us more details into this amazing occasion when God comes into the world. And what I really want to focus on is the response to Jesus's birth. How do people respond to Jesus coming into the world?

Usually Christmas brings with it a variety of emotions and responses. Some are good. Maybe you're excited to open presents or be with family or get a break from work or school. Maybe you've got an amazing dinner planned.

But sometimes the response to Christmas is disappointment and sadness and frustration. Disappointment over presents, or disappointment over family situations. Sadness, loss, apathy, frustration.

It can feel consumeristic - and maybe we feel pulled into that - even as we know it all should be about Jesus. There have been times at Christmas for me where everything is right - it's like a Christian Hallmark moment - and I still feel a sense that I'm missing something or something isn't quite right. There's a longing for something else.

We know it should be worship and thankfulness but sometimes we forget that.

And so this morning no matter where you're at on that spectrum I want us just to be reminded of the natural response when Jesus came the first time. And hopefully rekindle in your heart Christ the Lord born this day.

So what are the responses we see to the news that Jesus has come into the world?

1) The first response is holy fear. **Read 8-9**

This scene is rather amazing for a lot of reasons. Shepherds were among the lowest people on the social totem pole. They were unassuming people, often very poor and very uneducated. Shepherding is a very boring life; and what moments of excitement there may be are dangerous moments fending off a wild animals from your flock.

And one night they're out tending the flock minding their own business when an angel of the Lord shows up and lights up the entire hillside with the glory of God. This isn't a little bit of light. This isn't a flash light or street light.

Luke says that glory of the Lord shone around them. The same glory that surrounds God almighty in his throne room, the same glory that causes the holy seraphim to cry out Holy, Holy, Holy in **Isaiah 6** as they protect themselves from the glory of God on his throne - that's the glory that shines out around this angel.

Imagine a crystal clear night in the ancient world. Very little city light to pollute the sky. You could see the Milky Way in all of it's brightness like when you go camping or the absolute darkness when there is cloud cover.

And in a moment glory brighter than pro baseball stadium at night exploding in ancient Bethlehem. And it's an angel. He could have come unassuming like the angels in Genesis visiting Abraham. But instead it's glory and awe and wonder.

Something amazing is happening and these shepherds are overwhelmed. They have great fear: phobon megon. This is the normal human reaction every time the glory of God is revealed in Scripture. Whether it's Israel at Mt. Sinai, Ezekiel receiving his vision of God, Isaiah, the apostle John, the apostle Paul on the road to Damascus, the apostles on the Mt. of Transfiguration with Jesus. They are all overwhelmed by the awesome beauty and power and brightness of the glory of God.

And God does this on purpose. It's not like he accidentally lets out too much glory. "Sorry about that." No, he does this in order to show his power and grandeur and that he is worthy of all praise and honor. And think about this: God is infinitely holy. Infinitely glorious. So even the most powerful demonstration of his glory here in this world is just a fraction of how glorious he really is, lest we dissolve like a snow cone in the blazing fire of a wood stove.

God displays his glory and displays it on purpose and displays it in a limited way so that **we will have** the fearful response that is due his greatness.

And this interesting: this glory isn't accompanying God, it's accompanying an angel. A messenger of God to point to something amazing. The glory seems to accompany the angel because the message he's bringing is so phenomenal.

And all these shepherds can do is bask in fearful awe of this amazing sight.

And God is doing this because if he just sent a quiet note to the shepherds "Hey, my divine Son is a baby in Bethlehem" they probably wouldn't have responded with any kind of fear. Sometimes our response doesn't match what it should be. So God has to impress on us the gravity of the situation.

When Jesus came into the world, it was a truly **awesome** thing.

Side: About shepherds near Bethlehem. Leon Morris notes that in several rabbinic writings sheep were to be kept far away from Jerusalem - they needed to be out in the countryside so they could graze easily without getting in anyone's way. It's the same reason we wouldn't shepherd flocks in downtown Seattle.

But there was one exception. Any animal being shepherded around Bethlehem or Jerusalem was assumed to be used for one purpose. You know what that purpose was? Sacrifice. These shepherds were tending sacrificial sheep and goats to be used in worship at the temple.

They are preparing sheep for sacrifice when they are told to go see the true Lamb of God, the one to whom all the sacrifices pointed.

So they are filled with fear.

2) They are told to be filled with joy. Read 10-14

This is an interesting exchange. The natural response they have is holy, awesome fear. The glory of God produces in them fright.

But that's not the ultimate goal. The ultimate goal is joy. The fear is actually to lead them to joy.

As a dad, one of my favorite things to do with my little kids is throw them up in the air. A little throw produces a little joy, so it makes sense that a big throw would produce what? A lot of joy. But that's not usually what happens right away. Usually what happens is great fear. But I'm not going to drop them, there's not going to be any pain. I want them to have a little taste of roller coasters and bungee jumping right there in the living room.

