

Journey of Christmas Week 3: Journey from the Margins to the Center Luke 2:1-14
David Bawks - Pathway Community Church (December 27, 2020)

Good morning everyone! Welcome to our service today. I hope you had a meaningful and peaceful Christmas. Normally I would say something about my Christmas, but this is a little bit odd because I'm recording this on Tue, so I haven't had Christmas yet, but you're seeing this on Sunday, after Christmas, so I am looking into the future and trusting that the world is still there, that Christmas has happened and that it was good. As Christians we believe the kingdom of God is already, but not yet, so this is also something like that.

Today we are finishing our three-part series called the Journey of Christmas. We started looking at Mary, who submitted to God's message to her that she would be the mother of Jesus. Last week I explored the example of John, who was set apart from birth to have the ministry of preparing for Jesus. We saw how John demonstrated the humility to point to Jesus, even when it meant his own status and ministry became smaller and less influential.

Today we are moving from Luke chapter 1 to Luke chapter 2, the popular Christmas text that you have probably heard many times before. Let's read from verse 1 to verse 14.

2 In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. **2** (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) **3** And everyone went to their own town to register.

4 So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. **5** He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. **6** While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, **7** and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

8 And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. **9** An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. **10** But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. **11** Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. **12** This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

13 Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

14 "Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

This is such a great part of scripture, with such an incredible message. God became a human and come down to earth to live among us. Some of the prophecies from the Hebrew Scriptures are

fulfilled right here – Joseph was of the line of David and Jesus was born in Bethlehem as Micah foretold.

When something becomes very familiar, it is very hard to see it again in a fresh light. One of the challenges that I have with the Christmas story is that I am so used to it. It can be hard to look at it with fresh eyes, and a new perspective. But whether this is your first time really exploring this story or your hundredth, we can still continue to learn from the power of God incarnated with us.

My focus today is on the second part of that I read, starting in verse 8. There were shepherds out watching their flocks by night. And sometimes if we are very used to the story, we don't question it, but this is a rather strange part of the story. Why did God announce the message of the birth of Jesus to shepherds? Why didn't the angel announce it in the synagogue instead during their assembly and time of worship? Why weren't the Pharisees the ones God spoke to first? Why not the political leaders? Shepherds were lower class people, who had little power or influence, but were the first recipients of the news of the savior.

Let's think about a contemporary analogy. If you were about to launch a new business, how would you go about promoting it? You look for influencers. You look for early adopters. You look for people who are using the iPhone 12. You look for the people who have a huge social media following. Those are the people who will get you coverage and buzz. They are probably on Tik-Tok or Instagram, before maybe more on Snapchat or Twitter. You get someone famous to endorse it or use it, and let you use their name so that people believe you are legitimate and cool. You try to get on TV, and create buzz around your product or business.

Let me tell you who you don't go to. You don't go to the homeless community. You don't form a focus group of the unemployed, or those who don't have internet access at home – because they will not connect you to the people you need to reach. We are in a suburban context, but we also are not too far away from farms – and farm workers, and shepherds, generally do not have much more social power or prestige today as they did then. Giving the message to shepherds is an odd choice.

One of the parallels between Christmas 2020 and the first Christmas is that both were taking place in a census year. This year the census has become politically charged, especially around how or if undocumented people are counted, which just recently went to the Supreme Court, and may still return to the Supreme Court again. At the time of Jesus's birth, the census was also politically charged. For many of us, the census is harmless, a few minutes of filling out a form. But for others it takes on more significance. This is how Justo Gonzalez describes it in his commentary on Luke:

“A census had sinister implications. It was not just counting people in order to see how many they were, and what population trends were. In ancient times, and long thereafter, a census was in fact an inventory of all the wealth of a region—its people, its animals, and its crops—so that the government would be able to tax people to the maximum. A census usually announced greater poverty and exploitation. It was as welcome among subjects of the Roman Empire as undocumented immigrants in industrialized nations welcome a census today.” (Gonzalez, Justo L. *Luke: Belief, A Theological Commentary on the Bible* [Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible]. Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition.)

This means that the setting of the shepherds keeping their flocks by night may have been less idyllic that we sing about or imagine. Even before the angels showed up, the environment may have been marked by fear and uncertainty. They were probably focused on not drawing attention to themselves, and keeping a low profile.

Into this environment comes the host of angels telling them not to be afraid. This is standard angel operating procedure, or SAOP for short, since they just about always started by telling people not to be afraid. We saw this two weeks ago when the angel came to Mary. This time, the angels have “good news that will cause great joy for all the people.” Through Luke’s gospel, we see this phrase “the people” that means ordinary folks, regular people, as opposed to the elders, priests, and other elite of Jewish society (Gonzalez). The emphasis is that God’s good news applies to everyone, not just the top few, or even just the ethnic nation of Israel. All people.

The content of this good news is the **birth of a child**, indicated with **three titles**: “a Savior who is the Messiah, the Lord.” This is the only time when all three titles appear together in the New Testament (Gonzalez). Savior indicates both religious and political deliverance. Messiah means the anointed one, a reference to the process of anointing kings and priests with oil. This refers to the Jewish expectation of a leader who would usher in God’s ultimate reign and Israel’s complete and final victory over their enemies. But we go a step further with Lord. Lord is the same word used in the Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures for God Himself, Yahweh. Lord tells us Jesus’ true authority and dominion over the world and every aspect of our lives.

