

## Remnant Life Church

December 5, 2021

### “Why Bethlehem?”

Matt 1:18-21

The biblical account of Christmas is a very familiar one if you have attended church for any length of time

- The most familiar account is found in the book of Luke
- We have used that passage here every Christmas service since our first
- I find the words very familiar and somewhat comforting (Linus)

Yet there are many aspects of the story that raise questions

- We must remember that we are reading and examining this account through a 21<sup>st</sup>-century lens
- Things that were done over 2000 years ago are very foreign to us and we have hard time making sense of them

When information is being presented or a story is being told, people usually communicate in a couple of different ways

- Some will tell you just the bare essentials of something and from that you need to fill in the details
  - That’s not always a good way
  - Since many people are lousy at filling in accurate details
- But others will give you so much detail and even peripheral information that you can get lost or forget what it was you were talking about
  - I sometimes want to just say, “is there a point to this chase and how do we cut to it?!”

Well, there are two Christmas accounts of the birth of Jesus that are somewhat similar to these two styles of communication

- The first is in the opening chapter of Matthew

#### READ – [Matthew 1:18-21](#)

- What Rod just read was an overview
- Joseph and Mary are engaged; she’s found to be pregnant; Joseph is a righteous man and still marries her
- Then in the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter it goes right into the Magi, the young family’s escape to Egypt and their settling in Nazareth
- And so Matthew’s account of Jesus’ birth is really just one verse, 40 words, found in the 18<sup>th</sup> verse - *This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit.* ([Matt 1:18](#))
- The second account however, found in the gospel of Luke, is very different
  - If we consider what Matthew wrote as a pamphlet of information, Luke’s account is an 800-page Tom Clancy novel

- Luke takes 30 verses and over 500 words describing the birth of Jesus
- And that does not count the back-story where he begins with the birth of Jesus' cousin, John – also in detail
  - We learn that John's father, a priest, is told by an angel that his wife is going to have a baby
  - Zechariah does not believe him and because of his lack of faith is unable to speak through the entire course of his wife Elizabeth's pregnancy
  - He then tells us of Elizabeth's visit to her cousin Mary (which is why Jesus and John were second cousins)
  - We are even given the songs of praise sung by both Mary and Zechariah
- Luke also details Mary's own encounter with the angel Gabriel
  - Her response, of course is very different than Zechariah's
  - She fully embraces God's plan even though she knows what that will mean for her personally
- He then brings in the shepherds who were the first to receive the good news of the impending birth of the Messiah

But, there are many questions that both of these accounts present to us

- For instance why would Zechariah not believe an angel sent by God – and not just any angel (as if somehow that would not have been enough by itself) but Gabriel, the archangel messenger of God?
- Was Mary someone unusually special that she was selected to be the earthly mother of Jesus?
- Why would Joseph remain with Mary?
- What was Joseph thinking taking a very pregnant woman on an 80-90 mile journey when she is about to give birth?
- And finally, why Bethlehem?

While everyone of those questions provides important content and context to the story, it is the last one I want to look at this morning – why Bethlehem?

The town of Bethlehem was settled approximately 1300 years before Jesus by the Canaanites

- It is located in the southern portion of the Judean mountains
- About equal distance between the Mediterranean Ocean and the Jordan River leading into the Dead Sea
- It is just a little over 6 miles south of Jerusalem

It was the town of David's birth

- And because Joseph was a descendent of David it meant that he had to travel there to register for the census established by Caesar Augustus
- Yet there was nothing during that time to distinguish this small hamlet
- Certainly nothing for it to be the place chosen for the Son of God to be born
  - It would have made much more sense to select the town of Hebron
    - Hebron was very important at the beginning of Hebrew history – mentioned over 70 times in the Bible

