

Shepherds, Angels and Saints

Luke 2: 8-38

In the second chapter of his gospel, Luke presents many witnesses to the birth of the Messiah: Shepherds, angels, and saints (Simeon and Anna).

The Shepherds

The narrative begins with shepherds tending the flocks in the open fields and keeping watch over them in the nighttime.

In v9, an angel of the Lord suddenly appears, and the shepherds are terribly frightened, as the glory of the Lord shone all around them. The heavenly messenger announces, ***“Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.”***

What an announcement! The long waiting period for the arrival of Messiah was over. What a joyous privilege it must have been for that angel that day to announce the most notable birth in history –the incarnation of Lord of glory! How great is the mystery of godliness— God manifest in the flesh.

John Milton, the English poet, described it like this:

*“That glorious Form, that light insufferable
He laid aside: and here with us to be,
Forsook the courts of everlasting day,
And chose with us darkness house of mortal clay.”*

The angel tells them, this will be sign to you: ***You will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying-in manger.***

Then all at once a host of angels appeared with the angel, praising God, and saying, "***Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom His favour rests.***

How amazed this rejoicing angels must have been when they saw the Creator born as a creature! The Word coming as a speechless babe. Such a great host of angels accompanied the Lord at his first coming and a great host will accompany Him at His second coming.

When the great company of holy angels returned to heaven, the shepherds hurried to Bethlehem to find the holy child. They had believed the message and hastened not to act upon it. As soon as they found Mary, Joseph, and the baby, they shared the good news that had been told them concerning the child. To the great amazement of all!

Verse 19 tells us, that as Mary pondered all these things in her heart, ***the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.***

The shepherds had had an amazing evening, one that forever changed their lives. When we meet Jesus, we are never the same again. Have you met Him? Our lives are marked by a newfound attitude of praise and worship when we come to meet Jesus Christ the Lord for the very first time.

With shepherds we witness that—the Light of the world was born in the night (v8). How fitting since the whole world is in a state of darkness. Naturally and spiritually the world is wrapped in morbid, helpless darkness.

The Lord chose poor, lowly shepherds, living out in the fields to receive the glorious message of the incarnation of the Son of God. You know, we are told, that for some strange reason, shepherds were not permitted to testify in the court, but God used humble shepherds to be His first witnesses that prophecy had been fulfilled and the Messiah had been born.

God's angel was not sent to members of Caesar's household; not to proud Pharisees; not even to the priests, but to simple, humble, hard-working shepherds, who were near the bottom of the social ladder.

God is looking out for the poor and lowly. 1 Cor .1:27-28, ***But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before Him.***

You know, as I think of the glory of the Lord in this story, I am reminded that the whole purpose of the plan of salvation is the "glory of the Lord." God's glory had dwelt in the tabernacle and in the temple but had departed because of the nation's sin. Now God's glory, for the very first time in centuries, was returning to earth in the person of His Son.

On that silent night, lowly manger became a "holy of holies" because Jesus was there. In the stall is where lambs are born, and so it was, that the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world was born in a stall.

The narrative moves on, and in vv. 21-24 we are presented with three OT laws. The law of circumcision, the law of purification after childbirth, the law of the first born.

Law of circumcision for males

The Mosaic Law required that all newly born males to be circumcised on the 8th day after birth and it was customary to give them a name on that day. Verse 21 tells us they named the baby JESUS on the day of His circumcision. The name given by an angel, prior to Mary's conception. ***You shall call him Jesus, because he will save His people from their sins*** (Matt.1:21).

Jesus means "Jehovah saves." Jesus is the Saviour of the world, who has come to seek and save the lost. All humanity is made up of sinners who lost and need a Saviour. No one, who does not affirm His full deity and equality to Jehovah of the

OT can be saved. He warned the Jews, ***“Unless you believe that I am [God], you will die in your sins”***(John 8:24).

You know, his circumcision was His first suffering for us. It symbolized the work the Saviour did on the cross in dealing with our sin nature. The cutting away of the flesh. Circumcision was a sign and seal that Jesus was part of the covenant God with Abraham. And He would be the one to fulfill that covenant. I believe the circumcision was done at home, for Mary was unclean and could go to the temple yet.

Law of purification after childbirth

According to the Law of Moses found in Lev. 12:4, Mary was considered unclean for forty days, for childbearing. Mary was ceremonially unclean for 7 days, just as she was unclean during her monthly period. On the 8th day Jesus was to be circumcised and then Mary would have to wait another 33 days to be purified from her bleeding. She must not touch anything sacred or go to the temple until the days of her purification were over. For the birth of a baby girl, 80 days of ceremonially uncleanness was the waiting time.

Once the days of the purification were over, Mary went to the temple, in keeping with the Law, to offer two sacrifices. One as a burnt offering and one as a sin offering. A one-year-old lamb was designated for the burnt offering and a pigeon or dove for the sin offering. For the poor and those of little means it was permissible to offer a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons. Mary's case was the latter. The priest took the two birds she brought and offered them before the Lord, making atonement for her. Having done that, she was then ceremonially clean from her flow of blood.

