

Evergreen Presbyterian Church

Pastor Adam Parker

12/22/24

Sermon Title: Makes You Wonder

Sermon Text: Luke 2:1-21

Luke 2:1 ¶ In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered.

Luke 2:2 This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria.

Luke 2:3 And all went to be registered, each to his own town.

Luke 2:4 And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David,

Luke 2:5 to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.

Luke 2:6 And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth.

Luke 2:7 And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

Luke 2:8 ¶ And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.

Luke 2:9 And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear.

Luke 2:10 And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.

Luke 2:11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

Luke 2:12 And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.”

Luke 2:13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

Luke 2:14 ¶ “Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”

Luke 2:15 ¶ When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.”

Luke 2:16 And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger.

Luke 2:17 And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child.

Luke 2:18 And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.

Luke 2:19 But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart.

Luke 2:20 And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Luke 2:21 ¶ And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

Main Point: The news of the incarnation is meant to cause people to glorify God.

Outline:

1. God Brings His Good News of Peace
2. God Brings His Highest Glory

Introduction

We live in a world of bad news. Negative headlines just rule the day. If you want to get clicks, say something that will make people angry. Say something outrageous.

Say something to stir people up. Ours is an attention age where people have really taken to heart the old dictum that all news is good news, as long as we're talking *about* them.

But we also live in an age where people just make us feel used. They can make us feel like a mark. It seems like everybody wants something from us.

A couple years ago, my wife and I heard from some married college friends, who contacted us on Facebook and they were like, "Hey, can we have your phone number?" And we gave it to them and they called us, and we thought we were going to catch up with old friends only to find out that they were participating in some multilevel marketing thing, and they wanted us to join in. It had probably been a decade since we had seen this couple, we couldn't help but feel incredibly used and unloved by our old friends, and it made us want to cry.

Think about this: we're surrounded by people who are eager to share bad news. And often we're surrounded by people who, in a sense, always seem to want something from us – who make us feel used. I certainly hope the church doesn't feel like that for you, but the world around us certainly can feel that way.

But because of that, I hope that today's reading feels like a true breath of fresh sea air. Because if I can be really simplistic, what we have here is a declaration of news. And it's not bad news, it's good news. And it's good news that isn't trying to bilk you. It isn't trying to get something from you, it is good news *for you*.

Today's passage is a free, loving gift. A no-gimmick, loving declaration of something amazing and wonderful and good. It is God coming to mankind and saying, "I have something good for you. To receive this gift, I require nothing of you. I'm not trying to get your money. I'm not trying to get you to join my scheme. I'm simply telling you the best possible news that a sinner could ever hear, and here it is: a child is born. A son is given."

Let me just mention two points that we'll meditate on this morning to help us celebrate this good news even more.

The first is this: in the birth of Jesus, God Brings His Good News of peace. Second, in the birth of Jesus, God Brings His Highest Glory.

1. God Brings His Good News of Peace

First this morning, in the birth of Jesus, God brings his good news of peace.

The time in which the angels preach this message of “peace on earth,” was a time which in a worldly sense was the most peaceful that the world had perhaps ever seen.

Caesar Augustus is the ruler at this time. He was not originally named Augustus. His real name was Octavius. Augustus was a name that the Roman Senate gave to him after he defeated his enemies and Rome entered what was probably its golden era. Augustus would serve as emperor for forty-five years. No one ever ruled Rome longer than Augustus. Augustus would be remembered as a stable ruler with a long term vision for a stable republic – he was a much better leader and planner than his adopted father, Julius Caesar was. But Augustus was not a good man. In his biography of the Caesars, Adrian Goldsworthy reminds us that “From 43 to 30 BC, [Octavius] fought, lied, cheated, and trampled on the law. It is estimated that he killed more than a hundred senators.”

Augustus is credited with what was called the *Pax Romana* – the “peace of Rome” – this time in which Jesus was born. Here is how Goldsworthy describes that period of Roman history:

“Trade flourished in the Augustan peace. The cheapest way to transport goods was at sea. Thanks to Agrippa’s victories, Rome ruled the waves, and piracy virtually disappeared. Rome represented a huge market for grain imports, but many other goods were traded as well. Stability and the security of Roman law encouraged money lending, while a military drawdown took pressure off of taxes. In short, conditions were ripe for good times.”
(Goldsworthy, *Ten Caesars*, Kindle Loc. 445)

Augustus was a great leader, but he was not a good man. He did not create the *Pax Romana* through peace. It was a blood-soaked path to get there. And the sort of peace he created was with the blood of others – not his own.

