

“THE ANNOUNCEMENTS OF JESUS’ BIRTH TO THE WORLD”

Malachi 3:1-4, Luke 2:8-38

December 9, 2018

“A famous artist was commissioned by a great church to do a sculpture for the building’s vestibule. The assignment came at a time in the artist’s life when he felt the need to summarize in a work of art everything he was feeling as a human person. He worked very hard on the statue and, when it was nearly finished, he called in some children to look at it. One of the children said, ‘It is a statue of a great man,’ and the others agreed: ‘a great man.’ The artist shook his head and went back to work for several more weeks. Then he called the children back. This time the consensus was that it was a likeness of a ‘good man.’ Again the artist shook his head and went back to work. Weeks later, the children came a third time and, immediately, one of them said, ‘It is Christ!’ Then the artist was satisfied because what he was trying to say in the statue is what the Gospel Writers are trying to tell us in every line: ‘It is Christ! – not merely a good man, not merely a great man, but the God Man.’”¹

We’re working our way through the account of Jesus coming to the earth as our Messiah. We began with God’s preparation of the cousins, Elizabeth and Mary, for the great work that God was going to do through them. They encouraged each other so that they could endure the world’s judgement that would certainly come toward them – one because of her age, and the other because of her youth.

Then we saw how God informed Joseph of what was happening so that he could step up and protect Mary, both before and at the birth of Jesus. While Joseph had reservations at first, the angel of the Lord convinced him that it was right and good for him to take Mary as his wife and become her husband so that the child she carried, the promised Messiah, would be cared for and protected.

Today we see how God continued to work behind the scenes to pronounce Jesus’ birth to the people around Bethlehem and Jerusalem. So let me continue this journey of the Messiah and all that happens soon after His birth. This is Luke 2:8-21. (READ Luke 2:8-21)

¹ (James F. Colaianni, *Sunday Sermons Treasury of Illustrations*, [Pleasantville, N.J.: Voicings Publications, 1982] #484)

There's a lot of questions why God proclaimed the birth of Jesus to shepherds. These men and women were at the lowest of the social standing scale in that society because of the jobs they had. They would not have had nice clothes, after all working with sheep or goats all day can be messy. They would not have had fancy houses since they traveled wherever the sheep or goats needed to graze. They were not wealthy because shepherding wasn't a high income position. And they probably weren't the best hygienically. When you're out in the wilderness, bathing comes sporadically, and brushing teeth or hair was probably unheard of.

But these men and women were very in tuned with their surroundings. They may have been informed about the prophecies of God sending a Messiah. They may have been faithful in prayer. But they were simple people, living off the land, caring for their flocks, defending them from attack of predators, and they were likely very courageous people. They would have to face wolves, lions, and maybe even bears and keep them from killing any of the heard they were guiding. They would have to know where the green grass was and where the watering springs were. They may have been the first meteorologists, being very aware of the weather conditions. They weren't dumb by any means, just simple and very dedicated folk doing their best to protect and raise the flocks they tended.

So it is to these simple folk that God reveals the birth of Jesus. I can only imagine what spectacular display the angel demonstrated when he appeared to them. It was enough to terrify them. Luke tells us that "*the glory of the Lord shone over them*" (Luke 2:9), so it would have been like stadium lights suddenly turning on and lighting up the place. From complete darkness to blazing light! Not really what shepherds were used to. It would have completely destroyed their night vision. In any case, they were scared, as any one of us would have been. It may have taken them a bit before the angel can quiet them down and assure them that he means no harm to them before the shepherds are ready to listen. I think I would have responded the same way. But the shepherds are willing to listen to the angel's report of the news that, "*This very day in David's town your Savior was born – Christ the Lord! And this is what will prove it to you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger*"

(Luke 2:11-12).

But if this is not enough, a whole army of angels appear singing praises to God. You think our choir is good, magnify that by 1000 times and you might get close to the sound of that magnificent chorus, “*Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom He is pleased!*” (Luke 2: 14). Not only are their eyes blurry because of the magnificence of the brilliant light of the glory of the Lord, but their ears are ringing at the resounding song of the host of heaven. It has gone from the sound of crickets to the resounding angelic chorus. It may have even echoed around the hills and reverberated through each one of the shepherds as they ended.

For the shepherds, this gave them a pretty good indication where they might find Jesus. After they got over their amazement of what just happened, they decide that if God told them where the Savior was, they should go look for Him. So where to look? Not a palace, but a stable. Not in a crib, but in an animal feeding trough. Not in fine clothing, but in strips of cloth. Not in Jerusalem, but in Bethlehem. Wonderful directions for the simple shepherds. They probably knew the place even before they started. Who knows how many stables there were around Bethlehem at that time? Anyway, they set right off to find this new born Savior.

