



Sermon Transcript December 24, 2017

Advent 2017 Birth Announcements Jesus! For Unto You Luke 2:1-20

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on December 24, 2017 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio version of this sermon may be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com.

Sermon Text

Luke 2:1-20

¹ In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. ² This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³ And all went to be registered, each to his own town. 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, ⁵ to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. ⁶ And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. 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.

⁸ And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. 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. 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. ¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹² And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

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." ¹⁶ And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. ¹⁷ And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. ¹⁸ And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. ²⁰ And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Introduction

On this Christmas Eve-Day, we rehearse that wonderful birth announcement made by the angels to the shepherds, *“For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”*

I am drawn to that phrase *“unto to you.”* I see “you” in that announcement and I see “myself” in that announcement. In fact, this universal appeal to the birth of Jesus marks this entire story. We will see in a moment that it was unto a Roman world that Jesus was born. It was unto a Jewish world that Jesus was born. And, of course, it us unto our world that Jesus was born. This baby was not just born unto “Joseph and Mary.” Rather, *“For unto us a child is born, to us a son is given.”*

I was reminded this week that “Christmas is a winter celebration.”¹ That is not just a statement about the weather, but more specifically about the mood. Another way to put it is that “Christmas, according to the Bible, belongs in a land of deep shadows . . . That’s important to remember at Christmas, especially because it can be such a difficult time. If you’re ill, unemployed, broke, alone, divorced, depressed or in any other way transgressing ‘Our Festive Expectations,’ Christmas can be really rough. In a 2010 survey 18% of respondents agreed with the statement ‘I dread Christmas’. In another survey it was revealed that 19% ‘hate’ Christmas parties. For many of us, Christmas is anything but the most wonderful time of the year. Every relational fracture is exacerbated, every family breakdown is exposed and every pang of bereavement is given fresh oxygen.”²

On this Christmas Eve-Day, I want you to hear that into your “winter” and into your “deep shadows” *unto YOU* is born a *Savior, who is Christ the Lord.*” I want us to consider the inclusive nature of the phrase *“unto you.”* As we consider what this birth announcement meant to the Roman world and to the Jewish world and to our world, I hope you leave doing the two things that were done at the end our passage this morning. I hope you leave like Mary, who *“treasured up all these things pondering them in her heart.”* And I pray you leave like the shepherds, *“glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen.”* Between now and tomorrow, leave some time to further “ponder” and to “praise” God as you rehearse this wonderful birth announcement, *“For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”*

Good News To a Roman World

There is an ancient inscription that reads like this, “son of a god, imperator [ruler] of

land and sea, the benefactor and savior of the whole world.”³ I wonder who you would be inclined to think that this ancient inscription is referring to. Similar titles are used in our passage this morning to refer to Jesus, “*a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.*” Like this ancient inscription, the birth of Jesus is described as brining great joy for all people and peace on earth. But this ancient inscription is not referring to Jesus. Rather, it begins “Divine Augustus Caesar, son of a god, imperator [ruler] of land and sea, the benefactor and savior of the whole world.” The title “Augustus” implies characteristics of divinity.⁴

Caesar Augustus, previously known as Octavian, was the grand nephew of Julius Caesar. He later became Caesar’s adopted son and eventual Emperor of Rome. When Julius Caesar was murdered, it was Octavian who chased down his “father’s” assassin and later he consolidated power by defeating Mark Antony and Cleopatra. From 27 BC to 14 AD, for forty years, Caesar Augustus ruled over the ever increasing Roman Empire and through his leadership he issued in a period known widely as the *Pax Romana*. It was the beginning of a 200 year period known as Roman Peace.

He was celebrated because he expanded the Roman Empire and he brought stability that allowed the Empire to flourish. When it was proposed that the day of his birthday become the beginning of the new year, it was suggested by Paullus Fabius Maximus that Caesar Augustus had been sent by “the providence that divinely ordered our lives [sent by the gods] . . . sending us and those after us a savior who put an end to war and established all things . . . and when he appeared exceeded the hopes of all who had anticipated good tidings.”⁵ In other words, his birth was also announced with “great joy” to be “good news” - “good tidings” - that is for “all the people.”

