

“Responding to the Heavenly Proclamation”
Luke 2:1-21
December 20, 2020
Faith Presbyterian Church – Evening Service
Pastor Nicoletti

Our focus this evening will be Luke, chapter two, verses eight through twenty. But to give us the larger context, we will begin with verse one.

Please do listen carefully, for this is God’s word for us this morning.

^{2:1} In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. ² This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³ And all went to be registered, each to his own town. ⁴ And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, ⁵ to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. ⁶ And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. ⁷ And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

⁸ And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. ¹⁰ And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹² And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”

¹⁵ When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.” ¹⁶ And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. ¹⁷ And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. ¹⁸ And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. ²⁰ And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

²¹ And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

Let’s pray ...

We praise you, Lord,
and we ask you to teach us your ways and your truth.
Help us to take your Word into our hearts and onto our lips.
Make us to delight in your testimony more than in riches.
Help us to meditate on your precepts,
and to fix our eyes on your ways.

Grant us to delight in your truth,
and to never forget your Word to us.
In Jesus, name. Amen.
[Based on Psalm 119:12-16]

INTRODUCTION: THE HEAVENLY PROCLAMATION

Christmas is on the horizon. And that is a good thing. It is a time of joy and celebration at the end of what has been a trying year for most of us.

For many of us it means a time of celebrating, of enjoying good food, maybe of time with family, Christmas music, presents, nostalgia.

Those are all good things, and we should enjoy them.

But as we do, we need to make sure we do not miss what is at the core of Christmas.

At the core of Christmas is a shocking proclamation: God became man. He came in human flesh. The Son of God was incarnate.

This is a stupendous claim, but many of us have heard it and celebrated it so many times, that it can be surprisingly easy to miss.

I remember a story Tim Keller told in a sermon once, about paying a pastoral visit to a family in his congregation. And Keller did not realize that the family's home was right by a train line. And he was sitting in the living room, and the couple's young son was nearby, when suddenly there was an incredibly loud noise that tore through the living room as a train went by. And once it passed, Keller looked at the young boy and said "Wow! What was that!" And the boy looked at him, confused, and said "What was what?"

The boy had heard the train so many times that he didn't even notice it anymore. A huge crashing noise tears through the house, and he doesn't bat an eye.

Keller then made the point that this is how many of us respond to the heavenly proclamation of the incarnation.

Because what the angels proclaim to the shepherds here is quite astounding.

First of all, in verse ten, the angel declares that what he proclaims is "good news." And that was a charged word for the angel to use in that time and place.

In the context the shepherds lived in, a proclamation that was labeled as "good news" would be associated with the imperial herald, and a declaration about the emperor. It was associated with a proclamation about the imperial cult, about victory in battle on behalf of the emperor, or about the birth of a future ruler in the empire. By using that word, and proclaiming the birth of a child, the angel was telling the shepherds that another ruler had been born, whose dominion would be so great that the good news was important, as they said, "for all the people." [Green, 133-134]

That was the cultural connotation that label would have, but then, for Jews like the shepherds, the label would carry even more baggage. For them it would also be associated with the “good news,” described by the prophet Isaiah in Isaiah forty, verse nine. There the good news is not about the coming of a human ruler, but the coming of God himself.

The angel is saying that a ruler greater than Caesar is coming to earth. And that ruler would be God himself.

And those connections were not limited to the mention of “good news.”

The child is also described as a “Savior” – another word that had dual associations in the world it was spoken into. For once again, Caesar Augustus was identified by the title “Savior.” And once again the same word was used in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures to describe God himself. [Green, 134-135]

And the same thing was true of the title “Lord,” also used in verse eleven. It was a title for Caesar, but also for Yahweh, the God of the Jews. [Green, 135]

Shepherds are watching over their flock by night. And an angel appears. And the angel proclaims to them that a new ruler has been born, one who will save his people, one who will be greater than Caesar, one whose saving work will be good news far beyond the Jews, far beyond the Roman world – who will bring great joy, as the angel says in verse ten, “for all the people.” And that new ruler, born that night, was to be God himself.

The angel delivers this heavenly proclamation, and then a multitude of heavenly hosts appear, praising God for what he is doing in the world, saying: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased.”