Part of why the shepherds were chosen to hear the news first is that they had the humility to accept it, and to see it for the good news that it is. The political religious authorities had a much more mixed reaction to Jesus’s arrival, as the story goes on to reveal. But the shepherds accepted it humbly, and went on to share the good news, and it was intended to be shared.

Here’s the end result of Jesus’s coming to the world: “on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.” This raises the question – on whom does God’s favor rest? What does this mean exactly? We saw earlier that the good news will bring great joy to all people, so this message is widely inclusive. All are invited into God’s family and to experience his favor. But there are some people and some groups who do receive special focus and attention from God.

It is clear that God favors the poor. This is consistently repeated throughout the Bible. We are told that God defends of the cause of the fatherless and the widows, and loves the foreigner. These are the people closest to God’s heart, because they are consistently the furthest from those in power and those with the most influence. Here is my summary for us today:

❖ **God invites people to come from the margins to the center.**

After being born in Bethlehem Jesus grew up in Nazareth, and as BG mentioned two weeks ago, Nazareth was not a great town, it was small and removed from the center of action. It was a town on the margins. And as a young girl, Mary wasn’t necessarily the most obvious choice for the mother of the Messiah. A young, unmarried girl from a poor town would have been on the margins of society. But that is who God chose to bring forth the Messiah.

Last week we saw that God sent John to prepare the way for Christ. If you think about it, a dude living in the wilderness eating locusts and honey would not a great choice for a forerunner. He also was an “out there” guy, living on the margins of society and I’m sure some people thought he was crazy. You would think that God would pick the most popular Rabbi to announce the coming of the Messiah. But he chose John. And now we see the good news first going to people who lived most of their lives isolated, removed from regular life.

Elsewhere in the Bible, In Ephesians 2, we are told that those without God are lost and without hope. But in Christ Jesus, those of us who were far away have been brought close. That is one way that we move from the margins into the center. But there are others who are also excluded from the center, and are still in the margins.

This month I’ve been reflecting on how much our experience of Christmas varies depending on our social situation, our economic status, our family, and other factors. What does Christmas look like for those without a home? What does it look for those who have lost their job? What about those who have lost hope? For too many people this year, this is not a season of peace or joy, but instead of anxiety and despair.

COVID-19 has had the unfortunate effect of magnifying existing disparities in income and health and having a much great effect for minority people groups. This has been measured in Alameda county and across the country. “The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that Black and Latinx people are respectively 2.6 and 2.8 times more likely to be infected with COVID-19 than white people. They are also 4.7 and 4.6 times more likely to be hospitalized due to complications from the coronavirus, respectively.” (<https://www.dailycal.org/2020/11/24/ca-must-extend- eviction-protections-for-most-vulnerable-residents/>) We need to continue to be aware of the situation of the people around us, and those who are most in need.

Christmas is a time of giving and sharing, and we too can be like the shepherds and share a message of peace and hope. The good news of God’s love is especially important to people who feel isolated, those who feel like they don’t belong. As we go on the journey of Christmas, who around you needs to be invited into the center of God’s Kingdom and community? It could be an estranged family member, or the homeless person on your street. How can you safely connect and care for them? It is a lot more difficult with covid restrictions but there are still ways we can help. We can pray and ask God to create opportunities around us to share with them.

let’s invite our friends and neighbors to go with us. Let’s prioritize those who are traditionally excluded, and invite them into the center as well. If we have social capital, social power and influence, let’s use it to lift up those who are struggling. There’s a potential for a huge wave of people that could be evicted from their homes on Jan 1 across much of the country, and in California that could come in Feb unless something is done. Let’s follow this situation to see what solutions are proposed and how we can participate in the solution, possibility by advocating for some of the bills that are being discussed to help this problem.

How can you advocate for those in need? December has traditionally been a time of giving and supporting charities and non-profits, but the great thing about God's love is that it is not limited to one time or place, it is available every single day. So we can keep it in mind to be on the lookout for people who live on the margins of our communities and find ways to bring them into the fold whenever we can throughout the coming year.

The last few weeks we have taken the journey of Christmas and here are three things I'd like you to remember as we go into Christmas:

1. God calls us to move past our fears and be fully submitted to His will.
2. God invites us to point people to Jesus with humility
3. God calls us to share the good news of love and inclusion with those on the margins of our communities.

And if you're watching today and feeling like you're the one on the margins, like you don't really belong anywhere, if you've gone through this year feeling left out or isolated, like nobody sees or understands you, I want you to know that you DO belong. You matter to God so much that He sent his son into the world so that you could experience his love. And you're welcome in our family here at Pathway.

Join us next week on Jan 3 for a new series called Foundations. As we enter a new year, we're going to look at how we can evaluate where we are and prepare for a new year ahead that will continue to have struggles and challenges, but also has great promise and hope. Bring a friend as we continue to worship online. Here are some reflection questions I have for you and then I'll close in prayer.

Reflection Questions

1. When have you felt left out or on the margins?
2. Who around you can you invite "into the fold" this Christmas? Is there a friend or family member that needs to hear that they are loved?