

Good morning and Merry Christmas, Moon Valley!

We are continuing our Christmas sermon series titled, □ “So You Can Know For Sure.” It is a study through the gospel of Luke.

Our text for today is □ Luke 2:1-21. This is perhaps the most famous Christmas passage in all of Scripture. It is quoted by Linus in *A Charlie Brown Christmas*.

In the middle of the passage, an angel appears to some shepherds in the vicinity of Bethlehem with an announcement. An important part of the announcement is recorded in □ Luke 2:11-12, where the angel says,

ESV Luke 2:11 “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.”

Gabriel identifies the baby Jesus using three titles, □ “Savior,” “Christ,” and “Lord.” These three titles do not appear together in any other New Testament text.¹ Only here. This trio of titles reveals the transcendent greatness of Jesus.

“Savior” identifies Jesus as the one who will save his people, consistent with God’s promises to David in the Davidic Covenant given hundreds of years earlier.

“Christ” identifies Jesus as the Messiah. The title, “Christ” comes from the Greek word, χριστός, which is a translation of the Hebrew term for Messiah, the fulfiller of the hopes of Israel for a deliverer.

¹ Bock, 216-217.

“Lord” identifies Jesus as not just the saving Messiah, but also as the Lord God himself.² Jesus is God. Fully God and fully man.

So, in using the three titles together, Gabriel is announcing that the baby Jesus is the long-awaited Savior, the Messiah who is God incarnate.

Then in verse 12, Gabriel presents a sign or a marker by which the shepherds will recognize this newborn Savior, Christ, and Lord. He says,

ESV Luke 2:12 “And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.”

For a baby to be wrapped in swaddling cloths would not have been unusual. In that day, it was customary to bundle up newborns with strips of clothing. After all, in ancient Bethlehem, you couldn't run down to Target and buy a onesie. So, Jesus wrapped in swaddling cloths would not have been a unique identifier. One would expect most any newborn to be bundled up like this.

But the second part is indeed surprising and exceptional. Gabriel says the Savior will be “lying in a manger.” A manger is a feeding trough for animals. A manger served as a makeshift crib for the baby Jesus. It is quite possible that the first crib of God incarnate held fodder that had been licked clean by a cow that same day. A just used bovine cereal bowl.

Holy cow!

No one would expect to find any newborn in a manger, much less Jesus, whom Gabriel just heralded as Savior, Christ, and Lord.

² ESV Study Bible.

And this raises a question. Why did God choose a manger as a sign or marker? He could have chosen any sign he wanted as an identifier. Maybe a halo. Or a beam of light from heaven. Or garments that glowed.

Nope. None of these.

Instead, God chose an animal feeding trough. A manger.

Christ's crib was not high-brow; it was low-born.

Why?

Of all things, why choose the marker of the manger?

Here's the big idea I want to ponder today: ☐ The marker of the manger shows the manner of our Maker. The manger reveals the character of the Lord and his way of doing things. That God chose a manger instead of a mansion tells us something about him.

We can expand on this big idea to clarify the mission behind his manner. Jesus came for this reason: ☐ to humbly harness his power and privilege to lovingly serve our best interests.

Put it all together and the expanded idea is this: The marker of the manger shows the manner of our Maker: to humbly harness his power and privilege to lovingly serve our best interests.

Let that sink in.

The truth is Jesus has unparalleled power and privilege. He has all the prerogatives of God.

The first Christmas was not the day Jesus came into existence; it is simply the day God came to take on human form, to be God with us. The apostle John tells us in John 1:1 that, in the beginning, Jesus was with God and was God.

The apostle Paul also tells us in Colossians 1:16-17 that Jesus is the all-powerful creator and sustainer of all things. Of Jesus, he says,

ESV Colossians 1:16 For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. 17 And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

So, Jesus has the greatest power and privilege imaginable. Always has.

But Jesus does not wield his power in the way that human dignitaries normally do. Jesus did not come to serve his own selfish, prideful interests.

Instead, God in the person of Jesus humbly came as a baby in a manger to serve us. The manger is a metaphor that pictures the way of Jesus. Unassuming. Unpretentious. Unsophisticated. Unshowy.

Imagine it. The Infinite becomes an infant. Our Maker in a manger.

As we work our way through the text, we are going to see remarkable glimpses of Jesus's transcendent power humbly harnessed for us. The power is there to see if you look for it, but it is often in the background, inconspicuous.

It is evident in □ Luke 2:1-3, where Luke explains,

ESV Luke 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.

The phrase □ “in those days” points back to the preceding context where Luke records for us some things that have just happened—things that demonstrate the power of the Lord.

You may recall that, *in those days*, Elizabeth, a barren woman long past childbearing years, miraculously gets pregnant and bears a child we know as John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus. This is the Lord’s doing; nothing is impossible for him.

You may also recall that, *in those days*, Mary, a teenage virgin engaged to be married, miraculously becomes pregnant by the Spirit without ever having been with a man. She is about to bear a son named Jesus. This is the Lord’s doing; nothing is impossible for him.

But the Lord’s power is humbly harnessed. It is not showy. There is no pomp. There is no over-the-top public display.