And then, in verse fifteen, the angels go away from them into heaven.

And before we read on, we need to recognize that a question hangs in the air at this point in the text: How will the shepherds respond?

Now, not only did we just read the story, but we all know this story already, and so it is no surprise to us. But Luke’s gospel, as he has told it so far, does not assume how the shepherds will respond. For we have already seen a range of responses to such heavenly proclamations.

Earlier in Luke’s gospel an angel appeared to Mary, and made a heavenly proclamation to her about the virgin conception, in her womb, of the Son of God. Mary responded immediately with humble faith, declaring herself a servant of the Lord.

But a few verses before that an angel appeared to Zechariah to proclaim that, though he and Elizabeth had been infertile, they would have a son in their old age, who would prepare the way for the Lord. And Zechariah’s initial response is doubt.

All of this leads us to the question: Mary responded with belief, Zechariah with initial unbelief – how will the shepherds respond to the heavenly proclamation they receive? [Green, 137]

But while Mary and Zechariah's responses were somewhat immediate, the shepherd's response will be a bit more drawn out. There will be several stages to their response.

And so, if we struggle to respond to the proclamation of Christmas – if we, like that boy living near the train tracks, have grown a bit dull to the proclamation of the incarnation of the Son of God – then perhaps the shepherds can remind us how we are to respond.

Because the shepherds give us a model here not just for how to respond to the proclamation of Christmas, but how to respond to the heavenly proclamation as a whole: the revelation of God, and the good news of the gospel.

So let's see this evening how they respond to the good news that is preached to them.

As we do, we will see five stages to their response.

HEARING WHAT IS SAID

And the first is that they hear it. They listen attentively to the heavenly proclamation.

And we know this is the case from all that follows.

The shepherds heard what was said, and their actions and words that follow reflect that. They were attentive to the word proclaimed to them.

Now ... granted ... the Lord made that easy for them. It is a lot easier to pay attention to an angel who appears before you in glory and brightness in the middle of the night, than it is to pay attention to a book sitting before you early in the morning ... or a word spoken to you by a guy in a robe talking to you after dinner on a Sunday evening. That is of course true.

And yet, despite the different means employed, the word proclaimed to the shepherds is the same word that is proclaimed to us.

The angel spoke the word of the Lord – the shepherds acknowledge right away in verse fifteen that it was indeed the Lord who had communicated to them through the angel. The shepherds heard the word of the Lord, which is the same thing that we receive from the written Scriptures. And the same thing we are to receive from the pulpit. As the Second Helvetic Confession – a sixteenth-century Reformed confession of faith – puts it: “When this Word of God is now preached in the church by preachers lawfully called, we believe that the very Word of God is proclaimed and received by the faithful.” Or, as it has been historically summarized: “The preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God.”

The means may not be as compelling, but the substance of what we receive is the same: the Word of God, the heavenly proclamation. We have it in the Scriptures. We have it in the Word preached.

The question is: Do we hear it? Do we listen?

Have we committed ourselves to the regular reading of God's word?

We have it available to us, in our hands, at all times, in all sorts of formats: reader's Bibles, study Bibles, audio Bibles, Bible apps on our phones, and more. But do we attend to the Bible? Do we read it? Do we hear it?

Another new year is coming. And with it, another opportunity to renew your commitment to reading the Bible daily. Consider picking a reading plan for 2021 – a realistic one. Maybe gather a group to do the same plan with you. And commit yourself to attending to the Word of God. For without that first step, nothing else we talk about can really follow as it should.

Attend to the Word of God written.

But attend also to the Word of God preached.

Ask yourself how you can be more intentional in doing that in the year ahead as well.

Maybe your attendance on Sunday mornings – whether online or in-person – has been a bit more hit-or-miss lately. Maybe attendance at evening service has become a less regular thing for you. Maybe you've been more distracted lately during the sermons. Maybe your phone's been out more, and not because you've got your Bible app open on it. Or maybe you've found yourself just more frustrated with the preaching lately, and so less attentive to the content being preached.

