

“THE WONDROUS GIFT IS SILENTLY GIVEN”

I. Introduction

A. In a well-known Christmas carol, we sing these words:

*How silently, how silently,
The wondrous gift is giv'n.*

1. We are so familiar with that hymn that we may not give much thought to what this phrase is saying.
2. It is not saying that Jesus came into the world without the any of the commotion, pain, and noise that accompanies childbirth.
3. What it is saying is that this birth, the most important birth in all of history, took place without any fanfare, pageantry, or ceremony.

B. We find this same point expressed in Luke's account of Jesus' birth.

1. Luke's birth narrative is marked by its simplicity, even though it is relating an event of monumental significance.
2. It was biblical ironies of this nature that led Martin Luther to say that as Christians we need to be what he called theologians of the cross rather than theologians of glory.
3. And keep in mind that for Luther everyone is a theologian, since everyone believes something about God.
4. The theologian of glory expects God to work through things that are spectacular and impressive and glamorous.
5. But because the theologian of the cross accepts what God has revealed in his Word about how he works, he understands that in the economy of salvation, outward appearances often look contrary

to the true spiritual realities.

6. As we study this text today, we will consider some of the ways in which this was the case in the birth of our Lord.

II. A Burdensome Journey

- A. In the first part of our text, we see that Jesus' parents had to undertake a burdensome journey close to the time when Mary was due to give birth.
 1. This trip was necessary because of a decree issued by the Roman emperor, a decree requiring people to return to their ancestral homes so that they could be registered for tax purposes.
 2. Now, nobody enjoys paying taxes.
 3. Just imagine how Joseph and Mary would have felt about having to travel 75 miles when Mary was near the end of her pregnancy just so they could be registered for a tax to support the government of their foreign oppressors.
 4. I can't imagine that they were very happy about this.
- B. In those days, the Roman empire was ruled by Caesar Augustus.
 1. He was known as Octavian before he became emperor, and he reigned from 31 BC to AD 14.
 2. He is especially noted for how he brought an end to the civil wars that had ravaged the empire for many years.
 3. As a result, he presided over an era of unprecedented calm, known as the *pax Romana* or Roman peace.
 4. This enabled him to bring much greater organization to the empire, a factor that would later be of help in facilitating the spread of Christianity.

- C. Because Joseph was descended from King David, he and Mary had to go to Bethlehem, the town of David's birth, to be registered.
1. Aside from being David's birthplace, Bethlehem was an obscure little town.
 2. Yet in a prophecy given seven centuries earlier through Micah, the Lord revealed that the Messiah would be born there.
 3. That prophecy said, "But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days. Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has given birth; then the rest of his brothers shall return to the people of Israel. And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God." (Mic. 5:2-4 ESV)
 4. Our passage in Luke shows us how God providentially ordered history in order to ensure that this prophecy was fulfilled.
 5. Had it not been for the decree of Caesar Augustus, Jesus would have been born in Nazareth.
 6. God used something as this-worldly as a Roman tax policy to further his plan of redemption.
 7. He worked through the burdensome inconvenience that that policy imposed on Joseph and Mary to advance his kingdom purposes.

III. A Lowly Birth

- A. The next thing that we see in our passage is the lowly circumstances of Jesus' birth.
1. These lowly circumstances are first seen in the ordinariness of Jesus' birth.

2. It was really no different than other births.
 3. Luke gives no indication that this was the easiest labor and delivery that any mother ever experienced.
 4. Luke doesn't tell us that the baby Jesus didn't utter any cries after he was born.
 5. Luke doesn't even tell us that this child was exceptionally cute.
 6. If you or I had been there, we would not have looked upon the baby Jesus with a special sense of wonder or awe.
 7. He wasn't born with a halo over his head.
 8. He didn't radiate some kind of heavenly glow.
 9. He looked just like any other baby.
 10. His entrance into the world was marked by the same ordinariness that would characterize his entire life.
 11. As Isaiah had foretold, "he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him." (Isa. 53:2)
- B. The lowliness of Jesus' birth was also evident in its physical setting.
1. The eternal Son of God, the King of kings, was born in a stable in an obscure little village.
 2. And upon his birth, he was placed in feeding trough for animals.
 3. Imagine the smells of that place.
 4. Imagine how unsterile an environment it would be for giving birth.
 5. Yet this was all that was available to Jesus' parents.