Donald Wasson, the professor of Medieval and U. S. History at Lincoln College, wrote an article about the *Pax Romana* established by Caesar Augustus and he concluded the article by saying, “With the demise of the Republic, the government was in ruin [when Augustus rose to power]. Emperor Augustus had gained political and military control, and brought a sense of peace. He secured the borders, stabilized the economy, and brought a sense of peace. Augustus was quoted as saying, ‘I found a city of brick and I left it one of marble.’”⁶ Wasson actually said that Augustus “made Rome great again.”

So when our text begins by saying, “*In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered,*” it puts the birth of Jesus into a wider context. Through the details of the birth of Jesus in Luke 2, a very clear statement was being made to Rome and to Caesar Augustus himself. Joel Green says that the point of the story we find in Luke 2 is “that another ruler has been born, one whose dominion is

both universal and everlasting . . . And this “good news” must be seen as countering the exalted claims made by and on behalf of Augustus . . . Jesus’s birth calls into question both the emperor’s status as Savior and the “peace of Augustus” that gave rise to that acclaimed status.”⁷ The birth of Jesus was a clear statement to Rome that there is someone greater than Caesar Augustus who has been born. The birth of Jesus was an announcement to Rome that true and lasting peace has finally come.

Do you know what is interesting about the *Pax Romana*? The cross was a means by which this “peace” was maintained. Any threat to this peace was cruelly executed on the cross. It was peace through strength that kept peace in Rome for 200 years. Conversely, the peace that Jesus brought, ironically, was secured by the cross. It was through his humility, his death and resurrection that Jesus became the true *Savior, Christ the Lord*. And so to the Roman world it was announced in Luke 2, “*For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.*”

Good News to a Jewish World

Now this good news announced by the angels to the shepherds is good news to a Jewish world as well. In fact, it is the Jewish context we more readily see when we read this story. After all, the birth of Jesus is the fulfillment of what Israel’s prophets have been speaking about for hundreds of years. Even the very place where Jesus was born was foretold by the prophet Micah. He said in Micah 5:2, “*But you, O Bethlehem . . . from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel.*” So when these Jewish shepherds hear that angelic announcement, “*For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord,*” they are hearing words that every observant Jew longed to hear. After a long wait, “the Christ,” that is the Messiah, has been born.

When we read in verse 1, “*In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered*” it serves as a reminder that the people of Israel had also been swallowed up into the shadows of this vast Roman Empire. They were being registered so they could be taxed and the tax levied on them by Rome was a heavy burden. So they longed for the Christ, the Savior, who would come and deliver them from oppression. From the Jewish point of view, they weren’t feeling the *Pax Romana*.

During this Advent Season, we have been looking at various birth announcements throughout the storyline of the Bible that lead us to this birth announcement we celebrate on this Christmas Eve-Day. As we take in the whole storyline of the Bible, we discover that the peace that comes with the birth of Jesus is a peace that is far more

cosmic than being set free from Rome. You get a sense of the cosmic nature of peace that comes with the birth of Jesus when the angels say to the shepherds, “*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased.*” This is an inclusive statement that suggests “God’s mercy has fallen on the world.”⁶

During this Advent Season, we heard the first announcement of this good news, the *proto-evangelium*, that the offspring of the woman would crush the head of the serpent. Through Abraham and his son Isaac, we heard how God would bless the world through Abraham’s descendant. Through David we discovered that God would raise up a king who would reign forever with justice and peace. Through John the Baptist, we were taken back to the prophet Isaiah who spoke of “good news” that would come to the world through a coming servant of God. And so John the Baptist pointed to Jesus and said, “*Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.*”

We cannot lose sight that this most royal birth announcement was made to shepherds. It was an announcement made to a group of people on “the bottom of the scale of power and privilege.”⁸ Isaiah captures the essence of this “good news” as brining “*good news to the poor . . . to bind the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captive . . . and comfort to all who mourn.*” Again we see that this peace comes to us through humbly seeing our need for Jesus.

