

Sing, Choirs of Angels

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December 24, 2017

The Songs of Christmas

Luke 2:1-15

I read a story recently about a little boy who wanted a new bike for Christmas. He went to his mother and said, "Mom, you know how Christmas is Jesus' birthday? I think Jesus would want me to be happy on his birthday, and so I should have a new bike."

His mother replied, "I think Jesus would be really upset that you're using his birthday to get a new bike. That's really selfish. You're not getting one!"

The following morning, when Mom came down for breakfast she looked over at the Nativity scene they had set up in the house and noticed something didn't look right. Something was missing! She looked more closely. On the spot where Mary should have been was a little piece of paper. She opened it and there was a note clearly written by her son with these words: "Dear Jesus, if you ever want to see your mother again make sure I get my bike on Christmas day!"

We laugh, but for many people Christmas simply means expensive gifts and lots of food. Here are some fun facts about Christmas that you may not have known. Candy Canes are a Christmas staple. Nearly 2 billion candy canes are made every year. An average candy cane is 5 ½ inches, if you lined up all the candy canes they would go around the earth's equator seven times.

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- We consume enough candy canes to go around the earth's equator seven times.
- 7.3 billion shrimp are eaten at Christmas parties every year.
- 122 million pounds of egg nog is slurped down annually.
- 1 in 4 pet owners sign their pets' names to their Christmas cards

How many calories does the average person eat on Christmas day?

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- The average person eats more than 7,000 calories on Christmas day
- The average holiday shopper spends \$107 on themselves

"I'm buying gifts for everyone, but what about me? Don't I deserve a gift for myself? Isn't that what Christmas is all about?"

The little boy in my story understood that Christmas is Jesus' birthday. Christians celebrate Christmas not primarily to consume 7,000 calories or to buy presents for themselves or even to hold Jesus' mother hostage so that Jesus would get us what we want. Christians believe that God visited this planet in the birth of Jesus, and Christmas is the day we've chosen to celebrate God's visitation.

For those of you who have been here during the Advent series, we've seen that Christmas is all about singing. Not only do we sing Christmas carols today, not only are Christmas songs played everywhere – in every shopping mall and store – but if we go back 2,000 years to the birth of Jesus, the gospel writer Luke records that everyone is singing. Jesus' mother sings. Zechariah, John the Baptist's father, sings. And we're going to see today that at Jesus' birth, even the angels sing.

This Christmas Eve, my sermon is titled "Sing, Choir of Angels". Let's pray.

Slide Luke 2:1-15

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.) ³And everyone went to their own town to register.

⁴So 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. ⁵He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, ⁷and 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.

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

¹³Suddenly 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."

¹⁵When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

Why are the angels singing? The first reason for the angels singing in this story is:

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Because God's plan is always good

Think about how Mary must have felt traveling from Nazareth to Bethlehem which is over 60 miles away. Mary is not just a little pregnant, she is very, very pregnant. We don't know how she got to Bethlehem. Maybe she rode on a little donkey or had to walk or maybe she was in a little wooden cart with wooden wheels and no shock absorbers and every bump jarred her.

When she got to Bethlehem, there was no room for Mary and Joseph to stay with one of Joseph's relatives in the living part of the house. They had to stay with the animals. She had to lay her baby, Jesus, in a feeding trough. Do you think Mary was thinking the whole time she was traveling to Bethlehem, "Isn't it wonderful? I see what God is doing. He's fulfilling the promise that he made to the Jewish people 700 years ago through the prophet Micah."

Slide Micah 5:2

"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
though you are small among the clansⁱⁿ of Judah,
out of you will come for me
one who will be ruler over Israel,
whose origins are from of old,
from ancient times."

At the moment, Mary couldn't see that. Looking forward, we almost never see what God is up to. It's only as we look back that we see that God's plan for his people is always good. We look at Mary 33 years later standing at the foot of the cross, watching her son being executed. She watched her son suffer and bleed to death. Mary didn't say to herself, "Isn't this wonderful? God is showing his love for humanity. He is allowing his Son to die to pay for the sins of the world." At the moment of Jesus' crucifixion, it must have been horrible for Mary. Looking forward, I'm sure that Mary didn't understand what God was up to. Looking forward she couldn't understand. But after Jesus rose from the dead, looking back she understood that God's plan is always good for those who love him.

Maybe you've had a really hard year. Maybe 2017 for you is marked by a particular loss, the loss of a child or parent, the loss of a spouse or a loved one. You've gone through a very difficult season and you're thinking, "God, what's happening? Where are you?" In the moment, we rarely understand what God is up to. Looking forward we can't see and don't understand. God is never taken by surprise when bad things do happen. He can be trusted. Going forward, you may not be able to understand. But looking back, like Mary, there may be a time where you say, "I didn't understand at the time, but God did work good out of this. He did have a plan and God's plan is always very good."