My goal ultimately is to produce joy. Really it is.

That's what God is doing when his glory shines out around the angel. The ultimate goal is not to produce fear, it's to produce joy. Why would fear be the natural reaction and not joy?

Because the shepherds don't understand that the glory of God is **safe** and it is designed for their joy.

This is the reason that Christ came into the world. He didn't come into the world that we would cower and fear and be afraid of God. He came into the world to give those who follow him lasting joy.

Ultimately the goal is not to have phobon megon: great fear. We're are actually to have charan megalan: great joy. Why?

Because what has happened over in Bethlehem is that a Savior has been born. Jesus isn't to be feared because he didn't come to condemn the world.

That's **John 3:17**: God didn't send his Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in Jesus is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

Jesus came to save us from our sins. He is our helper in our time of need. This is good news of great joy for all people.

And it's almost ironic: the good news of great joy is that Christ the Lord - Yahweh is the Messiah, the chosen one - and he's a little baby laying in a feeding trough just down the road.

God has not only provided salvation, which is amazing. God *is* the salvation. He himself came. And he's just down the road. Go take a look.

God has taken on flesh, in humility, and been born to us. A lot of people think there's nothing really special about Christmas. Nothing special about the *birth* of Christ. Technically he came into the world 9 months earlier when he was conceived. But that's to completely ignore the Bible's emphasis on the actual birth of Jesus.

His birth is cause for joy. Great joy. It's right and good that we celebrate the coming of the Lord into the world to save us from our sins.

So we see holy fear, joy.

3) We see the response of praise. Read 13-14

The scene changes here. We go from these shepherds seeing a single angel in the blinding light of the glory of God, to a multitude of angels. And I don't know what you think of when you think of an angelic multitude praising God.

I usually think of like 10 or 20 angels doing a 4 part harmony in a fundamentalist baptist church. It's sweet and kind and a little jazzy.

No. The word multitude is often used for hosts of armies going to battle. Thousands and thousands, ten thousand times ten thousand. Instead of one angel in the blinding light of the glory of God, it's the entire baseball stadium filled with angels singing out and shouting out in a massive overwhelming roar.

Have you ever been in a baseball stadium when someone hits a home run? The place is deafening the stands are shaking.

In 2010 there a famous play by the Seahawks running back Marshawn Lynch. The play itself has a name called the Beast Quake. Because late in the game he broke 9 tackles - that's almost every defensive player, ran 67 yards pushing one guy to the ground and the roar of the crowd reached 137 decibels and was so loud local seismographs picked it up and it registered at about 1.5 on the Richter scale.

Deafening, ground shaking roar of praise.

This is what's happening in Bethlehem. How do we know? Because every time this kind of language is used the overwhelming volume is what is noted.

In Revelation when we see multitudes praise God it's described as like the roar or many waters - massive waterfalls - and the sound of thunder. The people of God and the holy angels explode in praise for the glory of

God. This is not silent night. This is the deafening praise of thousands of angelic voices praising the coming of Jesus.

Glory to God in the highest
And on earth peace among those whom he is well pleased.

The response is glory and praise in the highest possible degree, the highest possible way. And here on earth: peace. Peace to who? Among all people? No.

Peace among those with whom God is well pleased. Not everyone got peace at Jesus's birth. Herod didn't get peace. Satan didn't get peace.

No, those on earth who get peace are those with whom God is well pleased. Who's that? Believers. Those who are God's children. What has come into the world - like we saw last night - is our peace. He is our Lord, our master, our God. And he is peace to all who trust in him.

And if this is the response the holy angels give to Jesus, how much more should we give knowing he gives us that peace?

Fear / Joy / Praise

4) Response to the birth of Christ is a desire to know more. Read 15-18

So the angels disappear and the shepherds are left all alone. The night is dark and silent again. So what are they going to do? They just saw and heard this supernatural wonder and all these angels who are obviously excited about what's happened down the road.

They go to learn more. This message is too great, too amazing to be ignored. So they want to learn more.

Let's go! Let's investigate this thing that has happened. And this is interesting: they say the Lord has made known this thing to them. I thought it was angels who gave the message? Well, it is. But angel just means messenger. Who sent the message? God did, through the angels. They realize that this wonderful thing they've been told about is from God.

So they go to Mary and Joseph and they exchange information. They tell what they know, Mary and Joseph tell what they know. But they all desire to know more.

You ever tried to share something with someone that you thought was amazing and they just weren't into it? Like at all? Maybe you got a new toy or tool or game or gadget or whatever and you're all jazzed and the other person is like "oh...wow. That is...cool..." And you want other people to be excited about it but they just aren't?

