

## BIBLE BACKGROUND

Luke 2:8-20

Verses 8-12

**There were shepherds in the same area living out of doors and keeping a careful guard at night over the flock. An angel of the Lord came appeared before them and the glory of the Lord shone around them. They were utterly terrified. The angel said to them, “Do not be afraid for I want you to pay attention to the good news of great joy I am announcing, which is for all the people: today, in the town of David, a Saviour has been born for you, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign to you; you will find the baby wrapped up and lying in a manger.**

**There were shepherds**, should alert the readers to the dubious nature of these workers. Their vocation was a proscribed vocation because they worked on the Sabbath and were often thieves, stealing sheep and blaming the loss on wild animals. However, Luke is at pains to say that they were **keeping a careful guard** φυλάσσοντες φυλακὰς **at night over the flock**. God certainly chose one of the lowest group or type in the community to whom he would announce the good news but they were not necessarily the wicked but righteous and sincere worshippers of the Lord.

The sudden and frightening **appearance of the angel** is difficult to put in English. The verb ἀπέστη really means to set or set upon, in the sense that God placed the angel before the shepherds. In the night, an angel **comes upon** the shepherds, perhaps walking towards the, bringing with him, **the glory of the Lord that shone around them**, that is, lighting up the immediate area, not merely with light, but an emanation of God. This was heavenly light. We are to understand this as an theophany, a revelation of the outward glory of the Lord, often preceding a revelation.

**They were utterly terrified** was probably an understatement. In the gospels, the Lord and his angels frequently called people **to not be afraid**. When the Lord appears or acts, in the era of our Lord Jesus, it is most often to reveal his majesty and yet to comfort them with the news that he is greater than their fears for he is the one who brings God's salvation (Matt 14:27; 17:7; 28:10).

**The good news of great joy I am announcing.** The verb εὐαγγελίζομαι, often in the middle form, can have the general meaning of preach but even then it is to do with preaching the message of Christ. Literally, it means to announce good news, which is the obvious way to translate it here. The good news is the gospel, the birth of Christ right through to his ascension at the right hand of power. Its noun form is found in numerous places (Matt 4:23 et al). The verbal form is frequent, too (4:18; 7:22; 9:6 et al).

Where the gospel is proclaimed, it is good news not only because of the free gift of salvation but also because of the gift of joy, **great joy**. Christians were exhorted to praise, give thanks and rejoice because Christ has overcome the sorrows we encounter, trials and persecutions (1Thess 5:16,18; Ph 3:1; 4:4). The birth of Christ is the greatest and best news of all. It is announced by an angel and the glory of the Lord was revealed with it. It is heavenly joy, joy from God that will always last. Earthly joys end suddenly and griefs overwhelm but Christians have an abiding joy.

The good news announced is **for all the people**.

Today.

Royal birth.

A Saviour.

Born for you.

Christ the Lord.

A sign.

Verses 13,14

**Suddenly, there was with the angel a large army from heaven praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest and on the earth, peace to people with whom he is pleased.”**

This episode reminds us of Jacob near Bethel who received a vision of angels ascending and descending on a rampart (Gen 28:12,13). In his dream, God made a covenant with Jacob. The situation is quite different here but the revelation of a new covenant of grace is certainly announced. **The large army** was the host of heaven glorifying the Lord.

In our liturgy, we sing with the angels this wonderful news. In the Christmas event, God has chief place. He initiated the sequence of events beginning in Lk 1:26 through **the angel Gabriel**, the same angel mention in verse 2:9. For this gospel- reason, he is praised by angelic army. God dwells in the **highest**, not necessarily a location, but a description of his exalted, transcended and holy state (19:38). From this position, he has sovereign control of all things. However, though his glory is mentioned, it manifests itself to human beings not as a rule of law but a rule of grace and peace.

But the revelation of the good news concerns God's grace for **the earth** and its inhabitants. God receives glory but we receive peace. Other gifts of salvation are mentioned in 1:32,33 and 2:10-12. The baby is **great** and **Son of the Most High**. He too deserves the angels' praises as the Son of God from **the highest**. However, the highest one is **born for the world** and is the world's Saviour, Christ the Lord. This supreme Lord and Saviour is to be found in the world, **lying in a manger**. When peace is discussed, it must be discussed in this context of the highest one being available for the lowest.

What is this peace the Lord offers through his Son? First, peace needs to be seen in the sentence where it is used. It is not peace on earth but rather, **peace to people on earth**. It is clearly a gift from God and not peace that people themselves need to establish. Next, the last word, **well pleased** εὐδοκίας, which is the literal translation, could be rendered, of good will. It is a genitive form, but the literal translation fits the gift-nature of the sentence. God is granting the gift of peace in Christ to people on earth because of his pleasure and kindness towards them. It is God's good will not the good will of the people that produces this gift. The literal translation would be: **and upon the earth peace to men of his good pleasure**. Some consider that God's good will is for people who have pleased him but the context does not support this. **Of whom he is pleased** seems to point to a subset of people but the contrast is between heaven and earth, God and people. Though completely undeserved, God's pleasure is in all mankind.

This exegesis fits with Simeon's parting words after he had seen God's salvation (2:29) and the frequent blessing Jesus used to indicate to the seeker of healing his gracious affirmative response to a request: **go in peace** (7:50; 8:48). At the entry into Jerusalem, the people glorify God in the highest and speak of **peace in heaven** (19:38). Peace has a heavenly origin. It cannot simply refer to a cessation of war, though this could be included in God's gift. But being favoured by him with peace (**on whom his favour rests**, is a good translation) means being granted a divine peace. God establishes a relationship of peace with people because he reconciles them to himself, as Paul explains in Rom 5:1-3, 10. All people exist in an enemy state of mind and behaviour towards God but through the gift of the Son in a manger, God breaks down the barrier of sin and rejection and brings his redemption. Peace is the product of this salvation (Jn 14:27; 20:19). The Pax Romana was an enforced peace based on military power and the ability to conquer and suppress. God's peace is based on a new relationship of redemption God establishes through his Son. It is a peace beyond human understanding (Phl 4:7) because it involves a total cleansing of sin and the imputation of an absolute righteousness in Christ. This deeper peace that resides in the mind and heart of the believer is the beginning of a peace that

finds its completion in a full acceptance into the visible presence of God in his everlasting kingdom.

Verses 15,16

**When the angels departed from then and went into heaven the shepherds began to discuss with each other: “Let’s go to Bethlehem so that we can see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has revealed to us.” They left in a hurry and located Mary and Joseph and the baby lying in the manger.**

Naturally, the shepherds wanted to corroborate the revelation for they had been given a **sign** that they would find the **baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger** (12). More than this, they wanted to look at the new king promised to them, who was called the **Saviour, Christ, and Lord** (v.11). The disparity between the baby’s exalted titles, even the divine title **Lord**, and the nature of his situation, in a rude village, in a stable, and indeed, in a **manger** τη φάτνη is reflected in the lowliness of the shepherds and the privilege bestowed on them. God chose the poor and morally dubious shepherds to be the first witnesses of the birth just as he chose a poor mother and her poor husband. All of these participants had nothing to offer God or present to the new born Saviour and Lord.

Verses 17-19

**Once they had seen everything they explained the announcement spoken to them concerning this child. All those listening were amazed at what the shepherds had to tell them. But Mary treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart.**

The shepherds were good eye witnesses. They explained carefully the appearance of the angels when they were in the paddocks and especially focused on **the announcement spoken to them concerning this child**. Without the word of God we simply have brute facts. The meaning has to be explained and more importantly, the gospel of the Lord and his promises need to be revealed in the events. The baby is no ordinary baby. He is God’s **good news of great joy for all the people** (1.10). The shepherds begin to ensure this news gets out. What we call the gospel is not a book called the gospel but happy news or a good report and the highest and most exciting news of all history is the birth of the baby Christ who is God’s gift for all people. There is no restriction because the baby arrives in the world out of God’s grace and is not dependent of status, religion, accomplishments etc. The baby is the Saviour from sin, death and the power of the devil. Our lives have descended into meaningless materialism but the Lord Jesus can restore our purpose and fulfillment by bringing the profoundest experience of them all, the experience of God. The people, which must have included the people in the village and the people where they were staying, **were amazed** εθαύμασαν. **Amazement** and **great joy** is what people need today.

Mary is the quieter one and Luke picks up with great sensitivity her motherly contemplation of the great things spoken about her child. Her response, like the shepherds is faith and joy but her mind goes forward to what is ahead and the baby’s destiny and task in the world, whereas the shepherds are concerned about getting the present news broadcasted. Mary **treasured and kept** συνετήρει the statements about the baby, not only in her memory but in her heart, that is, she believed with her whole being and began to **ponder them**, συμβάλλουσα literally tossing them about as she began to envision what they would mean.

Verse 20

**The shepherds returned glorifying and praising God for all the things they heard and saw, which were just as they had been told.**

The shepherds returned to their sheep and the paddocks but their lives were utterly changed. They were filled with joy, **glorifying and praising God**. This is a special feature of Luke for Elizabeth, Mary, Zachariah and the shepherds all praise the Lord. The goal of life is the praise of God (Ephesians 1: 6, 14). This new found joy arose from real events that could be observed and perceived by the senses, what they **heard and saw**. The gospel is a real meeting with God in Christ that promises to us salvation as a free gift. When this takes place, we realize that God is real and that his word is the truth. The shepherds discovered in Bethlehem exactly what an angel

had told them they would find. This confirmed the word but their belief was not merely an acceptance of the veracity of the angel's news. When they found things just the way the angel describes they put their trust in the pronouncement, that this baby was the Son of God who would bring spiritual deliverance for all.