Law of redemption of the firstborn

Mary in the temple, presented Jesus to the Lord according to the Law of the firstborn, v23. In Exodus 13, the Israelites were instructed that every firstborn male (whether man or animal) belonged to God. He must be consecrated to God.

Firstborns were considered extra special in the OT. God had spared every firstborn male in Egypt of the households of Israel, so they belonged God. The price set to redeem (buy-back) the firstborn from God was set at of 5 silver shekels.

Jesus was both firstborn of the Heavenly Father and of Mary. We are not told Joseph and Mary paid the 5 shekels. If they did, can you imagine such a thought of the Redeemer being redeemed! Let us remember He was born under law, and the law must be kept, the 5 shekels may have been paid, but we are not certain.

Simeon

Simeon was righteous and devout. He belonged to the believing remnant of Israel. His name means “hear and obey” and that is precisely what he did all his life. He was silently waiting for the Consolation of Israel, which is prophetic term for the Messiah. Luke records that the Holy Spirit was upon him. It was revealed to Him that he would not die before seeing the Christ (v26).

Led by the Spirit Simeon went to the temple courts. On the same day Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to the temple to be dedicated, Simeon met up with them and took the baby in his arms and blessed Him. Overwhelmed with joy he praised God, and he bore witness to the fact that the child would be the Saviour for all peoples—

***²⁹ “Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace,
According to Your word;***

³⁰ For my eyes have seen Your salvation

³¹ Which You have prepared before the face of all peoples,

***³² A light to bring revelation to the Gentiles,
And the glory of Your people Israel.”***

From that moment on Simeon was ready to die in peace; his soul having been satisfied. Anyone who meets the Saviour Jesus in a personal way should be ready to die in peace. The soul who has a personal encounter with Jesus is satisfied with His salvation.

Simeon's waiting was rewarded; his hope was fulfilled. The saying, "***Those who wait upon the Lord shall not be ashamed***", is so true! Then Simeon stopped *praising*, blessed the parents, and started *prophesying*. And his prophecy contains three important images of what Jesus would be. The images of a) a stone, b) a sign, c) a sword.

The stone

The Messiah would be a rejected cornerstone. The nation of Israel would stumble over Him. Many would fall into judgement and perdition, but many would also fall in conviction and then rise in salvation.

The sign

A sign that would be spoken against. That means He would be a miracle. Not so much a demonstration of God's power, but rather as a revelation of divine truth. Our Lord's miracles are called "signs" because they reveal special truths about Him. Signs point to something. The sign meant, "His prophecies; His teachings" will come true.

The sword

The image of the sword was for Mary alone. It spoke of the immense suffering and sorrow she would bear as mother of the Saviour. The word sword implies not a hand dagger, but rather a large double-edged sword like the one Goliath used. The verb "pierce" suggests continual action. We know all too well, her greatest piercing would come at Calvary, at the foot of the cross.

Anna

Then next person to witness the birth of the Saviour in our story is Anna. Anna means "grace." Her story is truly one of grace. She also was part of the believing remnant waiting for the Messiah. Anna was a godly widow. It is not clear if she

was 84 years old , or was a widow for 84 years, making her well over a hundred. She became a widow after 7 years of marriage, that is evident.

She loved God with all her mind, with all heart, with all soul and with all her strength. She was a widow who decided not to remarry. She chose to make God her husband. She spent her time at the temple. It says she never left the temple. She probably lived in the temple complex, in one of the apartments in the outer court, or maybe she lived next to the temple.

Verse 37 tells she devoted herself to **“serving God by worshipping** “through fastings and prayers, day, and night. Can we find any woman like Anna today ?

God’s timing and leading is always perfect. Anna arrived just as Simeon was praising God for the child JESUS, so she joined in the song of praise. Anna’s heart leaped for joy! Anna did much more than praise and give thanks to God. She spread the good news of salvation to all who looked forward to redemption in Jerusalem (i.e., the remnant). She was a faithful prophetess, who spoke the word of God.

A basic legal principle requires that a person’s testimony to be confirmed by multiple witnesses. The Mosaic Law declared that **“a single witness shall not rise up against a man on account of any iniquity or a sin which he has committed; on the evidence of two or three witnesses a matter shall be confirmed** “(Deut 19:15).

In his gospel, Luke testified that Jesus Christ was born Son of God; that he was Israel’s long-awaited Messiah, conceived in a virgin through the power of the Holy Spirit; that He was God in human flesh, the Redeemer, who will save his people from their sins.

Such an amazing, extraordinary claim came with verification, as Luke presented the testimony of several witnesses to confirm it. Today we looked specifically at three of those witnesses—the shepherds, Simeon, and Anna. And with each confirmation of their Son’s identity, Joseph and Mary’s astonishment grew.

