

“A New World Has Come”

Luke 2:8-20

December 16, 2018

INTRODUCTION:

Among the Gospel authors, Luke alone records this interaction between an angel and the shepherds near Bethlehem. There is a beautiful appropriateness to this. In the birth of Jesus, heaven is coming to earth in multiple ways. Jesus comes from heaven to the earth in order to establish the kingdom of heaven on earth. So how appropriate it is that an angel from heaven should come to make this announcement to these shepherds!

The angel appears to the shepherds announcing the dawning of a new world. The old, cursed world may still seem to have a lot of life left in it, but its days are numbered. The angels have been waiting thousands of years for this day to come, ever since they heard of it when God told Eve that her seed would crush the head of Satan. How this one angel was selected to be the bearer of this glorious news we are not told, but it must have been the greatest moment of his existence. The day of crushing has now arrived with the birth of Jesus. God allowed the other angels to participate in the joy of this moment. **“And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God.”** Perhaps this included every angel in heaven. Nothing of such significance had happened in heaven since the creation of the heavens and the earth. In reality, no event ever was more significant than this. The new age was dawning and the old was dying.

The message of the dawn of this new age with the birth of Jesus is not given to kings and those in power. This should not surprise us, because it was the powerful who had a stake in the old world that was fading. Its coming demise was not good news for them. But to the humble, the poor and the faithful, it is good news indeed. Such were these shepherds, notable for their plainness. Though they would have been quite poor by our standards, in their own culture they were simply members of the common working class that no one paid much attention to. Yet it was this group of common folk who were privileged to hear the angel chorus announcing this news.

Luke includes this story not simply because it actually happened this way, though it certainly did. He includes it because the shepherds show us the way to enter this new kingdom. So let's follow the story and see what it teaches us.

I. Fear Rightly Interpreted

Sheep are such vulnerable animals that they need watching not only in the daytime but also at night. Even while they sleep, attack from predators threatens them. I would imagine that standing watch over sheep at night is 99% boredom and 1% adrenaline-fueled fear when a predator actually threatens. The fear is heightened even more when something unexpected and unknown happens, such as happened in this passage. A light pierced the darkness, and an angel from heaven stood in the middle of the light. The shepherds responded in a way any of us would have—they were terrified.

Angelic envoys do not speak on their own, but bring messages from God. The first message is the most common command in the Bible: **“Fear not.”** This word was then followed by a reason they should not be afraid. The disruption brought to their nighttime vigil was one leading to this new world. The angel was bringing good news of the birth of a Savior, Christ the Lord. What they saw initially as fearful was actually good. They had at first misinterpreted the appearance of the angel.

Is it possible that with this new world coming in Jesus that every fear you have is actually a misinterpretation? Is this why the most common command in the Bible is this command not to fear? What is it you are afraid of right now? Is it a health challenge, something about your children, a financial matter or a troubled relationship? Is it a fear of loneliness or singleness? For some of you, it may be a fear of death. These, and more, are the fears we battle. Can you receive this word from God? Fear not, for there is good news. A Savior has been born who is bringing a new world into this fear-ravaged old world. As a result, every fear you struggle with is due to a misinterpretation of reality. A new reality has come in Jesus.

I understand that there is an exercise some pilots undergo late in their training. While airborne, the instructor places a bag over the student pilot’s head, rendering him blind. The instructor then takes the controls and does all kinds of stunts. He does a loop to loop, tailspins and nose dives. He concludes by putting the plane in a nose dive and then taking the bag off the student pilot’s head and turning the controls over to him. He must then get the plane back under control. This exercise is called “Recovering from an Unusual Attitude.” There is a sense in which we are all at a place where we need to recover from an unusual attitude. The unusual attitude is fear, and the way of recovery is to see the good news in Jesus.

II. A Word of Power Believed

The angel describes Jesus in three words: Savior, Christ and Lord. First, he is the Savior, which means you are not. This exposes another battle we must fight constantly, the battle of who is going to be your Savior. Though Jesus is the only Savior who truly saves, we constantly seek salvation from other

sources. Many look to money and power for salvation, others to technology. Many today are looking to politics for salvation, which in my view is the reason for the strong anger associated with politics today. Only Jesus can truly save, because the salvation coming from him delivers us from our greatest problem, which is our sin. He saves us from sin's penalty, from sin's power, and ultimately even from sin's presence. There is no salvation apart from Jesus.

Jesus is also the Christ and the Lord. He is God's anointed one, the Messiah. That means that he is King, not just of Israel but of the whole world. Israel's Messiah is a man, so this is a reference to Jesus' humanity. And he is also the Lord, a reference to his divine nature. The Savior is up to the challenge, since he is fully man and fully God. Our fear is addressed as we believe this, and as Jesus becomes bigger in our hearts and minds.

In C. S. Lewis' *Prince Caspian*, the children find themselves back in Narnia after a long absence. But they are troubled because they don't see Aslan, the great king and lion, and a picture of Christ. Lucy, the youngest of the children, particularly wants to see him. One night she awakens to a voice calling her into the woods, where she finds a clearing. Here's what happens:

A circle of grass, smooth as a lawn, met her eyes, with dark trees dancing all round it. And then—oh joy! For *he* was there: the huge Lion, shining white in the moonlight, with his huge black shadow underneath him.