6. In spite of Mary's condition, no one in Bethlehem was willing to provide them with a place to stay.
7. No one in any of the rooms let out to travelers was willing to give up their place for this woman who was about to go into labor.
8. What cold indifference on the part of those people!
9. What a humiliating experience for Mary!
10. This is how our Savior entered the world.
11. How right the apostle Paul was when he wrote: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich." (2 Cor. 8:9)
12. While temporary lodging was refused to the infant Jesus on that night in Bethlehem, he was born in that stable in order that we might have a permanent home in God's glorious kingdom.

IV. A Remote Announcement

- A. The next thing that we see in this passage is that Jesus' birth was announced in a remote place.
 1. Of course, the news that was announced was glorious.
 2. This was evidenced by the fact that the announcement was made by the angel of the Lord and was accompanied by the radiating brilliance of God's glory.
 3. Yet the recipients of the message were anything but glorious.
 4. The angel appeared to shepherds tending their flocks in the fields near Bethlehem.
 5. Shepherds were not well-respected in first century Israel.

6. They lived out in fields with their flocks, which meant that they could not keep the ceremonial law.
 7. They also moved about from place to place, and people generally looked upon them as untrustworthy.
 8. These are not the people that we would expect to be the first to receive the news of the birth of the Messiah.
 9. This is another aspect of how Jesus “made himself nothing” when he took on our flesh and blood. (see Phil. 2:7)
 10. Even though his birth was announced in a glorious manner, the announcement was made out in the middle of nowhere, to people who lived on the margins of society.
- B. The shepherds responded to the appearance of the angel with fear, which is typical in such encounters.
1. Yet the angel assured them that they had no reason to fear, because he was coming with good news of a great joy.
 2. He came to proclaim the gospel to them.
 3. The gospel is a message of great joy.
 4. In fact, it announces the only true and lasting joy.
 5. As John Calvin points out, the words of the angel “show us... that, until men have peace with God, and are reconciled to him through the grace of Christ, all the joy that they experience is deceitful, and of short duration.”
 6. We sing about this in the hymn “Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken”, which says,

*Fading is the worldling's pleasure,
All his boasted pomp and show;
Solid joys and lasting treasure*

None but Zion's children know.

7. That solid, lasting joy that we have in Christ is greater than anything in this world.
 8. And it more than compensates for the pains, sorrows, worries, and troubles of this life.
- C. The angel conveyed this good news of great joy to the shepherds by saying, "unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."
1. The angel identified the baby who had been born that day in Bethlehem as Israel's Redeemer, as the Messiah, and as Yahweh himself.
 2. And the angel said that this child was born "unto you."
 3. He was born for the sake of those lowly shepherds.
 4. He was born to save everyone whom the Father has given to him, everyone who comes to him in faith.
 5. Jesus' birth will not do you any good unless you are able to say that he was born "unto you," born for the sake of securing your salvation.
 6. Every Christian needs to be able to join the apostle Paul in saying this of Jesus: he "loved me and gave himself for me." (Gal. 2:20)
- D. After the angel of the Lord made his announcement, a multitude of the heavenly host suddenly appeared and burst out in a song of praise to God.
1. We almost get the sense that they simply could not hold themselves back after hearing the gospel proclaimed.

2. Their song of praise teaches us that any mention of our salvation should incite us to praise God.
3. We should also note that this multitude of the heavenly host, God's heavenly army, ironically makes a pronouncement of peace upon those with whom God is pleased.
4. Who are these people with whom God is pleased?
5. It is certainly not people who have done something to make themselves pleasing to God.
6. The Bible makes it abundantly clear that apart from Christ, we are all children of wrath.
7. The only thing that any of us could ever merit from God is judgment.
8. It is only by his free grace that he makes some of us the objects of his pleasure.
9. As Paul says in Romans 5, it is only because we have been justified by faith in Christ that we have peace with God.
10. Christians are pleasing in God's sight because we belong to Jesus.