Now, can you imagine Mary and Joseph at the stable suddenly seeing all these shepherds surrounding the stables where they were – without their sheep and goats! And suddenly one of them yells out to all the rest, “Here! Here He is! Hey, everyone, I found Him! Over here!” And when everyone gathers around, they start whispering among themselves, “It’s just as the angel told us. Wow! Just look at Him.” They understood how it all worked – any savior has to first be born and grow up before they can accomplish the saving of the people. God was letting them in at the very beginning so that they could watch the marvelous work of God throughout the rest of Jesus’ life. And so excited they are about all of this that they can’t keep it in – they tell everyone who will listen about what they had seen and heard. Oh, the buzz they created in Bethlehem that day. It may have been a parade of people coming to see the new Messiah, born right there in Bethlehem. Who knows?

But who would listen to shepherds? They were known for their wild story-telling. It's what they did to pass the time around the fire at night. So why would people listen to them about some angelic appearance telling them about a Savior being born in a stable? Most would shake their heads and say to themselves, "Nonsense!" So maybe there wasn't a parade, just a few hopeful people.

But God's not done telling the people of Israel what He has done. After He is circumcised and named, Joseph and Mary take Jesus to Jerusalem to dedicate Him to the Lord. You see the first born son was always offered back to the Lord to be consecrated into His service, but then they could be "bought back" with an offering to the Lord. Listen to how it all unfolds. (READ Luke 2:22-38)

It's now been over a month since Jesus was born. If any of the hubbub and excitement that the shepherds caused got out beyond the borders of Bethlehem, one would think that the news would have arrived in Jerusalem before that. I would think that had news of a Savior being born were to have reached the capital of Israel, it would have spread like wildfire all around the country. This certainly could have happened, but the people would most likely tried to keep it from Herod. We'll hear more about how he responds to the threat of an uprising next week.

But we have Joseph and Mary doing their part to fulfill the Law, offering Jesus to the Lord, and then providing an offering. The offering was such that it indicated the poor condition of the family. Two young pigeons would not have cost too much, but it was just what they needed to satisfy the Law.

But God is still working in the background. An old man, Simeon, had already been told by the Holy Spirit that he would see the consolation of Israel. That means that God told Simeon that He was about to relieve the suffering of the people. He was providing comfort to the people, enabling them to find something to cheer about and lighten their souls. The Messiah was coming! The Savior was born! That would surely encourage the people. But Simeon, being very old, was assured that he would not die until God had fulfilled His promise. This faithful man was prompted by the Holy Spirit to be in the Temple that day, so that when Mary and Joseph finished fulfilling their part of the Law, Simeon is there.

He recognizes Jesus as the "holy child of Bethlehem" whom God has promised to bring salvation

to His people, Israel. With such joy welling up inside of him, Simeon took Jesus into *“his arms and gave thanks to God: ‘Now, Lord, You have kept Your promise, and You may let Your servant go in peace. With my own eyes I have seen Your salvation, which You have prepared in the presence of all peoples: A light to reveal Your will to the Gentiles and bring glory to Your people Israel’”* (Luke 2:28-32).

Again, I wonder what the people around them thought about what they were hearing. Jerusalem would have had a large number of people in it still coming to register for Caesar’s tax. More than likely the Temple would have been filled with travelers and pilgrims. If they heard Simeon praising God for fulfilling His promise by bringing the Messiah, wouldn’t the people perk up their ears and listen? Or maybe the noise in the Temple was too much to have Simeon’s words travel very far. Just another old man rambling on about God doing something in his life.

But after Simeon praises God for fulfilling His promise, he gives Jesus back to Mary and looks at her with solemn, but promising eyes, and tells her what this means to for her. Simeon affirms what the angel said about Jesus before He was conceived, and shares what God was going to do through Him – bring *“destruction and the salvation of many,”* and *“be a sign from God which many people will speak against and so reveal their secret thoughts”* (Luke 2:34-35). But even closer, Simeon discloses to her that *“sorrow, like a sharp sword, will break your own heart”* (2:35).

Along with the blessing of God bringing His Messiah to the world, there would be sorrow and agony and heartbreak. Simeon was preparing Mary for the end of Jesus’ life, when all people would turn against Him, and would crucify Him like a common criminal. God had not yet revealed the resurrection plans, for that would have been too much to bear at that time.