It was *this* man whom Jesus was born under. The fact that Christ lived a life of submission under this kind of leadership reminds us that God’s people live in a

world that is not ruled by good kings or magistrates. Christ's whole life would be a model of submission to sinful and disappointing authorities.

And yet, as peaceful as the world scene really was at this time, the angels are saying in a sense, to these shepherds:

“You may live in the Augustan peace, shepherds, but the peace that you need still hasn't come. You don't really have peace. Not the sort of peace that really matters. Not the peace that God is bringing. Until this child comes and lives and becomes your savior, it won't matter that the sea lanes are open that there is basically no piracy. It won't matter that there are roads stretching throughout the empire and an incredible amount of cessation of conflict. If you do not have peace with *God*, then the world around you may be at rest, but you will still have no true and meaningful peace.”

This speaks to us where we live, right? America is this incredibly blessed nation. We are between these two giant oceans, we have peaceful neighbors to the north and the south. We don't have the sort of vulnerability that nations on most of the earth experience. Unlike some nations, we aren't immediately and locally surrounded by enemies who have sworn to destroy us.

And when you enjoy the sort of domestic peace that America has experienced since the end of World War 2, you can become complacent. Or you can begin to think that you know peace. We often settle for domestic tranquility, and we can settle for this very *narrow* idea of peace. So when someone like a preacher comes to you reading the gospel and you hear, “In Christ there is real peace,” if you think of peace in a shallow and narrow sense, that can ring very hollow: “well I have peace. I guess this message from the angels isn't for me. This is for those really messed up and anxious people, maybe those people in war-torn nations” and we wrongly exempt ourselves as if we already have peace.

No you don't. Without this child the angels are singing about, we live in a *simulacrum* of peace. We live in a pretended peace – a time that looks like peace. We have the cessation of *external* conflict, perhaps. But that's not the same thing as God's rest. That is not the sort of peace these angels are preaching.

Isaiah 59:8 says, “the way of peace they do not know.” This is the kind of peace that the angels are speaking of here: the way of peace. The real way of peace is a way of talking about a life of holiness, love, justice, integrity, truth, contentment, and righteousness. Peace is a spiritual state, not necessarily a physical state where you aren’t in trouble.

Where does Paul say we get peace? In Romans 1:7 he says, “Grace to you and peace *from God* our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

When he gives a benediction at the end of his letter to the Romans he prays this: “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.”

You see there how true peace is a work of the Trinity. And he says this over and over in his letters: “peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” “Peace from God.” He calls him the “God of love and peace.” And yet so many people who don’t know God, and don’t know Christ think, “I have peace.” Sure, you might have peace with everyone *else*, but that doesn’t mean you have it with the one who matters most – who sees your heart, who sees your motivations, who knows what you love most and what matters most to you.

So often people will say, “I need to learn to forgive myself.” The idea here is that really this lack of peace is all in our heads, and if we could just get ourselves to feel better, we would have peace. But this is a very self-centered psychological way of framing all of our problems. It’s a self-centered grid to run everything through. But the biggest problem we have is not that we don’t have peace with ourselves.

The problem is that we don’t have peace with God. And God is real, he is there, he’s not just in our heads and in our feelings. As Francis Schaeffer said, he is the God who is there.

It is common to hear people talk about themselves, their feelings, their desires, and their hopes. It is more unusual to hear modern people talk about the one *above* them who created them, whom they are accountable to. For many, God is the forgotten person. People are so eager to be in their own heads, and it’s so rare to hear modern people with their psychological mindsets ever saying that maybe

just maybe they might possibly need to find forgiveness with the *creator*. Yet that is very much the biblical problem, isn't it?

Look at Paul's words in Romans 5:10: "While we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son." He doesn't mean that we were enemies with each *other*. Paul is saying that the natural state of all of us is that we are naturally enemies with God. In our hearts, we are for ourselves, and against him, opposed to him. We want life our way and not his way. We make our desires the most important decider for our lives, and we sideline the one who made and designed us. And yet in Christ, through the death of Jesus that enmity gets turned to friendship.

When Calvin talks about this passage in Romans he says that real peace is the believer's "serenity of conscience, which originates from the awareness of having God reconciled to himself." You see in what he says that there's an *objective* side to peace with God: (because God has reconciled me to himself). But there's also a *subjective* side (because in what God has done, I now experience a serene conscience). In Christ, I am no longer guilty, and so I need no longer *feel* guilty.