Why are the angels singing at Christmas? What does his story tell us about God and God's activity in Jesus?

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- God's plan is always good
- God's kingdom always wins

How many of you are singing this Christmas about the state of politics in America? Or the wonderful politicians you have leading your city or the state you're from or your country? Do you think any Christians in the world are singing, "Glory to God in the Highest" about the politicians in their home countries?

Why are the angels singing in this story? They're singing because God's kingdom always wins. When people in the ancient world read Luke 2, they didn't say to themselves, "Isn't that sweet! Just like we pictured in our little Christmas nativity scene. Should we move the ox and the donkey on the left side or the right side of the manger? Where should we put the little lambs? There are the shepherds. Let's put two of the shepherds in the back of Joseph and balance them off with an angel to the left of Mary."

Sentimental is not what people would have picked up in a first century reading of Luke 2. When people in the ancient world read Luke 2, they would have reacted as if they had touched a hot stove. Luke 2 is white hot. Luke 2 is incredibly radical. It's so in your face. We lose the whole historical context of Luke 2 and what Luke is communicating because we're so many centuries removed.

Let me give you a little background to this story. A few decades before Jesus was born, the Roman senate conferred on the Roman Emperor, Octavian, the title "Augustus"

which was a religious title. Augustus was said to have divine powers. After decades of war, Augustus brought peace to the whole known world. In fact, around the Roman world, people called Augustus “The savior of the world who brought peace to everyone on earth”. And they celebrated Augustus’ birthday as a Roman holiday. In fact, the announcement of the Emperor’s birth was called the gospel, that’s good news.

So here we have the Roman emperor, Augustus, who was worshiped as divine, who was called the savior of the world, who supposedly brought peace to all the earth, and there’s a holiday in his honor in which people and families get together to eat and drink and give gifts. And the day of his birth is called the day of good news, the day of the gospel.

And then Luke writes his gospel. And in Luke 2, Luke writes about the birth of Jesus, the Messiah. Luke tells us that Jesus was born during the days of Augustus, the savior, the man who brought peace to the world. It’s in that light that we ought to read the angelic announcement to the shepherds in verses 10-14.

Slide Luke 2:10-14

¹⁰But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. ¹¹Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

¹³Suddenly 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.”

No one who read these words in the ancient world would have failed to see that Luke is talking about the birth of a rival king, a new savior, a true savior whose birth is confronting a false savior, Augustus. Jesus the Savior is going to bring true peace instead of the false peace of this world. Jesus’ birth is the true gospel, the true good news, confronting the false gospel, the false news of ancient Rome.

The birth of Jesus is a confrontation. Christmas is a clash of kingdoms. The kingdom of God is invading the kingdom of this world. And the kingdom of God is going to be triumphant. So, there is singing because the kingdom of God always wins. It may be months, it may be years, it may be decades, it may be centuries, but God’s kingdom always wins.

As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said,

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“The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”

Three centuries after the birth of that little baby in Bethlehem, the Roman emperor, Constantine, bent the knee to Jesus and declared himself a follower of the true king.

Why are the angels singing?

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- God’s plan is always good
- God’s kingdom always wins
- God’s character is always humble

We see this truth underlined in verses 8-9 where we read:

Slide Luke 2:8-9

⁸And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. ⁹An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

What is so significant about the announcement being made to shepherds? Why wasn’t the announcement made to the priests in the Temple or King Herod? Who are these shepherds?

In Jesus’ day, shepherds were at the bottom rung of the social ladder in Palestine. Shepherds were viewed in the same way that people looked at tax collectors or dung sweepers. The history of shepherds in Israel is really a fascinating one. During the time of the patriarchs – Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – being a shepherd was a noble occupation. In a nomadic society, everyone was a shepherd. These wealthy men – Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – were all shepherds.

When the 12 tribes migrated down to Egypt, they encountered a foreign lifestyle. The Egyptians were all farmers. As farmers, they hated shepherds because of what sheep

and goats did to the land and their crops. The war between shepherds and farmers is an old one. It goes back to the time of Cain and Abel where Cain, a farmer, killed Abel, a shepherd. The Egyptians looked down on the Israelites because the Israelites were shepherds.

Over the course of the 400 years that Israel was in Egypt, Egyptian attitudes seeped into the Israelites who were no longer nomadic. The Israelites began to look down on shepherds as well. Shepherds were generally viewed as second class and untrustworthy. In the centuries around Jesus' birth, shepherds were even deprived of their civil rights. They were not allowed to be judges in court, and they couldn't even serve as witnesses. Doing business with a shepherd was unlawful because it was assumed that anything you bought from a shepherd was probably stolen property.