The words we heard from Simeon are very close to what we heard in Malachi 3 today. *“But who will be able to endure the day when He comes? Who will be able to survive when He appears? He will be like strong soap, like a fire that refines metal. He will come to judge like one who refines and purifies silver. As a metalworker refines silver and gold, so the Lord’s messenger will purify the priests,*

so that they will bring to the Lord the right kind of offerings...” (Malachi 3:2-3).

Yes, Jesus would convict people of their sin and invite them to repent and seek the forgiveness of God the Father. He would challenge the people, common and elite alike, to evaluate themselves and turn from their wicked ways and seek the Lord God again. Yes, Jesus would not bring peace, but a sword, a sword that *“pierces even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow, judging the thoughts and intentions of the heart”* (Hebrews 4:12). He would expose the sins of the people, but then would offer up Himself as the sacrifice for those sins, in order to release all who claim Him from the bondage of sin and death. Jesus was the One who would fulfill all the requirements of the Law enabling all who trust in Him to find the mercy of God.

In order to fulfill the letter of the Law, God provides another witness to the great work that God was going to do in Jesus. For any prophecy or witness to be true it had to be corroborated by a second witness. The old prophetess Anna, who lived in the Temple and trusted in God’s provision, also comes up to Mary and Joseph proclaiming the goodness of God. *“She arrived and gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were waiting for God to set Jerusalem free”* (Luke 2:38).

Ok, so the people heard it once from Simeon, but then they heard it again from Anna. Providing that they were still in the temple to hear both testimonies, the people would have begun to hear of the great work that God had planned through Jesus for the salvation of the world. They could have gotten very excited about God’s Messiah. But we are not told that many responded to the words and prophecies of Simeon and Anna. Although there were some who were waiting for the Salvation of Israel, this was just a baby. What could He do? Even more time would have to pass before He grew up and fulfilled His Messianic role.

So we see that though some may have become excited about the birth of the Messiah, God’s Savior, the majority of the people did not hear or comprehend what God was doing. Certainly we do not hear of any priest or Pharisee or Scribe or leader of the Temple coming to hear this great wonderful news. If they had heard about Jesus being the Messiah, if they had truly believed that He was God’s

promised One, they may not have ever let Jesus out of the Temple that day. But as it was, “*When Joseph and Mary had finished doing all that was required by the Law of the Lord,*” they went back home.

How then do these two accounts work in the midst of our lives? What difference do they make for us all these centuries later? Does it give us a reason to celebrate and party and decorate trees and give gifts and sing songs, and eat big meals? Yes, but don’t let it stop there!

You see, while the world focuses on the commercial aspect of the season, WE are called to go way beyond the surface and understand the deeper impact of the season. Jesus does not want us to live and let live, go on in our everyday lives living in emptiness and monotony. Jesus came here to the earth, not so that we could celebrate, but that we might look at who we really are, what we have done in disobedience to God’s Law, and how we have fallen away from His presence. Jesus wants us to seriously look at our lives and see the desperate need we have for a Savior to free us from our sins and bring us back into a relationship with the Father Almighty. It’s not about living like the rest of the world, but it’s about us becoming transformed by the renewing of our minds to give up the stuff of this world that leads us away from God and seek to conform to His likeness, His image.

Jesus came to the earth to die for us so that we, through His death, might become like Him! We are not to remain the same, lost in our sinfulness and thumbing our noses at the Savior who has come to release us from that sin. The birth of Jesus is the fulfillment of God’s promise to bring us a way that we might escape the wages of sin, eternal death, and find real life, eternal life in Him. The seasons of Advent and Christmas calls us to rejoice in God’s giving us a second chance at living for Him. Jesus’s birth was for us, so that we might turn away from our own ways and once more embrace God’s ways that lead to life.

The birth of Jesus is indeed a time of rejoicing, but we are to openly share the true meaning of the season by telling others about our Savior, Immanuel, God With Us, Jesus Christ our Lord. Just like the shepherds did on the night of Jesus’ birth, walk through the empty festive activities of our world

today and share the true Light of the Lord Jesus with all those that you meet, so that they might receive the “good news of great joy for all the nations” (Luke 2:10). Like Simeon and Anna, be the ones who proclaim Jesus to all people whether they listen or not. He is the One over all, worthy to be praised by each one of us for what He has done. Let the reason for the season be all about Jesus, our Savior, and Messiah who has come to set His people free.

Give praise and glory and honor to God for what He has done for us through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN.