



Welcome to the World: How God Enters an Inhospitable World and Welcomes the Outcast to Himself.

Luke 2:1-20

I want to begin our study this morning with a bit of a spoiler alert. At the end of this section of Scripture this morning, it appears that the source for Luke's account of the birth of Jesus is Mary, the mother of Jesus, herself. Luke writes, *"But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart"* (Luke 2:19).

Michael Card writes:

"Amid the hubbub, as the sky crackles with angelic energy and excited shepherds run around telling the good news, Luke leaves us with Mary. She is meditating on 'these things.' She has locked them away to treasure them in her heart. She must have been Luke's eyewitness for the nativity. How else would he have known this?" (Michael Card)

I think as Luke describes Mary pondering the events surrounding the birth of Jesus in her heart, he is intending us to do the very same thing – **to ponder**. What does the birth of Jesus tell us about our God? What does it tell us about why and for whom the Son of God came into the world? This is no ordinary series of events. The God of heaven has sent His Son into the world in an obscure, out of the way place, rich in biblical history, but in almost complete anonymity.

In Luke's gospel, we are listening to Luke's careful recounting of his research on the life and ministry of Jesus. And here, it is like Luke has pulled up a chair and asked Mary to describe an event that was indelibly marked upon her memory: the birth of her "firstborn son" (2:7). This was in the treasury of her memory (2:19). There aren't many things that leave an indelible mark on a woman's memory like the birth of a child, particularly her first childbirth experience.

The other night, we were chatting with Roland and Rachel, one of our young families here at Waterbrooke, and they were describing the 30-hour event of their firstborn son, Judah's birth. If you were here last Sunday, they dedicated Judah to the Lord. Rachel called it an experience like climbing a mountain. Roland and Rachel were laughing as they described their interactions during that long arduous 30-hour roller coaster ride. They were laughing now. I don't think they were laughing so much then. But they remember key moments. We remember outstanding moments in those significant events. What is interesting about Mary and what she recounts to Luke is not so much the delivery process itself as the remarkable timing and circumstances that surrounded the glorious event. It was anything but usual! It was not what anyone including Mary expected. The Messiah, the Christ, the promised one that Gabriel had spoken about, entered the world not in pomp and circumstance but in silence and seclusion. God did not send His Son into the world to princes



and kings but in an animal stable, in the city of David, to a poor young teenage girl and her betrothed husband, and to insignificant shepherds watching their flocks by night. *God, in Christ, was making a very, very clear point. Christ Jesus did not come into the world to save the significant movers and shakers of the world. He came into the world to rescue the weak, the broken, the outcast, the sinner. As Mary was welcoming the Son of God into her world, God in His Son was welcoming the world into His.*

Do you understand that this morning? This is crucial for you and I to ponder in our hearts. God sends his Son into the world in a particular place, at a particular time, and in a particular way, to make a particular point: ***The good news of the gospel is not for the elite, for the powerful, the influencers... it's for those nobodies, who have nothing by which to commend themselves, no one taking note of them, but who will humbly, joyfully, and willingly welcome God's Son into their lives by faith.*** It's not who you are that saves you. It is who He is.

So, let's just look at this account recorded by Luke, and let's do it like we are listening in to a reporter or a historian, detailing the events as described to him by Mary. What stood out to Mary? What stuck in her mind? There are three things that seem to stand out most clearly in this text for Mary: **The Shame, The Shepherds, and the Shalom!**

I. The Shame: The Sad Circumstances of Jesus' Birth (Luke 2:1-7)

I know that that might be a bit of an overstatement. I could just say the humble circumstances of Jesus' birth. But I want to call it the tragic circumstances of Jesus' birth because I want you to think for a moment about what this was actually like for Mary. When the Lord told her that she was going to be an unwed mother carrying the Savior, there was an obvious cost and some serious consequences to her response, "I am the Lord's servant.... May it be done to me according to your word." There was a cost to Mary's discipleship.

I want to go back to something that John Hall pointed out last week when he was preaching on the birth of John the Baptist. John pointed out that it was not unusual for the family and the community to be deeply involved the lives of a couple especially when a child is born. In Luke 1:58 and following, there is the entire scene when John is born and he is named on the eighth day, at his bris. And everyone is there not just to celebrate but to contribute to the discussion around what the baby should be named. That was a normal event in an eastern, Jewish culture. Family and community were deeply involved. Again, to reference, Roland and Rachel. In not too long, they are headed back to Burkino Faso, the first time since they have been married and the first time since Judah was born. CoVid has really affected that. So, this is both a celebration of their marriage and now the birth of Judah. Roland hasn't seen his mom in five years. So, they were describing that in his village in Africa, this is a huge community event. Almost everyone will be there.

What is unusual in Luke 2 is that Jesus is born not just in a manger but in complete isolation from the religious and family network to which Mary and Joseph belong. There is an obvious parallel being drawn between Zechariah's birth and Jesus' birth. And, if you are a woman, you have to be able to imagine what it



was like for Mary, to give birth, completely disconnected from her family, from her community. Luke writes, “In those days, a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered to his own town. 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, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. 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.”

Would you just envision that for a moment? Would you ponder this for a moment? Mary is not yet married. She is nowhere near home. She has no place to stay. They have no money. There is no stopping the baby from being born.

The commentators point out that if you were to listen to Luke with first century ears, it was even more daunting. Just the mention that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus would be a strong reminder, especially to Jewish ears, that they were living under foreign rule and oppression. The only reason for this census was to ensure and to enforce taxation. Can you imagine what this already meant for a young couple like Mary and Joseph who didn't have two widow's mites to rub together?

This is what I want you to consider here: Personally, these were incredibly difficult times for Mary and Joseph. They couldn't have felt more powerless, helpless, alone and abandoned in this world:

- a. **They were anonymous pawns in an oppressive political system.** Caesar Augustus was the adopted nephew of Julius Caesar. Julius Caesar had announced himself to be god of the Roman Empire and at one time, Octavius, Caesar Augustus' childhood name, was called “the son of God.” He had implemented what was known as the “Pax Romana” which was the establishing of Roman rule over all the known Mediterranean world, promising peace on earth. Caesar's Augustus peace on earth was subjugation to Roman Tyranny. He wasn't known for being a pleasant fellow.

Again listen to Michael Card:

“Caesar Augustus was born Gaius Octavius in 63 B.C.... Octavius' mother was the niece of the dictator Julius Caesar, who adopted him as his son and heir, leaving his financial and political fortune to the eighteen-year-old Octavius. When Julius Caesar was declared a god of the Roman state, Octavius became a 'son of God' and the eventual founder of the 'Roman Peace,' or Pax Romana, clearing the sea lanes of pirates and establishing law and order throughout the empire.”

“Despite the aura classical scholarship casts around him, Augustus was a blood thirsty tyrant, closer to someone like Hitler or Mussolini.... There is a distinct emotionality involved in simply saying 'Caesar Augustus.' It connotes upheaval... Rome was dominating the world, even the backwater town of Bethlehem.” (M. Card)



- b. **They were obviously poor.** They had no money and no place to stay. Later in Luke 2:24, when they bring Jesus from Bethlehem to Jerusalem, they offer the sacrifice that was permitted for those who were poor – “a pair of turtledoves or pigeons.” Again, I think it is worth noting that for any woman, having a child in a stable because there was “no room for them in the inn” was no pleasant and easy task. *This wasn't a hospital birth or a home birth. This was a homeless birth.*
- c. **They were religious pariahs.** Now, I want to be careful in saying this, but we do know that having a child outside of wedlock would have brought on the criticism and the ostracization of family, friends, and peers. There is a reason why no one welcomes them and why no one hosts them. Last week, I was reading through John 8 and Jesus is charging the religious leaders of doing evil when they reject him for calling God His Father. Jesus tells them that they are doing the works of their “father” and they fire back at him, **“We were not born of sexual immorality.” (John 8:41)**. Although, Joseph and Mary and godly and devout, they are seen as having let down the community and their faith.
- d. **They were family problems.** Here they are in the city of Joseph’s forefathers, in a culture where family takes care of family. This is not like our culture where staying in an inn is seen as a good and normal and safe thing to do. Yet, they have no one to turn to. They have no one who will take them in. They have no one who gathers around them to help, to name the baby, or to celebrate.

Do you understand this? This is an extremely difficult and painful time. They are political pawns. They are economical poor. They are religious pariahs. They are family problems. They are facing pretty much every fear and opposition that we all face in this broken world: injustice, uncertainty, rejection, abandonment. They are hard-pressed on every side. But more importantly, as we will see in a moment, **they are perfectly placed.**

Let’s at least stop and say this, the birth of Jesus is meant to be read by women and outsiders, oppressed and abandoned, and saying, Christ was born in these very circumstances so that you might hear the message of this “Christmas” story and realize that you are not alone. ***Mary and Joseph had nothing and no one but Jesus and that was more than enough.*** You also may feel like an unimportant peon in this world, pushed around, and at the whim of political powers, and educational powers, but God is sovereign to position you exactly where you need to be to see that His Son has been sent into the world for you. Are you a pawn in a system that controls your life? Are you poor and struggling to make your world come to make ends of meet? Have you got a reputation as a sinner, legitimately or illegitimately? Are you seen as a problem to your family? Have you been abandoned, rejected, and forsaken? Well, Jesus Christ came into the world in this way to show us that it is not who we are, who others think we are, what we have or what we have done that saves us... it is only through the firstborn Son that any of us have any hope. These real problems place us in exactly the position we need to be to receive the Son of God.



II. The Shepherds: The Wonderful Words of Salvation (Luke 8-17).

Well, as Luke records this information about the birth of Jesus from the testimony of Mary, he shifts from a manger to a group of loyal shepherds out in the field, doing the night shift. I'd like to imagine that as Luke is sipping a cup of tea with Mary, he asks her what really stood out to her about that night. No family. No pomp and circumstance. "What stood out to you, Mary?" Was it the labor? Was it the loneliness? It is like Mary says, "No... it was the smell. Yes, the smell. Shepherds!" The only ones who showed up were a bunch of smelly shepherds who were all excited and testifying to some incredible experience that had happened to them while they were watching sheep at night! Then Mary launches into the description of what the shepherds told her. God sent angels to make the first preachers of the gospel a bunch of lowly shepherds sent to announce to Mary and Joseph – the gospel ... "Good news of great joy". (This by the way is a great encouragement to me.)

Luke 2:8-9 reads *"And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear."* I like Philip Ryken's comment about the angels. He writes,

"Imagine what joy they had going out in the middle of the night and scaring people half to death with the glory of God. They were also singing in a new key, praising God for his grace to sinners." (Philip Ryken)

This was not a gender reveal party! It was an agenda reveal party! For the angels had come to announce to those who would have been likewise seen as unclean outsiders and insignificant nobodies, that God had entered the world sending the son of the hero the Shepherds, David.

What did Mary vividly remember? The Wonderful Words of the Shepherds.

"Fear not, for behold I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people."

Why shouldn't the Shepherds or Mary or anyone fear"

- ***The clear wideness of the gospel – The gospel is for everyone:*** The message comes to poor anonymous shepherds because the good news is not for the elite but for everybody. God sent His Son to Bethlehem, and sent shepherds to a poor teenage girl and her fiancé in a stable to make it abundantly clear – the gospel isn't for sovereigns and power brokers, and the self-righteous – but for the nobodies, the forsaken, the forgotten, the condemned. This would be the pattern of God's ministry to choose sinners and shepherds to announce hope for all people.

This is why God chose the apostle Paul and sent him to make it clear that the gospel is for all people. ***The angels are sent to make prophets of shepherds to make it clear to us that the gospel is for all people, even smelly shepherds.***



- ***The cumulative weight of the good news – This child is David’s Son.***

“Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you who is Christ the Lord.” (2:10)

At a moment when they couldn’t have felt more disconnected from their people, they couldn’t have been more profoundly connected to them, their history, and their destiny.

*“This is now **the sixth time** that Luke has mentioned David’s name. The child born to the shepherds was David’s royal Son.”*

Zechariah spoke of this great salvation - Luke 1:69 – “He has raised up a horn of salvation for us, in the house of David (as he said through the prophets long ago), salvation from our enemies and from all who hate us, to show mercy to our fathers...”

“Savior points to his role as deliverer. Messiah points to his office in terms of the promised Anointed One of God; and Lord indicates his sovereign authority.” (Darrell Bock)

Here we see that Mary and Joseph though abandoned and rejected by their own have been chosen and appointed by God to welcome in the Savior of the world.

Mary is not forgotten. Israel is not forgotten. God is keeping his covenant promise to raise up one who would deliver His people. As Mary and Joseph felt the disconnect with their Jewish heritage, God showed them that they couldn’t have been more deeply and profoundly connected to it.

All of this has been to put them in one place, in Bethlehem, the city of David, where they would have not only their firstborn son, but God’s only Son. Listen to Tom Schreiner:

*“This is an example of God’s secret sovereignty, by which the decisions of an emperor lead to the fulfillment of prophecy – to the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem (Micah 5:1-2)... **God’s sovereignty manifests itself in Mary’s giving birth when they are in Bethlehem. From the decree of Augustus to the birth pangs of Mary, we see the Lord working out his plan.** Jesus is identified as the ‘firstborn’ son, and this could simply mean that the inheritance belongs to him as the firstborn. But the messianic character of Luke’s first two chapters suggests an allusion to Psalm 89:27, where the Lord says of David, ‘I will make him the firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth.’ What was true of the historical David is fulfilled in a more profound way in the greater David, Jesus.... The reference suggests Jesus’ sovereignty over all kings – even Augustus.”*

Do you see what is being said here? Jesus is fulfilling the plan of God by fulfilling the prophecy of Micah in Micah 5:1-5:

“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times. Therefore, Israel will be abandoned until the time when she who is in labor gives birth and the rest of his brothers return to join the



*Israelites. He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord His God. **And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth. And He will be their peace.***"

It is this Son who will bring peace to earth.

"I have found David, my servant; with my sacred oil I have anointed him...I will also appoint him my firstborn, the most exalted of the kings of the earth.

I will maintain my love to him forever, and my covenant with him will never fail.

I will establish his line forever, his throne as long as the heavens endure."

Psalm 89:21,26-29

They may be political pawns and poor paupers and religious pariahs and family problems, but they are perfectly placed by God for the sending of His Son into the world. **God has chosen them for this enormous privilege because even the Emperor of the Roman Empire must do the bidding of the God of heaven and the ruler of earth!** Proverbs 21:1 reads, *"The king's heart is a stream of water in the hands of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will."* That's where our peace comes from and that's where Mary's peace comes from. Again, listen to Dr. Schreiner:

*"God always fulfills His promises; nothing can thwart his will. He ensures that circumstances will conspire to bring about what he has purposed. Mary and Joseph have no plans to go to Bethlehem or for Mary to give birth there, but God has planned for Jesus to be born in Bethlehem. How does He accomplish His will? **He moves an entire empire to accomplish His will!** He puts it into the heart of Caesar that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world Augustus has no idea that he is carrying out God's purpose with the census."*

- ***The Significance of the Signs – The manger and the swaddling cloths are unmistakable signs that this is God's Messiah.***

"This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

Mary's poverty was God's pointing finger. **Wrapping the baby in swaddling cloths and putting Jesus in a manger were acts of humble desperation on her part and intentional acts of deliberation on God's part.**

Look. Poverty is not an accident. It is what He has become so that you will be poor no longer. The God of the universe has and will stoop down to the lowest of lows to lift the weak and broken. If He is willing to do this for us, we can be assured that nothing can separate us from His low.