Honestly, I think that's how we are sometimes with Jesus. We know the basics. We know the story and the gist. We've read the gospels once or twice. But if we're honest we're stuck not wanting to learn more. To know more about the Lord.

And the amazing thing is that what sits in our lap is so much more of the fullness of what God has revealed to us about Jesus's. We have so much more to learn about Christ than these shepherds ever had.

And I want to encourage you this year - in the spirit of these shepherds - to expand what you know of God in Christ. I want you to ask God to give you a desire to know more and then go seek out more.

So want to challenge you with 2 things. First, read you Bible more this year than you ever have. I'll be honest, if my pastor gave me that challenge early in my walk with Jesus it wouldn't have been hard to do. But dive into the Word. Read the whole Bible this year, or at least read the whole NT. If you got some money for Christmas go buy a new Bible and wear it out. Find a reading plan, get a plan, and work the plan. It's hard but it's worth it. Go learn more about this thing that has happened.

Second, I want you to read 3 books on theology of some kind. We've got a bookshelf you can borrow from. These don't have to be huge. It can be huge. I just read through most of John Calvin's Institutes for the first time ever. It took me 5 months and like 20 pages a week (which is only like an hour a week of reading) but I made it with 3 other guys. And it was wonderful. It was hard, and it took discipline but it was good.

And I hate reading. So if I can make it so can you. It could be book on Christian marriage or Christian living or the Trinity or eschatology or how to understand your Bible. Or a book on apologetics. If you want suggestions come talk with me. But 3 books is my challenge for you.

And push through it with the goal to know more about God and his Word.

This is what we see when people behold the glory of God, they get a greater desire to know him more and then proclaim what they know which fuels their desire to know more. And round and round it goes.

5) Related to knowing more, they treasure Christ in their heart. Read 19-20

This is somewhat related to the last point. Everyone is amazed at what has been revealed. Everyone is praising God. But Mary treasures these things and ponders them. What does that mean?

Well, it seems as though Mary didn't fully understand all that was revealed to her. We understand the Christmas story *now*, we know the entire implication of what happened that first Christmas morning - or at least we understand more than she did. But this was all brand new information. Unfolding information.

She doesn't know how to process it. She doesn't know what to do with all of it. And like we've seen in Mark's gospel, there are many times that it appears she's forgotten all of this stuff because she is acting so contrary to everything we think she should know.

There's that song that comes on every year *Mary Did You Know?* And the song is easy to make fun of because for some of the answers it seems like it's an obvious yes.

Mary did you know this baby boy would save our son and daughters?

Well, she knows he's the Savior.

Did you know that your baby boy is Lord of all creation? She's told to call him Immanuel - God with us.

So some of these seem to be an obvious yes. Others are a no.

Did you know he'd give sight to a blind man? No, how could she possibly know that?

Did you know he'd walk on water? No, that wasn't a prophecy.

In many ways we are like Mary. Sometimes we have truths of the Word of God and we're not really sure what to do with them. We know they're good and right but not precisely how they affect us. If there's a book in the Bible you read or a theology that you kind of roll your eyes at or ignore or avoid because you're not sure what to do with it or how it's helpful, my encouragement to you is to actually treasure it.

To value it and rejoice in it because God has revealed it to us on purpose.

6) Response to Jesus' birth is obedience. Read 21-24

What do Mary and Joseph do in response to all of this? They keep the commands of God.

Even though what has happened is unprecedented in human history and they don't quite know all that the birth of their son entails, what they know is they are required to be obedient to God.

- They get Jesus circumcised in accordance to the Law.
- They name him the name the angel told them to name him.
- They take him several miles to Jerusalem in accordance to the Law to buy him back as their firstborn son in accordance to the OT Law.
- They are willing to sacrifice for their son who will ultimately sacrifice for them. By the way, they were poor and we know this because turtle doves were the sacrifice of poorest in Israel.

They were obedient to all the Law in the craziest of circumstances. They're still not technically married. We know from later in Jesus's life they are accused of sinning. They're miles from home. They're poor as all get out. They've just had the craziest supernatural experience anyone has every had. They may still be hanging out at the cave or barn or whatever - they're not even in proper living space.

And yet they are obedient to the Lord. In every detail.

And I just want to encourage you this morning that if you've been straying in obedience to God or putting off obedience to God to turn back.

We know that our obedience doesn't save us and our disobedience doesn't damn us. Our salvation is all because of faith in Jesus.

But many times we make excuses for our lack of faithfulness.

But Christ has come into the world. And our response to his grace and mercy and salvation shouldn't be to put off obedience. But to seek obedience in every area of life, in the small things and the big things, in the public things and in our heart.

That we might bring glory to our Savior.

Pray