

December 24, 2024
Luke 2:1-20

Christmas Eve
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

Good News for *All* People

“” I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”

Our friend Beverly lives in an apartment building in midtown Manhattan that houses many people who work in the arts, including actors and musicians. It is not unusual to see a person in the lobby or to share an elevator with someone who has been on a popular television show or performed in a concert that you might have attended. A sign of the unique nature of the building can be seen in the notices that are posted on the bulletin boards in the building; in addition to announcement for tenants from building management, there are often postings for auditions to various upcoming concerts, plays, and other opportunities in the city. On one visit, I noticed an announcement that caught my attention: “Extras Wanted.” I was not sure what this meant, so when we arrived in Beverly’s apartment, I asked her what was meant by an “extra.” She shared with us that an extra is a person who is a background character in a play, movie, or television show. Extras are the people in the background in a restaurant scene, or people who populate the street during an outdoor scene involving the lead actors, or who are in the audience in a scene in which the lead actors are performing on stage. Extras do not receive any credit for their work, and the pay for work as an extra is often low, but for artists who are starting out in their careers or who are looking for work to pay the bills working as an extra is a way to be involved in show business that will hopefully one day lead to more substantial roles that will bring both screen credit and better pay.

Ever since that day, I have found myself noticing the “extras” in both television shows and movies, and I have wondered about their lives and how they are hoping that this background work will one day lead to more prominent roles. While a scene would not be complete without their presence, they are often unnoticed as we tend to focus on the more prominent actors, especially if they are well-known personalities. While it may be true that there are no small roles, those who work as extras are hoping for one day to receive credit for their work and recognition for their talents that they are seeking to use to further their careers.

I found myself thinking of these extras in modern performances as I began to look at today’s Gospel lesson, Luke’s account of the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ in the

manger in Bethlehem. It is the most beloved of all of the stories of the birth of our Saviour, the story that we cherish as we come together on this holy night to sing our praises for the fulfillment of the promise of God spoken through the prophet Isaiah that *“a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”* (Isaiah 9:6). It is the story that gives us the characters that populate our nativity scenes both at home and in our sanctuary; these include both Mary and Joseph, the angels and shepherds, animals that were in the stable on that holy night, and of course the child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger. It is a story that features characters that play a major role in the fulfillment of God’s promise that from Bethlehem *“shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from old, from ancient days ... And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God”* (Micah 5:2-4). We heed the call of the beloved Christmas carol to *“come, ye faithful ... come and adore him born the king of angels!”*

Luke’s account of the birth of Jesus begins with two figures that are never found in any nativity scene: *“In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria.”* (Luke 2:1-2). While it may seem strange that the first person Luke mentions in his nativity narrative are the Roman emperor and a regional governor working on behalf of the Empire, they play an important role as Luke relates the gospel story to significant events and rulers of the time. In addition to his role as absolute monarch over the conquered people of Israel, Caesar Augustus was also widely acclaimed by his followers as a “bringer of peace.” By relating Jesus’ birth and the angelic announcement of *“peace on earth”* (2:14) to Augustus’ decree, Luke is able to subtly proclaim that the true bringer of peace is not the Roman emperor but Jesus the Saviour. *“The Saviour of all people was born under the reign of Caesar Augustus, whose peace paled before that announced by the angels.”* (Alan Culpepper). The context of Jesus’ birth serves as commentary on his future role: the Messiah born under Roman oppression would overthrow the powerful and raise up the oppressed, fulfilling the words his mother Mary sang in her magnificent *Magnificat* that rejoiced in the Lord who *“has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly”* (1:52). Luke also mentions Caesar Augustus at the beginning of his birth narrative because in his decree the emperor becomes an unwitting accomplice to the fulfillment of God’s Will as his order resulted in Mary and Joseph traveling to Bethlehem so that the Christ Child might be born in the city of David:

- “Beyond any argument as to Luke’s historical sources is his basic conviction that emperors, governments, and laws serve the purpose of God, often without knowing it. Caesar Augustus is more than a date for the story: he is an instrument of God’s Will.” – Fred Craddock.

Luke now turns our attention to the heart of the story: the arrival of Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem and the birth of Mary’s firstborn son. The Evangelist describes the birth itself with surprising brevity: *“When they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.”* Wrapping a child in bands of cloth (“swaddling clothes”) was a common practice that demonstrated maternal love and kept the child’s limbs straight (*“I was nursed with care in swaddling cloths.”* – Wisdom of Solomon 7:4). The manger in which the child was laid was probably a feeding trough; the “inn” may refer to a place where caravanners and pilgrims could spend the night, a guest room in a house, or to the sleeping area of a single-room Palestinian peasant home. Since there were no such accommodations available in city teeming with others who were there for the Roman census, the child was born in a stable and placed in a feeding trough, an unlikely place to find a newborn child that would soon become a sign for others of the fulfillment of God’s promises through the birth of the child of Mary.

In the next scene, our attention is shifted from the place of Jesus’ birth to fields on the outskirts of Bethlehem where we are introduced to *“shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night”* (2:8). Shepherding was a despised occupation at the time, far different than the positive image in which shepherds are often depicted in our modern world. In the first century, shepherds were often scorned as being shiftless, dishonest people who grazed their flocks on other people’s lands and who would abandon their flocks at the first sign of trouble from predators. Jesus refers to such shepherds when he identifies himself in the Fourth Gospel as the “good shepherd,” as opposed to *“the hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away – and the wolf snatches them and scatters them”* (John 10:12).

