

God's Surprises in the Christmas Story

December 21, 2008 - Luke 2:1-20

We have just about made it through the Christmas season. It comes with blessings and stress. The reason for the season is the Christmas story from the Bible. But how well do we know that Christmas story? I'm going to give you a little quiz to test your knowledge. Kids, you might want to take on your parents to see if you know the Christmas story better than they. You can follow along on the insert in your bulletins. I will make a statement about the Christmas story. Each statement is either: True, False or We don't know.

According to the Bible:

- #1 Joseph led Mary on a donkey to Bethlehem.
 - _____ True _____ False _____ We don't know.
- #2 Jesus was born in a stable.
 - _____ True _____ False _____ We don't know.
- #3 The angel chorus sang "Glory to God in the Highest."
 - _____ True _____ False _____ We don't know.
- #4 The angel host declared "Peace on Earth, good will to men."
 - _____ True _____ False _____ We don't know.
- #5 The shepherds met the wisemen at the manger and together they worshipped Jesus.
 - _____ True _____ False _____ We don't know.

Now let's read from the Bible to see if we can discover the right answers.

Luke 2:1-20 (ESV)

The Birth of Jesus Christ

2:1 In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. **2** This was the first registration when [\[1\]](#) 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, [\[2\]](#) 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.

The Shepherds and the Angels

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 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!" [\[3\]](#)

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.

Now let’s see how you did on the Christmas story quiz:

Footnotes

[1] **2:2** Or *This was the registration before*

[2] **2:5** That is, one legally pledged to be married

[3] **2:14** Some manuscripts *peace, good will among men*

- #1 Did Joseph led Mary on a donkey to Bethlehem.
 - **We don’t know.** All we’re told is Joseph went up with Mary
- #2 Was Jesus was born in a stable.
 - **We don’t know.** All we’re told is he was laid in a manger which could have been in a variety of places.
- #3 The angel chorus sang “Glory to God in the Highest.”
 - **False – They didn’t sing it. They said it.** According to verse 13.
- #4 The angel host declared “Peace on Earth, good will to men.”
 - **True** – if you’re reading from the King James Version; **False** if you’re reading from other English versions of the Bible.
- #5 The shepherds met the wisemen at the manger and together they worshipped Jesus.

- **False** – The wisemen weren’t at the manger. Matthew 2 tells us after Jesus was born, wisemen came to inquire in Jerusalem.

So there may have been some surprises here when we compare our knowledge of the Christmas story with the Bible. But much more important are the surprises God inserts into this story. Today, I want to lay out for you several surprising ways in which God advances His salvation plan. If God saves in surprising ways, what might that mean for you and me? Yes, the Lord is dependable and reliable. But if He is a surprising God using surprising ways to save, we need to be ready for His surprising calls on our lives.

So the central truth I am going to attempt to prove to you today is this: **God saves in surprising ways, so we must be ready for His surprising calls.** All this comes from our Advent series on Christmas through Mary’s eyes in the Gospel of Luke. Remember we started with the angel Gabriel’s announcement to Mary? We learned that God uses His extraordinary resources combined with ordinary resources to accomplish His salvation purposes. Then we looked at Mary’s song after her journey to visit her relative Elizabeth. There we discovered

God opposes the proud but lifts up and uses the humble for His purposes.

Now we examine this famous text to see the surprising ways God saves. When I use the term saves, I mean God advances His salvation purposes. God uses surprising places, people and situations to advance His salvation purposes. What is God's salvation purpose; To reconcile man you and me with Himself. Why is there any need for reconciliation? Because we have all sinned and fall short of giving God glory all the time. Sin is a grievous offense against the holiness of God worthy of His wrath. But God demonstrated His love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. I hope you will see the great surprising lengths God went to in this Christmas account to advance His salvation plan for sinners. Then we will consider how we might respond to His surprising saving ways.

God saves in surprising ways!

Surprise #1 - God used the Roman Emperor to get Mary and Joseph to the surprising "city of David." (2:1-5)

Verse 1 tells us a "decree went out from Caesar Augustus." He was born Gaius Octavius. He followed one of Rome's most famous

rulers, Julius Caesar. Julius was murdered in 44 B.C. Rome was constantly torn apart by power struggles and civil strife prior to this murder. The assassination sparked further turmoil. So in 43 BC, the Roman Senate gave three rulers control over the Roman world. Mark Anthony, Lepidus and Gaius Octavius. Through a series of power struggles, Gaius Octavius took hold of power. He defeated Antony in a military battle in 31 BC. Then in 29 BC, the Roman senate declared Gaius Rome's first emperor. In 27 BC they honored him with the title "Augustus" – exalted one, worthy of worship. Under his rule, Rome dominated the entire Mediterranean region. This ushered in a period of great prosperity and relative peace throughout that world.

Augustus' name was worshipped throughout the empire. In Rome, they built an altar to Pax Augusta or Augustan peace. The Greek cities in Asia decided to rearrange their calendar to begin on the date of Augustan's birthday. They saw Augustus as the savior who brought an end to all war. His birth would mark the beginning of a good news message for the world. He ruled a relatively peaceful empire from 27 B.C. until his death in the year 14 BC.

Now there is no record of a worldwide census taken during the time of Jesus' birth. But Augustus reorganized the administration of the empire. There are records of censuses held in different places at different times. Luke's words may communicate that a census took place in Palestine as part of this coordinated empire wide-policy of Augustus. Remember, Luke was a careful investigator. So he wanted to set this account in history. But in mentioning Augustus' name, he reminds us that even this great emperor was used by God to accomplish His sovereign purposes.

Luke continues to place this account into history by referencing somebody named Quirinius. Now we know that Quirinius oversaw a very unpopular census in the year 6. But that's too late for Jesus' birth. It could be the Quirinius was governor twice. In fact, they have found a stone fragment near Rome that honor's an official who twice governed Syria and Phoenicia during Augustus reign. The official's name is not on the fragment. But his accomplishments fit Quirinius. Or the other possibility is a translation alternative listed as a footnote to the ESV text in verse 2. This was the registration that took place before Quirinius was governor of Syria. Luke ensures his readers

know this was not the unpopular census in the year 6. This was the other one that came before that.

Verse 3 tells us "All went to be registered, each to his own town." Now why would they have to go to their home town to register? Can you imagine if everyone here had to go to their home town to register? How many native St. Albertans do we have with us today? Hands up – you were born in the Sturgeon Hospital and raised here? Talk about huge travel issues if we all had to go to our birth place to register. Why couldn't they stay where they were living? That's how we do censuses today.

Normally, that was the pattern. It could be that returning to your ancestral city was a distinctive Jewish twist. Those with links to ancestral lands in Judea may have seen those links legally forfeited if they had not gone home for the census. It's like your family has some land somewhere. You don't live on it. But the government decides to do a land assessment. If you don't show up at the designated spot to meet the officers, the government will grab the land. That's sometimes how dictators grew rich.

Well all these factors combine to get Joseph moving out of Nazareth. But why did he take Mary? Nazareth to Bethlehem involved a difficult 80 mile or 130 kilometer journey. We don't know if they had a donkey. Ladies, would you like to make a 130 kilometer journey on a donkey or even on foot when you're 8 months pregnant? What could have driven them to take such a risk? It could be that the gossip and slander against Mary was so bad in Nazareth that they both thought it best to get away. We also know that in Syria and later in Judea, women twelve and older were subject to a poll tax. So her personal appearance for the census might have been required.

But the real surprise in this first section comes in Luke's label for Bethlehem. Verse 4 - "Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, *to the city of David which is called Jerusalem!* Right? No. Bethlehem. Bethlehem is never called the city of David in the Old Testament. That title is reserved for Jerusalem. Bethlehem is the city of David's origin not the city of David's palace. Yet the prophet Micah prophesied that Bethlehem would bring forward the deliverer. God chose this surprising place to bring forth His Son as a baby.

Surprise #2 - Instead of an altar in Rome, God used a surprising cradle as a sign of the savior's arrival. (2:6-7)

We talked about Augustus and the altar built in Rome to commemorate the peace He brought. Well the Prince of Peace was about to be born in Bethlehem. Surely God could top anything the Romans came up with. But verses 6 and 7 reveal the circumstances of Jesus' birth in the barest terms. We've just had a baby born in the church this past week. What do ladies especially want to know? How did it go? What's the story? Did you take pain meds? What is his weight? All we get here is the days were accomplished for her to deliver. So she gave birth to her firstborn son. No weight, height or birthing narrative. She wrapped him in cloths, laid him in a manger because there was no room in the inn.

Why did Luke present it in such bare terms? Maybe he wanted us to focus on two key factors. **One** – Jesus was born. All the details surrounding that were secondary compared to his arrival. **Two**, she laid him in a manger. The word manger is found three times in this passage. It is critical. Now apparently every lower class Mom wrapped her baby in swaddling clothes. That was not unusual. But it

was unusual to lay your baby in a manger. This is where we get the idea Jesus had to be born in a stable or barn.

That's certainly possible. But mangers were often outdoors. So Jesus could have been born in the open air. There's a strong tradition Jesus was born in a cave. Or it could be he was born in a poor family's home where the animals lived under the same roof as the people. Since there was no room to lay him in the people section, they had to lay him in the animal's feeding trough. Yet that manger served as *the sign* identifying the savior. It was likely other kids were born in Bethlehem that night and wrapped in swaddling clothes. But you'd only find one laying in a manger. So there would be no altar or great pillar serving to commemorate this baby's arrival. His sign was a manger.

Surprise #3 - Instead of the good news of Augustus the savior, God sent an angel army to announce the good news of the eternal savior.
(2:8-14)

Now remember we talked earlier about Augustus and the peace on earth he brought to the world. People marked his birth as the beginning of the peace era. They spread "euangelion," of peace on

earth by Augustus. Euangelion – is where we get our word Gospel or good news. We also get evangelism and evangelical; the people of the good news. So people commemorated Augustus' birth with a gospel message of the peace brought by the savior Augustus.

Now to this text: An angel appears to shepherds, who we'll get to in a minute. The place lights up so that light bathes these shepherds. They're terrified. So the angel reassures them. "Fear not." Then look at what he says in verse 10 – "I bring you good news (euangellia) of a great joy that will be for all people." That sounds a lot like the emperor. "For unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." Savior? That sounds a lot like the emperor too.

The emperor brought peace from military conflict in the empire. It probably benefited the shepherds in some way. Yet he was still pretty distant in Rome. So notice who the angel points out the savior was born for. "Unto you, shepherds, a savior is born." I'm not just here to announce the birth of an emperor who will provide political stability so you can live your lives. I am here to announce a

savior born to you; someone who has come to personally save you, shepherd. You, people sitting in this room right now.

Then an angel army appears. The term ‘Host’ was a military term used to describe an army. What does this army say? Glory to God in the Highest and on earth peace. Good news; A savior; Born; to bring peace.

But this savior provides some very different peace than the peace Augustus provided. The second half of verse 14 states – On Earth peace among those with whom he is pleased.” So this is where the “peace on earth, good will to men” controversy comes in. The King James Version has this translation. It was based on later Greek manuscripts of the New Testament. These later manuscripts did have “Peace on earth, good will to men.” You will see this on Christmas cards and perhaps in store windows or on your tree ornaments. People can interpret the message to mean Jesus came to bring a peace on earth between the brotherhood of man and wish all men good will or blessing. It seems like a message of universal peace and good will. What could be better for the Christmas season than that?

But earlier manuscripts which are closer to the original that Luke wrote have what the English Standard Version tries to represent. “On earth peace among those with whom He (God) is pleased.” “Peace on Earth, good will to men” puts the focus on man. But this version puts the focus on God. It points to peace between God and man. The angels say God will bring peace for men and women on whom His favor rests. Who does God favor? Those people who receive His Gospel. God’s peace is not a reward for those who have good will but a gift to those who are objects of His good will. This is a heavenly declaration of God’s saving plan.

So the angels do not simply announce a rival to Caesar Augustus and the good news of the peace he brought to earth. The angels declare the arrival of One who brings peace between God and people on Earth.

God advances His salvation purposes in surprising ways. He uses the Emperor to move Joseph and Mary to the surprising city of David, Bethlehem. He uses an ordinary manger as the sign of the deliverer’s arrival. He uses angels to announce a savior bringing a much deeper peace than the absence of military conflict.

Surprise #4 - Instead of royal heralds, God spread the good news through despised shepherds. (2:15-18)

Remember we talked about Luke's focus on God's concern for the outcasts and unimportant like women, children, poor and the despised? Well people despised shepherds. Their work often kept them from observing ceremonial law. They had to deal with dirty sheep. They had to touch dead bodies of sheep and lambs. They were often out in the fields keeping watch so they couldn't get to the temple. They had a nasty habit of stealing especially from travelers. They were considered so unreliable that they were not allowed to give testimony in law courts.

Yet, God sends his angels to them! These shepherds must have been pretty devoted to God. They understood the message and they knew who spoke to them. So when the angel army finished their declaration, the shepherds say, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened that the Lord has revealed to us." Somehow they knew "city of David" meant Bethlehem, not Jerusalem. They placed great value on this message from God. The angel gave them

one sign to authenticate his message. "You'll find the baby lying in a manger."

So they hurry to Bethlehem. They discover Mary, Joseph and the baby in a manger. Nothing further was required for these shepherds to convince them that the angel spoke truth. Notice in verse 17 – it doesn't say when they saw him- when they saw it (the manger). They didn't expect baby Jesus to have a halo. We have no record that they asked Mary and Joseph for ID or if they had had any dreams. They see the baby in the manger and declare all they heard from the angels.

So God entrusts the announcement of this birth to the shepherds; not royal heralds; not through some official channels. Perhaps He chose them because they already lived a low class life. So when they found a baby in a manger and a poor young girl as its mother, it didn't throw them. They didn't doubt when they saw the child in such humble circumstances. They had that child like trusting faith that Jesus so often talked about.

God should have used more official channels. Yet the surprising shepherd's announcement is known throughout much of the world today.

Finally, *Surprise #5 - Instead of royally commissioned scribes or scrolls, God inscribed the events on a young girl's heart.* (2:19-20) Julius Caesar preserved his military conquests in a memoir. Caesar Augustus' journal talked about his administration. Surely God would commission some royal scribes to preserve these details for us.

But look at verse 19. "But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart." But – instead of announcing like the shepherds did, she treasured all these things. Treasure means to "preserve, keep safe or keep close." She retained them. She thought about them. She diligently contemplated the works of God in bringing all this together. Could Luke be revealing his source to us in this verse? We don't know but after all the surprises that God has pulled already. Wouldn't it be like him to get this message through the inner thoughts of a young girl rather than the official scrolls of some royal scribe?

God saves in surprising ways. God advances His salvation purposes through people, places and events that man would not think of. How might we respond to this reality? Simply, we must be ready for His surprising call.

If you're not a Christian here today, you might have come today expecting nothing. Maybe you came for the dedications or because someone invited you or because its the last Sunday before Christmas. For unto you is born this day a Savior who is Christ the Lord. The Lord God has sent and delivered a real savior into history. The Lord provided all that was needed to get this message out despite the obscurity of Jesus' birth. The message has endured for 2000 years to this day and this moment when you are sitting her. Now you're faced with a surprising call from God. Will you receive that Savior? Will you receive the ultimate savior who came to bring peace on Earth in your life?

Maybe you are like a first century Roman or Greek who put their faith in a human emperor who brought peace on Earth and supposedly saved the world. But Caesar Augustus died. Maybe you too have trusted things of this world as your savior or hope. But the

economy has tanked. Your investments have plummeted. Or that which you put your faith in has crumbled. Will you now consider the ultimate Savior who came to bring peace on Earth; peace with God into your life?

For those of us who are Christians, this account reminds us of our need to walk closely with the Lord so we are ready for His surprising calls to join Him in His salvation work. The shepherds watched their flocks at night. That was a very ordinary activity. Suddenly, God calls them to go and confirm His message and announce the good news. You never know *when* God might call you. You never know *where* He might call on you. So we Christians are called to cultivate that walk with God so that we are sensitized to His call whenever it may come.

I pray that God uses this time together today to remove any notion we have that the Christmas is old news to us. It's full of surprise and wonder. May God open our eyes to see His call upon our lives through Christmas and into 2009.