I have no illusions about the fact that I have much room to grow in my preaching – that I can improve in how engaging I am. In fact, I do not doubt that there is room for growth in a range of aspects of how I preach. And it is part of my calling to work on those things. I intend to spend the next few decades trying to grow in those ways. That is my calling.

But your calling is to attend to the preaching of the word even when the preacher leaves something to be desired. Your calling is to receive the heavenly proclamation even when the preacher is mediocre. Because even when the preacher has a lot of growing to do, the fact remains that "The preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God." And your first calling is to hear it, whoever the messenger might be. Because it's not about the messenger, it's about the proclamation.

And the first thing the shepherds do in our text is that they *hear* the heavenly proclamation.

EXHORTING ONE ANOTHER

That is, of course, an obvious first step. But I think it is the second thing that the shepherds do that is especially interesting.

Because the second thing they do, after hearing the heavenly proclamation, is that they exhort one another to apply the heavenly proclamation.

That's what we see in verse fifteen. There we read: "When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.'"

That's an easy line to skip over ... but I think it's a fascinating line.

We could imagine the scene: the angel appears, the heavenly host join him, these heavenly messengers proclaim the Word of God, and then they disappear. And the shepherds are left there again in the dark and quiet of the night. And there they are in silence.

And as obvious as it was that they all needed to go and see what the angel had told them had happened ... if we know human nature, then we would suspect that it may have actually been kind of hard for the first shepherd to speak up and say "Well ... we should go see this thing."

And yet, those words were necessary.

And to better understand how necessary they were, we could imagine how we would be tempted to respond if we received such a revelation, but we were alone at the time. If we were out in the fields in the first century, and an angel appeared to us and told us about such a birth in Bethlehem, and then disappeared ... would we go? Would we respond by seeking out what had been revealed to us? Or would we begin, almost immediately, to doubt what we ourselves had seen and heard?

As we think about that, we can see that it was an act of mercy that the Lord brought this heavenly proclamation not to an individual, but to a group, so that, as we read here in verse fifteen, they could turn to each other and exhort each other to respond rightly to the heavenly proclamation that they had received. Because, if we know ourselves, then we know how easy it is for us to hear such proclamations, and then do nothing about them.

Most of us do this all the time. We read the Scriptures, and we come across something that calls on us to respond. And we pass over it, without taking any further steps.

Or we hear a sermon that touches directly on something in our lives, and we hear it when it is delivered ... but by lunch time it is a distant memory, and by Monday morning we have forgotten it.

Larry Osborne, a pastor in California, has written an entire book arguing for churches to not only institute small group ministries for their congregations, but to base the focus of those small groups not on additional Bible study or additional teaching, but to structure them around focused discussions between the people in each small group, on how to *apply* the sermon from the previous Sunday morning.

And Osborne gives a number of reasons why he thinks this format is most beneficial for a congregation, but one which our text highlights for us tonight is that, for most of us, the heavenly proclamation is not enough. We need to be exhorted by a brother or sister in Christ to actually do the thing that the sermon called us to do. We, like some of the shepherds, need for someone else, who heard the same proclamation, to turn to us and to say, "Let's go do what the Lord just told us to do." As obvious as it is, we need both to exhort others, but also to be exhorted by others, to apply the heavenly exhortation to our lives.

We do not, at this point, have a structured discipleship group ministry which creates an easily accessible space for these kinds of discussions ... though it's certainly not the worst idea.

But that doesn't prohibit you from intentionally creating a space to do this. Who, in your life, might be the person who can exhort you to apply what you hear on Sundays, and who might also hear the same exhortation from you? Maybe it's a friend. Maybe it's a roommate. Maybe it's your spouse. It can be hard to initiate those conversations if you are not used to them. But the benefits of such a practice, not just once, but week after week, can be tremendous.

And the same is true for the proclamation received through the Scriptures.

I am not a big technology guy at all. But one of the reasons why I love using a Bible reading app is that I can do a Bible reading plan along with other people, and at the end of the readings for each day, we can post our thoughts, for the other people in our group to see.

It's a great tool for accountability in keeping up with a reading plan. But it's also a great way to exhort one another to actually apply what we hear. This past year I have been doing a reading plan with the men in my long-term pastors' accountability and support group. And those interactions, from those brothers spread across the country, have been a blessing to me, and have often included exhortations to one another to apply what we have been reading.