Into this “winter celebration” and the “deep shadows” of this world comes the light of the world. Our story begins in darkness. It is noted that the shepherds were “*keeping watch over their flock by night.*” Isaiah the prophet said in Isaiah 9:2, “*The people walking in darkness have seen a great light, on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has shined.*” The good news of the birth of Jesus is that the long anticipated and promised light of God has come into this dark world. And so to the Jewish world it was announced in Luke 2, “*For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.*”

Good News to Our World

In the book *Four Kinds of Christmas* it suggests that there are four possible responses to Christmas. The first response is to be like Scrooge and to be controlled by the darkness that exists in this world and in our own hearts. Scrooge said in Dickens’ *Christmas Carol*, “Every idiot who goes about with “Merry Christmas” on his lips should be boiled with his own pudding, and buried with a stake of holly through his heart.” If you are honest, the darkness is not just “out there” in the wintry realities of life. There is a

darkness within you as well. Look at all “the darkness” that is being exposed right now in our culture from people who are portrayed as having everything together.

The second response is to Shop and grab all the gusto in life you can because tomorrow you die. And so perhaps you celebrate by surrounding yourself with family, feasting and festivity, but eventually the party is over. You are left looking for the next party. It is like putting tinsel on a Christmas tree that has been cut down. The tree is perishing.

The third response is the Santa response. “According to the mythology Santa is generous, giving gifts to all the children of the world. But Santa doesn’t give gifts, does he? He gives rewards for good behavior. And if you’re naughty, you get coal in your stocking.” The author of the book went on to say, “A friend of mine was six years old when her parents ‘phoned the North Pole’ to report her misbehavior. In her presence they advised the big man of her latest misdemeanor and proposed a cancellation of her account with immediate effect. ‘No, Santa!’ she yelled towards the phone, ‘I’ll be good, I promise.’ It worked! She behaved. And it goes to show that Santa doesn’t really give gifts after all. He gives rewards – performance-related Christmas bonuses. This is not the overflow of Santa’s generous heart. It’s part of a parent-sponsored global conspiracy to keep kids moral.”⁹ Sadly, this often carries over into our view of God. We don’t want God. We want his things. And when we don’t get what we think we deserve, we wonder about the fairness of God or what kind of God he really is.

But there is a fourth response to consider. It is the “stable.” It is the place where Mary pondered all that happened and from where the shepherds left praising God. I want to read for you an excerpt from this book. It captures well how this story in Luke 2 is “good news” for You.

I would like to read an excerpt from this book for you. “Think of the heights and the depths contained in this stable. The firstborn son is of course Jesus. He is the one Isaiah called ‘a great light ... Mighty God ... Prince of Peace’! But what happens at this first Christmas? He is born into the human race to become our *brother*. Born to Mary – an unmarried, dirt-poor teenager. Born into a suffering, subjugated people. Born, we suppose, into a stable – a cattle shed. Laid in a manger – a feeding trough. And . . . He’s born to die – born to descend into the depths of our pit.

The traditional Christmas is utterly revolutionary. The King of heaven becomes powerless. The Light of the world descends to the darkness. The giver of life is born to die. This is God’s solution to the darkness. We might have responses to the world’s brokenness but Christmas is *God’s* answer. Here’s how it works.

The Christmas Child is God's eternal Son joining our race by the power of the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:35). This means He's not just a special baby; He's an eternal member of that divine family – the Trinity. For this reason Isaiah (and others) can call Him the 'Mighty God'. He has always been in on that family of love – Father, *Son* and Holy Spirit. But He didn't just bathe in that eternal light. In the stable He entered our darkness, because this is what love does.

Christmas time sees airports crammed full of tearful reunions. People pay thousands and cross oceans just to be with one another. Why? Love bears the cost to draw near. And Jesus bore the cost to draw near to us. At Christmas God the Son became God our brother, because love pays any price to be with the beloved.

Imagine you are at the airport waiting for your own Christmas reunion. Your successful older brother is flying in from New York. He's been living there for the last ten years while you have struggled on at home. Dad died six months ago, Mom's been diagnosed with Alzheimer's, you're out of work and the debts are piling up. He approaches with more bags than you expected and with tears he says, 'I'm back for good now. We'll get through this.'

This is the meaning of Christmas. Jesus did not merely pay us a visit in the stable. God the Son became our elder brother. He joined Himself to our family in all its poverty and He pledged His life to us forevermore. When you see Jesus in the manger, you're seeing a promise – He is committing Himself to our race and to our plight. In the stable the Christmas Child, though speechless, is speaking volumes. Essentially He's saying, 'I'm here now. I have come to shoulder your burdens, just like Isaiah promised.'