- It is the location of the Caves of the Patriarchs considered to be the traditional burial places of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, and Jacob after he was embalmed by the Egyptians under the watchful eye of his son Joseph
    - In Judaism these caves are considered the second most holy site after only the Temple Mount
  - Jerusalem would have been an even more logical choice
    - The OT mentions Jerusalem over 600 times
    - It has been the center of all Jewish religious and civil life since the time of King David when he captured it from the Jebusites and made it his capital city
    - It was the location of the King's palace and, of course, the holy temple of God
  - How about the ancient city of Jericho, or one of the beautiful Mediterranean port cities of Joppa, Caesarea, or Gaza, or the more prominent towns of Shiloh, Bethel, or Gilgal?
  - Or if God really wanted to make a powerful statement to the people of that day, why not Rome, Babylon, Athens, or Alexandria?
- But Bethlehem?
  - It there had been a heavenly site-selection committee, Bethlehem would not have been on their radar
  - This is the type of town that people passed through on their journey from Jerusalem to Hebron
    - It held no importance for political, commercial, cultural, or educational reasons
    - There was not great wealth or royalty located there
  - Even the prophet Micah, in his prophecy some 700 years earlier, emphasizes the town's lack of significance (*Micah 5:2*)
- The name Bethlehem means "house of bread" most likely owing to the fact that it is located in a region that was the grain producer center in the OT
  - But aside from its geographical location, Bethlehem never rose to a place of prominence for any reason
  - And perhaps that is exactly why God chose it to be the birth place of His Son

Now Bethlehem is not totally unknown in the Bible

- It is the place where Jacob's wife Rachel died and was buried after giving birth to the 12 and final son Benjamin
- It is the place where Naomi, Ruth's mother-in-law, was from
- And subsequently the place where Ruth found her kinsman-redeemer, Boaz
- It was the birthplace of Israel's greatest king, David
- And it was on these hillsides that the shepherds were keeping watch over their flocks by night
- And the destination of 3 wise men after seeing an unusual star in the western sky

But our story of Bethlehem begins, yet again, with shepherds

- Remember, Moses became a shepherd after living in the house of Pharaoh for the first 40 years of his life
- It was a shepherding people, we read in the latter part of Genesis, who settled in the land of Goshen in northern Egypt at the invitation of Joseph
- And it was shepherds who first received the news about the birth of Jesus the Messiah

### Shepherds

- They were, as we already know, at the lower end of the class scale among the people
- Their job was a dirty, nomadic, solitary one that kept them isolated from the population
- And according to Jewish religious law, they were unclean
  - Meaning not only did they smell bad, but they were not qualified or permitted to participate in any acts of worship
  - No feasts, no holy day involvement, and they could certainly not approach a temple or tabernacle
- Because they moved about so much and were strangers to the people, they were looked at with suspicion
  - Their word was not admissible in court
  - They were considered thieves who had to be watched constantly

### The Announcement

- If it were up to you, to whom would you make the first announcement about the Messiah?
  - The power political leaders?
  - The religious leaders of the day?
  - How about the wealthy or affluent?
  - The news media outlets?
  - In reality, NONE of these were told
- God chose the lowest of the low, the outsiders, the outcasts, those on the outside looking in
  - These are the ones God told, I want you to be the first
  - Why?
  - Weren't the others more worthy?
  - That is exactly why God did not choose them
  - He wanted the most unworthy to be given the greatest honor
- That is one of the first indications of Jesus' mission to this world
  - To give those who are unworthy, like you and me, the greatest gift and honor, the forgiveness of our sins and a restored relationship with God through Jesus Christ

### The Response

- Something important to note is how the shepherds responded to this amazing announcement
  - Their first response was a natural one – fear
  - But the angel knew what to say and they accepted his words
- Their faith was the action of their belief in what they were witnessing
  - They abandoned the sheep they were in charge of
  - And take note that they left the sheep of the earth to go and see the Lamb of God

God chose a nowhere place like Bethlehem, revealed His plan to a people with no standing, and sent His Son to die a common thief's death on the cross. For you and for me!

Bethlehem is the House of Bread

- Jesus was born to satisfy our spiritual hunger
- Jesus said, *I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry* (John 6:35)

He was also born in the House of Bread to show us that we must recognize our personal need for Him

- If you eat a big meal, that will do nothing to satisfy my hunger
- To eat of the bread of life is an individual decision that cannot be made for you
- Everyone eats physically but only some are eating spiritually
- The problem is that there are many tables serving spiritual food that is rotten and very bad for you
- Are you eating from the right table?
  - Is it the table of Jesus Christ?
  - My prayer is that this Christmas season will a time for all of us to feast at the table of life
  - The is the only place that your soul, your spirit, and your mind will be truly satisfied

Why Bethlehem?

- Because God did not send His Son to die only for the rich, the famous, and the powerful – not then and not today
- He came to die for the shepherds, the farmers, and the common people of a small village
- God sent His Son to die for me and for you