- “By the time of Jesus, shepherding had become a profession most likely to be filled from the bottom rung of the social ladder, by persons who could not find what was regarded as decent work. Society stereotyped shepherds as liars, degenerates, and thieves. The testimony of shepherds was not admissible in court, and many towns had ordinances barring shepherds from their city limits ... The Pharisees classified shepherds with tax collectors and prostitutes, persons who were ‘sinners’ by virtue of their vocation.” – Craig A. Satterlee.

It is to these lowly shepherds – not to kings or emperors, the wealthy or prominent people in society – that the angel appears with the good news of the birth of the Messiah: *“Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified”* (2:9). The appearance of angels in Scripture is often accompanied by terror; earlier in this Gospel, Luke reports that *“when Zechariah saw [Gabriel], he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him.”* (1:12). As Gabriel called upon Zechariah to not be afraid at the sight of an angel, so also does the angel begin its announcement with the words *“do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people”* (2:10). The angelic message is meant to be a word of good news, a sign of God’s abundant grace for all Israel and all God’s people – including these lowly shepherds who will be the first to hear the good news that *“to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord”* (2:11). The declaration of the angel emphasizes the fulfillment of Israel’s messianic expectations “today” in the announcement that the long awaited child has been born, fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah that *“a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”* (Isaiah 9:6). The titles all define Jesus’ role: he is a “saviour” (*“But when the Israelites cried out to the LORD, the LORD raised up a deliverer for the Israelites, who delivered them.”* – Judges 3:9), he is “Christ the Lord,” the one born in the city of David to fulfill God’s promise that David’s ancestors would reign over Israel forever (*“He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.”* – 2 Samuel 7:13). The angelic announcement of the birth of the Messiah is accompanied by the sign through which the shepherds will know how to find this child: *“This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.”* (2:12). The unusual place where Mary laid her child will become the sign through which these shepherds will find the fulfillment of the promise of the angel of the child who has been born to them as their Saviour, Christ the Lord.

Before the shepherds can respond to this announcement, a great army of angels appears in the heavens: *“And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!’”* (2:13-14). From the heavenly host a song rises in praise of God, angelic voices that will be heard later in the New Testament in the voices that sing to the Lamb of God that *“you are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation; you have made them a kingdom and priests serving our God, and they will reign on earth”* (Revelation 5:9-10). Praise for peace is directed not to Caesar Augustus but

to God, the source of a peace that no human being can offer (*“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”* – John 14:27).

- “It was customary in the Roman Empire for poets and orators to declare peace and prosperity at the birth of one who was to become emperor. In that familiar pattern, but from heaven, comes the good news of joy and peace occasioned by the birth, not of an emperor, but of him called Saviour, Christ, and Lord. The prophesy of Isaiah is fulfilled as ‘the poor have good news preached to them.’” – Craddock.

As suddenly as the angels appeared before the shepherds, they *“had left them and gone into heaven”* (2:15); but even though the shepherds were back in their previous darkness, their lives were forever transformed so that they would never again live in the darkness of the disrespect that others cast upon them. Even though the angel never instructed them to search for the sign of the child lying in the manger, the shepherds know that they must *“go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.”* They leave their fields with haste, leaving behind their former occupation as the first disciples would when Jesus calls them to become his followers (*“When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything behind and followed him.”* – 5:11). When the shepherds come upon the sign of the *“child lying in the manger”* with Mary and Joseph by his side, *“they made known what had been told them about this child”* (2:17) becoming the first persons to share the good news proclaimed to them by the angel; *“the shepherds now join the chorus of witnesses, for they have seen and heard”* (Culpepper).

So far, we have been introduced to the prominent actor in Luke’s nativity story: the Roman officials, Mary and Joseph, the angels and shepherds, and the child lying in the manger. But now Luke introduces us to the “extras” in the story, the unnamed persons who are also gathered around the manger and who also hear the good news proclaimed by the shepherds, the result being that *“all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them”* (2:18). While Mary’s response is somewhat different from the others in the stable (*“But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart”* 2:19, the mother of Jesus thinking back to the proclamation of the angel Gabriel that this child *“will be holy; he will be called Son of God”* -1:35), the others respond with joy at the message proclaimed by the shepherds, who *“returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.”* (2:20).

To the best of my knowledge, no nativity scene includes those “extras” who also hear the good news of Christmas. Their names are never mentioned, and we have no idea what became of them after that holy night. But they are not merely background figures who will be forgotten, for they are a part of the message of Christmas that the birth of Christ is “*good news of great joy for **all** the people.*” In the birth of Jesus we have the good news that on Christmas night a Saviour was born who will be a blessing for all people – not only those whose names are prominent and remembered in history, but also those whose names did not live past their years in the life, those who were often in the background, those who may have been overlooked and marginalized, those who lived in the shadows and were buried along with their names. It is the message of hope that the words of the angel – “*to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord*” – is inclusive of all persons, for in God’s eyes no one is an extra or a nameless, faceless person; all are precious in the sight of God, and Jesus is born as Messiah to all people, especially those who find themselves lost and forgotten forlorn and abandoned:

- “And you, beneath life’s crushing load, whose forms are bending low, who toil along the climbing way with painful steps and slow: look now, for glad and golden hours come swiftly on the wing; oh, rest beside the weary road and hear the angels sing!” – ELW Hymn 282.

The actors and musicians who answer those notices for extras in our friend’s building in Manhattan know that they will probably go unnoticed by those who will see the show in which they have participated; but those who are in the manger to hear the good news of the shepherds know that they are not “extras,” but persons who are holy and precious in God’s eyes. For all of us, it is the good news that no matter who we are and what our place may be in life, the message of this holy night is good news for everyone: “to you – to **us** – is born this day our Saviour, Christ the Lord!” Oh come, let all of us adore him!

Amen.