How might you both give and receive similar exhortations, as you encounter the Word of God?

So, the first thing we are to do is to hear the heavenly proclamation. The second thing the shepherds model for us is that we are to exhort one another to apply the heavenly proclamation.

RESPONDING IN ACTIVE FAITH

The third thing we are to do is to respond to the heavenly proclamation with active faith.

And this we see in verse sixteen: "And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger."

The first thing we should note is that this took faith. They must have felt – and they must have looked – a little nuts, showing up in Bethlehem, and asking through the streets if a baby had just been born, and then asking to look in, with eager expectation, to see if the baby was lying in a manger, thus fulfilling the sign that the angel had promised.

It took faith to go and to search for this baby lying in a manger.

But it also took action. The shepherds got up and went.

We're not always that good at action.

Now, of course, there are times when the heavenly proclamation calls us to pause, and to ponder. We see that right here in our text in Mary, in verse nineteen. And that can be true at times for us.

But other times, we use “thinking” and “pondering” and “reflecting” not really as a way to faithfully engage with the heavenly proclamation ... but as a way to avoid actively responding to it.

Sometimes we hear the Word of God – whether written or preached – and we know exactly what we need to do. And we know we should do it right away.

We know we should apologize to that person. We know we should confess that sin to someone. We know we should do that thing to serve our neighbor. We know we should have that conversation with our child, or our spouse, or our parent. We know we should approach someone for discipleship or accountability. We know we should begin that spiritual discipline or habit right away.

But then we quickly come up with a way to delay, that sounds responsible or spiritual. Well ... we don't want to be hasty. Let's take some time to think about this. Let's make sure we have a plan. Let's approach this methodically and intentionally. Let's pray about it for a bit first.

Imagine if the shepherds had responded that way. Thinking, and pondering, and praying are all good things. But when we already know what God has called us to do, then we can actually take those good things, and we can misuse them – in fact, we can even go so far as using them as excuses for our disobedience.

As James puts it: “whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.” [James 4:17]

Where might you have such sin?

So, we see here in the shepherds that, first, we are to hear the heavenly proclamation. Second, we are to exhort one another to apply the heavenly proclamation. Third, we are to respond ourselves to the heavenly proclamation with faith and with action.

PASSING ON THE PROCLAMATION

And then fourth, we are to pass the proclamation on to others.

That is what we see in verse seventeen.

The shepherds respond with active faith – they go to Bethlehem and they look for the sign that the angel told them about: a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger. And then they find the sign – they find the baby that the angel spoke of.

And then we read in verses seventeen through nineteen: “And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart.”

There are a couple things to note here as the shepherds share the heavenly proclamation with others – a couple things that would have been natural barriers to their sharing the proclamation with others as they did.

First of all, in a culture that valued the well-educated, and that had a strong sense of hierarchy, shepherds did not rank highly as teachers. They were peasants, who lived in an agrarian society, but could not provide enough to support their families from their own landholdings, and so had to hire themselves out as well. They were “located toward the bottom of the scale of power and privilege” in their society. [Green, 130] They did not have the credentials to garner the attention of others.

But they spoke anyway. Because they knew that what was most important was not the status of the messenger, but the message itself, and its original source, which was God. Their confidence is not in themselves, but in the Lord’s word, spoken to them.

Second, they seem to have received somewhat mixed responses. Mary received their words and responded faithfully – we are told in verse nineteen that she treasured up their testimony and pondered it in her heart.

Others respond, we are told in verse eighteen, with amazement – with “wonder” as the ESV puts it. But we should note that that is a somewhat ambiguous response. As one commentator points out, throughout his gospel Luke notes many people marveling at the works of Jesus ... but their marveling – their amazement, their wonder – while not “necessarily negative in tone [...] is not tantamount to faith, and is no guarantee that a correct understanding of the extraordinary has or will be reached.” [Green, 138] In other words, the shepherds get a reaction from everyone who hears ... but it wasn’t necessarily a reaction of faith.