This is the thing the angels are talking about here. And it's not something we can do for ourselves. No amount of "forgiving ourselves" can bring peace with God. Only God can do that.

The world is full of people who do not want Jesus, but they have convinced themselves that somehow they are still friends of God, and they don't need a mediator.

Why do they think they have peace with God? The primary reason is good intentions. People think deep down that their good intentions mean that God will see through their bad deeds and their sins and decide that deep down they are really very good people.

But we know from the book of Jeremiah that how we feel is not a sufficient test for peace with God because we deceive ourselves. Why? Because he tells us that nothing is more deceitful than the autonomous human heart.

And here come the angels with a message of good news. That without this child, we can't make peace for ourselves. So how is this peace going to happen? Well all

the shepherds are told here is that they will find a baby lying in a manger, and that this child will usher real true peace into the world. What they aren't told is the specifics.

Yet let me suggest something: the peace that Christ will bring is here to be seen if we have the eyes and ears. Ron Meyer talked to me about this a few months ago at the door after worship one Sunday, and I haven't forgotten it. He pointed this out, that the animals these shepherds are watching over are the same animals which are sacrificed in the temple.

Someone has to watch the animals that end up being sacrificed. That's shepherds. That's whom these angels preach to. And it is those shepherds who are in essence being told that someone is being born who will one day put them out of a job. Finally one is coming who will bring the kind of peace that the death of sheep and goats could never achieve.

You see, while these men are shepherds who watch the flock, the child they are going to visit is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

The sacrifices have been happening for well over a thousand years by this point, but they have only been types and shadows – getting people *ready* for peace. Now as they see this child, that peace is finally here.

I want you to know that you can have this peace with God. Not just a sense of psychological well-being. Not just a ceasing of external conflict, but real peace with the real creator who is there.

If you do not know Christ and have not repented, then you may externally have it all together, but the Bible says you do not know real peace with God. Apart from Christ, peace with God eludes you.

What is the solution? You are meant to turn to Jesus in faith, rest in his completed work, and let his death stand in for your own death. "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved."

The offer of true peace with God is straightforward and it is simple if you will hear the message.

2. God Brings His Highest Glory

Second, in the birth of Jesus, God brings his highest glory.

A singular angel speaks to the shepherds to tell them about the child in Bethlehem. They have the location, but then the shepherds incredibly see a heavenly worship service in which the multitudes of heaven praise God. What do they say?

“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”

Now, the glory of God is all over the Bible. It’s a word that we may use a lot, but we may not think much about. The Hebrew word for “glory” is “kavoth,” it’s the word for heaviness. The heaviness – the weightiness – the majesty of God is all over the Scriptures. The Psalms repeatedly tell us that God’s glory is over all the earth (Ps. 57:5, 11; 108:5). The Old Testament is saturated in this insistence that God is glorious. And he’s done glorious things. Exodus 15:11: “Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders?”

When we say that God is glorious, we don’t really mean that he is heavy in any sort of physical sense. God’s glory is another way of describing the sum total of all his divine excellencies.

Now, God in himself is glorious, even if we never see it. We call that his *intrinsic glory*: he’s glorious whether we see it or not. He is full and perfect and infinitely beautiful and great, and his manifold perfections are over all, whether we as his subjects always see or admit it. That’s his intrinsic glory, which doesn’t depend on us.

Now, His *extrinsic* glory is the glory that he displays for us – that he shares with us, that we are meant to see, where he communicates his fullness and sufficiency to us as humans. This is an outworking of his intrinsic glory: he’s being kind and revealing himself to mankind.

The whole history of redemption is a history of God showing this glory to his people.

The Hebrews needed to only look back to God's amazing acts in their own history to know that God was glorious. Parting the red sea and saving his people from Pharaoh showed that God is glorious in his power. Scattering the nations, toppling Jericho, raising up Judges, raising up prophets, destroying the false prophets of Baal, bringing fire down from heaven, bringing his people back from exile... just think of all God's deeds, and you can see his glory on display. The entire Old Testament is one long sustained argument for the supremacy and glory of the God of heaven.

But what these angels are saying here is, "You know that God is glorious. And yet the birth of this child is the highest display of that Glory. "Glory to God in the highest."

The incarnation preaches a more potent conveyance of the glory of God than every other deed that happened before this.