As He grows up, Jesus' burden-bearing nature takes Him all the way to the depths of the pit – all the way to godforsaken death. Christmas leads to the cross. There Jesus takes on Himself our sins and all the judgement that they deserve. The cross shows just how far our elder brother goes to shoulder our burdens.

Love bears the cost, and on the cross Jesus bears the cost for all that separates us – paying off our debts to God in full. He suffers the dark hell which our sins deserve and then bursts through death and into life on Easter Sunday. Now He comes to each of us in this land of deep shadow and says, 'I know your darkness. Let me be your light.'

This is the ultimate Christmas gift. As Isaiah says, 'to us a son is given'. If you call out to Jesus, asking Him into your life, you receive Him as your own Lord and guide through

the valley. He takes the government of your life on to His shoulders. He fills you with His Spirit so that His Spirit is now your Spirit. He introduces you to His Father so that His Father is now your Father. He promises you His future so that His eternal life is now your eternal life. It's all for free and that gift tag around His ankle is true: it's all FOR YOU. So how will you respond?"¹⁰

Conclusion

With the birth of Jesus, the Roman world was served notice that a greater king has been born and greater peace than this world can possibly give has come. With the birth of Jesus, a Jewish world was told that the promise of God to bring his blessing to the world has finally come. And to you, walking in the "deep shadows" of this broken world, has been born "*a Savior, Christ the Lord.*" The darkness is real, but with Jesus light has come. With Jesus comes true peace because you are made right with God. With Jesus comes a new way to live, with Jesus sitting on the throne of your life. And he never leaves you. If you want to receive this gift, all you have to do is ask.

Dear Father, It's hard in the dark. And I recognize that there's darkness in me too. I'm sorry for my selfishness and sin. Thank you for Jesus – your gift. Thank you that He came to live my life here in the darkness. Thank you that He died my death on the cross and thank you that He rose again. I now receive Him into my life. May He be my Lord, my guide and my friend forever. Accept me as your child, fill me with your Spirit and help me to walk with Jesus and His people through the darkness and into your eternal light. In Jesus' name, Amen.

¹*The Four Kinds of Christmas* <http://fourkindsofchristmas.com/read/>

²*Ibid*

³David Braund *Augustus to Nero: A Source Book on Roman History 31 B.C.—A.D. 68* (London: Crook Helm, 1985) 66

⁴Joel Green *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 126

⁵S. R. F. Price *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1984) 54

⁶Donald Wasson "Pax Romana" in *Ancient History Encyclopedia*, www.ancient.eu, December 8, 2015

⁷Green, 134-135

⁸*Ibid.*, 130

⁹*The Four Kinds of Christmas*

¹⁰*Ibid*

Readings for the Christ Candle

Lighting of the Christ Candle:

The last candle of the Advent Wreath is known as the Christ Candle. It is always lit on Christmas Eve. The next significant time in the church calendar that you might see the Christ Candle is during a service called *Tenebrae*, on Good Friday, where it is the central candle of seven other candles. During that service, the candles are extinguished one by one to symbolize Christ's life ebbing away, and that Christ candle is eventually extinguished to represent his death on the cross. It is a reminder to us that you can't understand the manger if you don't see the cross. Jesus said it this way in Mark 10:45, *"For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."* It is with the cross in mind that Jesus came and it is with the cross in mind that we light the candle celebrating his birth.

Passing the Light

During Easter, the light of the Christ Candle becomes the light of the Passover Lamb, the lamb that was killed and eaten at the Jewish celebration of Passover. Now the candle is symbolic of Christ's role as our sinless Lamb, slain for our salvation. It is a reminder that Christ has conquered death once and for all.

On Ascension Day, 40 days after Easter, that Passover candle is extinguished during a tremendous celebration, to symbolize that our Lord returned to heaven in victory. The candle traces a miraculous journey God made to redeem his people. The lighting of this candle today is the reading of the first page of an age-old way of telling His story. We're just the latest in a line of countless believers who have seen Him in a candle just like this.

I hope that you can experience the Christmas season as the beginning of a yearlong or even a lifelong journey through the life of our Savior. Let this candle be a visual representation of the Lord of the world, God come near. As we pass this light, may you be reminded of the nearness of God to you as you respond to him by faith. He wants to bring light to your life all year round, to cast the warmth of His presence into every corner of your life, to cast out and utterly overcome the darkness so that you can bring his light wherever you go. That's my wish for you this Christmas.

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