But for the movement of his tail he might have been a stone lion, but Lucy never thought of that. She never stopped to think whether he was a friendly lion or not. She rushed to him. She felt her heart would burst if she lost a moment. And the next thing she knew was that she was kissing him and putting her arms as far round his neck as she could and burying her face in the beautiful rich silkiness of his mane.

"Aslan, Aslan. Dear Aslan," sobbed Lucy. "At last."

The great beast rolled over on his side so that Lucy fell, half sitting and half lying between his front paws. He bent forward and just touched her nose with his tongue. His warm breath came all round her. She gazed up into the large wise face.

"Welcome, child," he said.

"Aslan," said Lucy, "you're bigger."

"That is because you are older, little one," answered he.

"Not because you are?"

"I am not. But every year you grow, you will find me bigger."

III. A Word of Weakness Received

We have become so familiar with the Christmas story that it is easy to miss its shocking elements. One of those is the unexpected contrast between verses 11 and 12. We saw in verse 11 how Jesus is the Savior, Messiah and Lord. Now in the very next verse we read the news that the shepherds will find him

wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger. The manger, as you probably know, was a feeding trough for animals. The only possible explanation for such a thing is that Jesus is born to poor parents. The Savior, Messiah and Lord will be found in a barn, not a palace.

He will be wrapped in swaddling cloths. In case you are unfamiliar with the practice of swaddling, it is when you wrap a baby tightly so as to prevent movement of its arms and, to a lesser degree, its legs as well. The practice of swaddling goes back thousands of years before Christ. It is like a straightjacket for the whole body. Parents believed that wrapping infants tightly helped their limbs to grow straighter. Swaddling went out of fashion in the eighteenth century but has recently become more common as it is thought to provide a sense of security to a baby. Imagine, though, what it means for this baby, for Jesus. He is the One, according to Hebrews 1:2, through whom the world was created. He also upholds the universe by **“the word of his power”** (Heb. 1:3). And now he can’t even move his arms.

In an article in the most recent *CT*, Jeff Peabody writes of the swaddling of Jesus:

And here is where the light dawned in my darkness. This historical detail from Christ’s birth suddenly transformed into a personal sign for me. Because I no longer saw just a baby in a blanket, but a God who entered into my boundedness, who shared inside knowledge of all I was feeling... The conditions of his advent were a small metaphor for his entire life. As the Son of God became flesh and bones, he experienced an unfathomable limitation of himself. The universe closed in around him, restricting him with time and space. Having a human body was like being swaddled, as it contained Almighty God in unnaturally small dimensions.

We know what the shepherds did not yet know, that Jesus’ life would end in the same way it began, with his arms immobilized by the nails that held him to the cross. But we also know that it wasn’t nails that held him there, but love. Jesus became weak, dying the death of a criminal, because he was the appointed sacrifice to cleanse us of our sins. He came in the weakness of a baby, lived in the weakness of poverty, and died in the weakness of a cursed, forsaken criminal. And he did it all out of love for those who will receive him and his love.

IV. Fruit Revealed

The angels speak of the fruit of Jesus’ birth: **“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”** Jesus, the Prince of Peace, brings peace into the world. The thing that everyone wants, but which proves so elusive, will come through Jesus. Let me point out a

couple of things about this peace. First, it comes in stages. The first stage of peace, the one Jesus has already brought, is our peace with God. Without this, outward peace is worth little. Even pagan philosophers recognize this. The first century stoic philosopher, Epictetus, said it like this. "While the emperor may give peace from war on land and sea, he is unable to give peace from passion, grief and envy. He cannot give peace of heart, for which man yearns more than even for outward peace." But Jesus will also give that outward peace, realized ultimately at his second advent when he comes to make all things new.

The second thing I want to point out about this peace is its connection with God's glory. The angels say "Glory to God" first, and then speak of peace on the earth, because the two are related as cause and effect. There will be no peace on the earth or in your life until there is a centering on God's glory. This challenges our rebellious idea of peace in which we want God to continue giving us his gifts of good health, prosperous economies and stable governments so that we can be free to do whatever we want. God knows that such a path will never bring peace.

God's peace comes in two ways. First, he has appointed a day of judgment on which he will rid the world of every person who is self-centered rather than God-centered. Peace will come as God cleanses his world of everyone not centered on his glory. He will do so by giving them what they want, a world where each person can be the center. Nothing could be worse, which is why that place is called "hell." But there is a second way, through another judgment. It is the surprising judgment of Jesus on the cross. Jesus was made sin while he hung on the cross, and he was judged by his heavenly Father. For all who trust in Jesus and follow him, our self-centered, rebellious hearts were judged in Jesus that we might enter into the peace of a God-centered world. This explains why God doesn't act now to end the terrible tragedies that continue unabated in our broken world? The only way to end it is through judgment of all the unrepentant self-centered, and in his mercy God is holding open the door, at great cost to himself, for those unrepentant to repent and come to Jesus. Are you among that number?

CONCLUSION:

G. K. Chesterton once said, "Poets do not go mad; but chess players do... Poetry is sane because it floats easily in an infinite sea; reason seeks to cross the infinite sea, and so make it finite. The result is mental exhaustion." Chess players are always strategizing, trying to see many moves ahead, and the options multiply exponentially. If you run your life like the chess player, there is no peace. It is simply too much for us to figure out how things should happen. Better, in simple faith, to trust the one born of weakness, dying in weakness, but now reigning supreme. Fear not, for unto you is born a Savior, Christ the Lord.