Why is it that the incarnation yields the "highest" glory to God? Because in the coming of Christ, Jesus glorifies God's attributes of justice, holiness, mercy, and wisdom in ways that they *weren't* glorified before. They were seen before, they were known before. And yet in the birth of this child and in the life of this child, and eventually in the death of this child, all of those glories are distilled into one glorious display. The way J.C. Ryle says it, "Creation glorified God, but not so much as redemption."

And there's a contrast here. Think of angelic worship versus human worship.

The angels of heaven are obedient, and they worship. But they also worship as those who are *unfallen*. They *always* do what pleases the Lord. They are obedient messengers. They have observed the fall of the world; they have knowledge of the fall of mankind, but they haven't experienced it themselves. They know about salvation, but they don't *experience* salvation. Jesus was born to save mankind, not angels. They don't know what that's like: for him to become one of them. He came as a man to save men. Even though they are not personal beneficiaries of the birth of Jesus, these angels rejoice.

Our worship differs from the worship of angels in that sense. Think about this: how much more should we rejoice, who actually *do* personally benefit from the

incarnation of Christ. Christ did not become an angel, he became a man. He has become one of us. A member of mankind.

The angels rejoice, and he did *not* become one of them. We should rejoice even more than the angels, because he has, in a sense raised us up and dignified *our* nature by becoming one of us. We worship, not just as *created* beings, but as redeemed beings – something the angels do not know.

This is why redemption gives God glory in the *highest*: because in the birth and life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God deploys all of his manifold perfections for our good. We see His justice and mercy. His holiness and his wisdom. His power and sovereignty and planning. All of his attributes rolled into one magnificent display: the birth of this child, culminating in his death and resurrection for sinners who are united to him by faith.

The angels are saying, *this* is the highest glory. Who could have imagined this? Who could have conceived of it? In the incarnation, God has outdone everything that has come before.

Only God in his infinite wisdom, perfect planning, and absolute knowledge and skill could have woven together the events, the promises and the covenants into this moment where a girl in Bethlehem gives birth to the Savior of mankind.

Could you have planned this? Could you have thought of this? Could even the wisest person who ever lived have dreamed up such an amazing reality – that God himself would become our rescuer, living among us, and dying for us?

No wonder the angels say what they say and sing what they sing: this is the highest glory.

Conclusion

Now, what should we do? Our response should resonate with those shepherds and with Mary. What does the text say?

First, in verse 15 Luke tells us that after they hear this message, the shepherds go and see the child and rejoice.

I want us to take our cues from these men. Whenever we heard the word of God, there is a temptation to go, “Huh. Interesting.” ... “Well, *back to life...*” Calvin talks about this, how often we will be confronted by God with an amazing truth, and be dumbfounded by it. But then we sort of shake ourselves back to what we think is reality and go, “Huh. That was weird. Oh well,” and then we go on with life.

In reality, when God’s word speaks, he gives us clarity, makes us see ourselves truly. That is reality.

Second, they tell others, and verse 18 tells us that “all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.”

I also want us to take *this* cue from them in this as well. This is indeed good news. It’s news that needs to be shared. It is news that was needed in the day when it first happened. And we need it now. Do humans at the end of 2024 suddenly now *not* need this good news? Everyone else did but we don’t? Has something in human nature fundamentally changed in the last 2000 years so that now we don’t need good news about a way to be saved from our sins? No way! Some people are in denial that they are sinners, but I use that word “denial” very intentionally here. No serious person can either convince themselves or others that sin is not a problem for us today... as if it was only a problem for ancient people. Human beings need this good news as badly as we did 2000 years ago. So please, Christian. Please go. Please tell others. Please take a risk in your relationships and tell the ones you love where they can find peace with God. Please do not keep this news to yourself.

Third and finally, it says in verse 19 that after the shepherds reported to Mary and Joseph what they saw, that Mary was “pondering them in her heart.” The grammar here indicates that even after she heard the shepherds’ report and put that together with her own experience, that she *continued* to put these pieces together so she could understand the whole picture of what God was doing through this child. Luke says that they wondered at these things.

It might seem like an odd application for me to make here, but here’s what I want to end on: we should wonder at these things. We should be amazed, we should be

fixated, we should meditate on this: that God is so glorious that he sent his Son to assume human flesh, to live among us, and to be our Savior.

This is a time to rejoice. And so let's rejoice in the goodness, the kindness, and the glory of God on display here today.

Let's pray.