And so, the shepherds face two challenges we so often face when it comes to sharing the gospel. We often feel like we lack the credentials – like we lack the standing to have the right to witness to others about who Jesus is or what he has done. And we often fear that while someone might be taken aback by our words, it might not be because they believe us. Those fears so often keep us from passing on to others the heavenly proclamation that we have received.

And the shepherds could have let it stop them too. But they don’t. They tell others anyway. Because they realize that neither what they have to share, nor the response others may have, is ultimately rooted in them, but it is rooted in God himself. The word is worth passing on because it is the Word of God. The response people have matters not because of what it says about their relationship to us, but because of what it says about their relationship to God. And so, they pass on the proclamation to others. The shepherds become, as one writer puts it, “the first evangelists of Luke [and] Acts.”

They pass on the proclamation, and we are called to do the same.

So, we see that the shepherds hear the heavenly proclamation, they exhort one another to apply the heavenly proclamation, they respond with active faith to the proclamation, and they pass on to others the proclamation they have received.

WORSHIPPING THE LORD WHO REVEALED HIMSELF TO THEM

Then, fifth and finally, they glorify God. They respond in worship. We read in verse twenty: “And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.”

It’s interesting that this comes at the end.

Of course, it didn’t have to. It is often natural for our first response to the heavenly proclamation to be worship. But it is instructive for us that, in this case, worship came at the end.

We often think and speak of the Christian life as being fueled by worship. We worship the Lord, praising him for who he is, and that enables us to then go out and live as Christ’s disciples – to do what he has called us to. And of course, that is true.

But it’s not a one-way street. Because as our worship empowers our discipleship, it’s also true that our discipleship – or obedience – should strengthen and empower our worship.

The shepherds may have glorified and praised God together before they spoke to each other about going to Bethlehem ... though Luke doesn’t mention that.

But even if they did, we could consider the quality of their worship at that point, compared to the quality of their worship by the time they get to verse twenty.

By verse twenty, they have not just heard the heavenly proclamation, but they have spoken to one another about it. They have responded to it – seeking what it called them to seek, and finding what it promised them they would find. This has led them to share the good news with others. And after all that they turn to God and they give thanks. And now they are praising and worshipping God not only for the heavenly proclamation, but for the ways God has confirmed that proclamation in their lives, the ways God has used them to spread that proclamation to others, the ways God has knit them together in obedience to the proclamation. Those facts make their worship that much richer.

And so it should be with us. Our lives of worship are not disconnected from our lives of obedience and discipleship. How we worship will shape how we live as Christians – that is true. But how we live as Christians will also shape our worship. We must acknowledge that connection, and as we do, it should motivate us all the more to worship Christ, and to live as he has called us, with sincerity and truth.

CONCLUSION

The shepherds here give us a picture of a faithful response to the heavenly proclamation. They give us a picture – a model – that we should imitate in many ways.

But, of course, the shepherds aren't really the main point. And the pattern we see in them isn't even the main point. By itself, the pattern is just another to-do list for us to follow. It's just a set of bare commands.

But bare commands are not what is at the heart of this text. What is at the heart of this text is the shepherds' encounter with Jesus – with the Savior – with Christ the Lord.

Christ is the content that the angels communicate. Christ is the one the shepherds exhort one another to go see. Christ is what the shepherds tell others about. Christ is the basis of the worship the shepherds offer.

But most importantly, in verse sixteen, Christ is the one the shepherds themselves encountered. And that is the point. That is heart of their experience. That is the thing that makes everything they do possible.

And so, brothers and sisters, this Christmas, let us not be deaf to the heavenly proclamation. Let us not, through habit, let the astounding heavenly proclamation go unnoticed.

Let us hear the heavenly proclamation: Christ is born. Let us exhort one another to apply that proclamation to our lives. Let us respond together with active faith. Let us share the good news with others. And let us respond to it all by glorifying and praising God for it all.

But more than all of that, at the heart of all of that, let us encounter Christ himself. Let us seek *him* and relate to *him* and do all that we do, because we have encountered *him*.

For he is our Savior. And he is our Lord. And the news of his drawing close to us is the greatest news that there is.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

Green, Joel B. *The Gospel of Luke*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997.

Wright, N. T. *Luke for Everyone*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2004.