V. A Strange Visit

- A. This brings us to the last part of our passage, where we see the strange visit that took place after the angelic announcement was made.
 1. The shepherds responded to the angel's good news of great joy by going to Bethlehem to look for the sign that the angel had given them.
 2. They 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."

3. That sentence tells us that the Christian faith is about actual historical events, about things that have really happened.
 4. It also tells us that God has given his Word to announce those events and to interpret their meaning to us.
 5. Like the shepherds, we need to respond to these things by going to Jesus, by looking upon him as he is set forth in God's Word, by receiving and resting upon him in faith.
- B. The manger scene would have been a strange sight for the shepherds.
1. The circumstances in which this baby had been born stood in such sharp contrast to the angelic announcement of his birth.
 2. Nevertheless, this sign confirmed all that the angel told them.
 3. Everything was just as he had said.
- C. It also must have been strange for Mary and Joseph to have these men arrive from the fields to take a look at their baby.
1. God had made it known to them that this child was the Messiah, even though they did not yet know all that this would mean.
 2. They must have wondered why God would send lowly shepherds to be the first to lay their eyes on Jesus.
 3. Nevertheless, it was fitting for shepherds to be in this role.
 4. Their visit served as an indication of what kind of King the child would be.
 5. As we read earlier from Micah, this child "shall 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 shall be their peace." (Mic. 5:4-5a)

- D. After telling us about the shepherds' visit, Luke then relates two things that resulted from it.
1. First, the shepherds told others about what they had heard and seen, and the people marveled at this news.
 2. The shepherds would have had the opportunity spread their report.
 3. The fields outside of Bethlehem were used to pasture sheep that were used in the temple sacrifices.
 4. This means these shepherds would have regularly brought sheep to Jerusalem, where there would be crowds of people with whom they could speak.
 5. These men who were looked down upon by so many were the first to proclaim the birth of the Christ.
- E. The second thing that resulted from the shepherds' visit was that Mary treasured up these things and pondered them in her heart.
1. There are two important things for us to draw from this.
 2. First, this is a detail that only Mary herself could have known.
 3. Luke's mention of it gives us good reason to believe that Mary herself was his key source for the material that is contained in the first few chapters of his Gospel.
 4. Second, Mary's actions here set an example for us to follow.
 5. We too should fill our minds with what the Scriptures tell us about the wondrous works of God, and we too should ponder these things in our hearts.

VI. Conclusion

- A. While the inhabitants of Bethlehem refused to make room for Jesus, at least they did so in ignorance, not knowing the true identity of Mary's

child.

1. As one commentator points out, what they did in their ignorance “is done by many today in wilful indifference.” [Geldenhuys, 102]
 2. Most people know at least something about Jesus, but many simply don’t care.
 3. Their attention is consumed by other things, and there is no room for Christ.
 4. The good news of great joy is disregarded because people are busying themselves with pursuits that will eventually fade into oblivion.
- B. This calls our attention to the utter lostness of the human race.
1. In sending Jesus into the world, God has given the most wondrous gift ever given, yet people greet it with a shrug.
 2. Never lose sight of the immensity of the blessing that God has bestowed upon you by drawing you to Jesus Christ.
 3. You did not come to Christ by your own power.
 4. It was not your idea — not any more than it was the shepherds’ idea to go look for Israel’s Messiah in a manger.
 5. You came to Christ because of the Holy Spirit’s effectual call.
 6. Make sure that you give God unceasing thanks for such an indescribable gift.
- C. There is one other way we should respond as we think about the lostness of our race.
1. This should cause us to be in fervent prayer for our non-Christian neighbors, and to be looking for opportunities to speak with them

about the gospel.

2. This is not an easy thing for most of us.
3. It is intimidating, and we often feel inadequate for the task.
4. But we have to remind ourselves that our knowledge and persuasiveness are not the things that really matter here.
5. If God used lowly shepherds to spread the good news back when Jesus was born, he can certainly use you and me to do so today.
6. In fact, this is the kind of inversion that fits in so well in God's economy of salvation.