The rabbis in Jesus' day used to debate about the meaning of Psalm 23, which said, "The Lord is my shepherd". "Why would God ever call himself a shepherd?" Shepherds in Jesus' day were labeled as sinners along with tax collectors and prostitutes.

Why did the angels sing? Because God's character is so incredibly humble. No one is so low or so disreputable or so messed that God won't reach out to them. No one is such a failure that God won't save them. No one you pray for is so far gone that God can't turn their lives around. God announces the birth of his Son to the people who were among the most despised in the world.

I just want us to reflect on one thing before we move on. God's work in the world is always surprising. Jesus says it's going to be a surprise to us who we see in heaven. And Jesus says it's going to be a surprise because there are some religious people that we won't see. We think to ourselves, "That guy? He's become a follower of Jesus? He was the biggest party animal in our fraternity." "That woman? She was the most outspoken atheist in our workplace." "That couple became followers of Jesus? They were voted most likely to end up in divorce court." The angels sing because there's no one too far away. No one has failed too much. No one who is so unlikely that humble God won't reach out to them.

Why are the angels singing?

Slide

- God's plan is always good
- God's kingdom always wins
- God's character is always humble
- God's Son is always Lord of all

Listen to the announcement that the angels made to the shepherds:

Slide Luke 2:11

Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.

A Christian is a person who has made a decision to allow Jesus to be the Lord or the Master over all of life. To call Jesus “Lord” is not just a religious title. Lordship implies mastery. It implies sovereignty. It implies control. Not only your religious life or your church going, but mastery, sovereignty, control over all of life. To be a follower of Christ is much more like being chocolate milk than like being a grapefruit.

So many people in America consider themselves to be Christians because they grew up in church or they were baptized as infants or they went through a first communion or some other religious ritual. They are like grapefruits. Their religious life is one section where they may pray or read the Bible or go to church. But then they have all these other sections that have nothing to do with Christ. They have their relational section and their financial section and their career section and their entertainment section and their section concerning their opinions on a whole range of matters. To call Jesus Lord, which is what the angels sang about, is to say, “I renounce, I turn my back on being a grapefruit Christian.

To call Jesus “Lord” like the angels did, means that you are a chocolate milk Christian. Just like chocolate is stirred up in every part of the milk, Jesus as Lord is stirred into every part of your life. Having Jesus as your Lord means that you want him in an increasing way to rule over every atom, every particle of your life. To say Jesus is Lord means that I am allowing Jesus to be the master of my opinions. A Christian is not someone who says, “Well, Jesus teaches so-and-so about the poor or immigrants or abortion or sex or divorce or whatever, but I don’t agree. It’s nice that Jesus taught that, but I don’t agree. I have a different opinion.”

To be a Christian is to be someone who says, “I have brought my mind and my opinions under the mastery of Jesus. Jesus is my teacher and I’m allowing him to shape my thoughts, my views, and my opinions about everything.”

Being a Christian is not only to call Jesus the Lord of my opinions. The angels are singing because Jesus is Lord of all! And “all” means, if you’re a Christian, that you are saying “Jesus, I want you to be Lord of all my relationships this Christmas.” If Jesus is your

Lord, then you have yielded control of all of your relationships to him. A Christian is someone who asks God questions like, “Lord, do you want me to date this person? Does this dating relationship have your blessing on it? Do you want me to become engaged to this person? Do you want me to marry this person? Do you want me to go into business with this person?”

How can we call Jesus “Lord” and date or marry or divorce or go into business outside of Jesus’ will? Do you ever inquire of Jesus regarding your relationships? Are you willing to reconcile with someone that you’re at odds with this Christmas? To never submit your relationships to Jesus means that whatever else he is – regarding your relationships, regarding your family, Jesus is not your Lord.

The angels are singing because Jesus is Lord of all. Let me ask you, friend, this Christmas. Is Jesus the master of your possessions? Do you try to gain Jesus’ perspective ever regarding what you spend your money on or how much you give to church or to charity? Do you yield the control of your work to Jesus? Have you surrendered your future to Jesus? Whether you are a retiree or a child, or anything in between, have you said, “Jesus, I want you to be the Lord of my life in this coming year, 2018 and 2019 and however much time I have left.”?

The angels sang on Christmas because Jesus the Lord was born to us – to you and to me! Let me ask you as I close today a very simple question, is Jesus your Lord this Christmas? Have you surrendered control of your whole life to him and asked him to be your Master, ruler, King over everything – your opinions, your relationships, your possessions, your spending, your job, your future, your body? This Christmas, why not make Jesus your Lord? Have you entirely surrendered your life to him? If not, in a moment, I would like to pray with you.