"The shepherds did not find the child couched in royal splendor, as they might have expected, but lying in poverty. This was the humiliation of the incarnation, that the Son of God humbled himself to save us. The Venerable Bede, writing sometime in the seventh or eight century, said: 'It should be carefully noted that the sign given of the Saviour's birth is not a child enfolded in Tyrian purple, but one wrapped round with rough pieces of cloth; he is not to be found in an ornate golden bed, but in a manger. The meaning



of this is that he did not merely take upon himself our lowly mortality, but for our sakes took upon himself the clothing of the poor.' We can recognize Jesus the same way the shepherds recognized him: by his humility. We see him wrapped in the swaddling cloths of his humanity, and even more, when we see him dying in the naked agony of the cross – we know that he is the Christ whom God has sent to save us." (Philip Ryken)

- ***The cosmic worship of God: The Shepherds recount the cosmic joy over the glorious grace of God.***

"And suddenly, there was with the angel, a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace among those with whom He is well-pleased.'" (2:13-14)

The angels were ecstatic because God was so good!

"From eternity past, those sinless creatures had worshipped him with perpetual praise. But now God was sending His Son into the world, where he would be despised and rejected unto death for the salvation of a lost and fallen race. This was the most glorious demonstration that God ever made of His grace. Therefore, it was only right for him to receive the highest praise." (Philip Ryken)

Mary will always remember this event for the ecstatic joy of heaven's angels over the birth of her Son.

This is the upside down world of the kingdom of God. When we feel we are forsaken, we have a God who sees us and saves us. When we feel we have been abandoned by those dearest to us, we have been offered the grace and acceptance of the God of the universe in Christ. **When no one came with us, Christ came for us.** Though people are ashamed to be identified with us, Christ is not ashamed to call us his brethren. Hebrews 2:9 reads *"But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone. In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the author of their salvation perfect through the suffering. Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So, Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers."*

At the very point, where Joseph and Mary felt like pariahs in the world, they couldn't have felt more deeply connected to God in heaven. Where they felt the sorrow of no family, they felt the ecstasy of heaven. Where they felt condemnation, they experienced grace upon grace.



III. The Shalom: Treasuring and pondering the truth of Christ (2:18-20).

“And all who heard it, wondered at what the shepherds told them. ***But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart.*** And the shepherds returned glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.”

This is good news for extraverts and introverts. Luke asked Mary what any good historian would: **“So how did you respond?”** Mary said, I treasured the truth. I took it. I thought hard and long about what God had said. God had come for the poor, the outcast, the sinner. In my heart of hearts, I welcomed the gospel into my life and it became life and joy and peace to me. This is peace on earth. It begins in my heart.

Christ entered the world to bring peace with God. Christ enters the heart to make that peace ours. Mary knew this peace. Luke asks Mary: What was going on with you when all this was going on? Mary responds... Peace. I treasured Christ. I pondered it. We had nothing. But we had Jesus.

The Shepherds did what you would have expected shepherds would do. They hooted and hollered and sang and rejoiced and celebrated that the Savior was one of them and through Him, they would become one with God. But Mary just took it all in. She took Christ in.

I remember my conversion. **My conversion was glorious calm.** It was a starry night in Canada and I walked home and I felt for the first time – the pleasure of God. I knew in my heart of hearts that God had come for me. God delighted in me and had welcomed me and I never felt closer to heaven in my life than when I conversed with God in a little village and pondered the glorious truth of Christ coming to save me. The Shepherds shouted it on the hill side. Mary savored it in her heart of hearts.

Here are the questions in the message of the shepherds to Mary:

1. Is there a wideness in the mercy of God towards sinners?
2. Is there weightiness/ a substantial ground for believing that this is the Christ? The hope of the world?
3. Is there a willingness for Christ to take weak and lowly and rejected sinners to Himself?
4. Is He worthy of your trust and worship?