This is in contrast to the power wielded by □ Caesar Augustus, the then ruler of the Roman Empire mentioned in verse 1. At the time, Augustus would have been widely regarded as the most powerful human being on the planet. According to verses 1 through 3, Augustus issued a decree whereby residents of the Roman Empire were to return to their hometowns to be registered for the purpose of taxation. The decree occurred when Quirinius was the Roman governor of Syria, the general region where Jesus is about to be born.

The power of Augustus wielded through his decree has many people on the move to return to their hometowns so they can be taxed. No human on earth had the power to do this but Caesar Augustus alone. No doubt he thought this was his own doing to raise the money he needed to wield his power and preserve his privilege.

But Luke shows that Augustus is just a pawn the Lord uses for his higher purposes that are running in the background, largely unnoticed. In [verse 4](#), Luke explains,

ESV Luke 2:4 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,

The decree of Augustus served to temporarily move Joseph and Mary from Nazareth to Bethlehem, which was the ancestral home of Joseph. It is the town where his forefather David was born.

As shown on [this map](#), the trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem was about 90 miles to the south—a trip that took them about 5 miles beyond Jerusalem.

Luke is careful to record this detail because it is the fulfillment of the prophecy that the Savior would be born in Bethlehem. Hundreds of years before, the Lord had spoken through the prophet Micah. The Lord's words are recorded for us in [Micah 5:2](#).

ESV Micah 5:2 But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.

“Ephrathah” is the name of the district where Bethlehem is located.³ The □ “one who is to be ruler in Israel” is, of course, Jesus. And we learned a couple of weeks ago that the coming of Jesus is the fulfillment of a promise made by God to David back in 2 Samuel 7:16. In what is known as the Davidic Covenant, God promised that a descendant of David will come to take up his throne and rule the people of Israel. That is precisely why Luke is careful to record back in □ Luke 2:4 that Joseph “was of the house and lineage of David.” This shows that Jesus is the promised Savior, Messiah, and King from the lineage of David.

Reflecting on the first four verses of our text, we see a contrast of power.

On the one hand, by his earthly power, Caesar Augustus issues a decree to levy a tax that is painfully obvious to everyone.

On the other hand, by his infinitely greater heavenly power, the Lord orchestrates history to fulfill prophecy that is recognized by comparatively few.

□ Verse 5 reminds us that Joseph was accompanied by Mary. We are told that Joseph went to Bethlehem . . .

ESV Luke 2:5 to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.

I join the Bible scholars who believe that Mary and Joseph are probably legally married by this point.⁴ Otherwise, it would be difficult to explain why Mary would be accompanying Joseph. Describing Mary as Joseph’s

³ ESV Study Bible.

⁴ Bock, 205-206.

“betrothed” is likely Luke’s way of saying that the marriage had been legally finalized but not yet physically consummated. This affirms that Mary is a virgin, and that her pregnancy is purely by the miraculous power of God.

At this point, only a handful of people know about the miracle of the virgin Mary’s pregnancy. Many more likely assume that Joseph and Mary must have slept together before getting married.

But the Lord does not seem anxious to dispel all doubts or to correct all misconceptions. Much of the time, he seems to provide just enough evidence to invite faith, but not so much that faith is no longer required.

The story continues in □ verses 6 and 7.

ESV Luke 2:6 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.

Luke is careful to explain that Jesus is □ “her firstborn son.” This shows that Jesus has all the rights to inherit the Davidic throne as the first son in a Davidic family.⁵

That Jesus is the King makes it all the more remarkable that he ends up in a manger. We are told that the reason he ends up in a manger is □ “because there was no place for them in the inn.”

To modern ears, the term “inn” conjures images of something like an ancient Holiday Inn. But the original Greek term does not describe a

⁵ Bock, 207.

hotel. Rather, it simply describes a lodging place, or in some cases, a guest room.

It is quite possible that Joseph and Mary had hoped to stay in the guest room of some relatives in Bethlehem, but because so many people had returned to Bethlehem to register, there was no room for them. Instead of turning them away, the relatives may have put them up in the only place they had available: a stable.

With the manger.

What other king would put up with being relegated to a stable? Most kings would make room for themselves by kicking people out.

Not our King.

Now the scene shifts from the birth in a stable to a field nearby. Verses □ 8 through 14 are the ones quoted by Linus on stage with his blanket. Let's listen. [Video here.]

ESV Luke 2:8 And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.

□ ESV Luke 2:9 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.

□ ESV Luke 2:10 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."

□ ESV Luke 2:11 "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."

□ ESV Luke 2:13 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!”

This passage contains the showiest thing in our text. We have an angelic appearance. We have the glory of the Lord shining. We have an announcement of the Savior’s birth. And then we have a chorus of angels praising God.

At first blush, this may seem a bit inconsistent with the lowly manger metaphor and the humble harnessing of power—that is, until you consider the audience.

All this does not happen before powerful cultural elites. All this does not happen before celebrities or dignitaries. All this does not happen before the well-to-do.

It happens before a handful of shepherds—shepherds on the night shift no less. It happens before a few guys who smell like the sheep they tend. It happens before those of comparatively low social status whose word could easily be dismissed by people of influence as the drivel of the little people.

Apparently, the Lord flunked Public Relations 101.

Or this is the way of the manger.

The story continues in □ verses 15 and 16.

ESV Luke 2:15 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.”

□ ESV Luke 2:16 And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger.

There is the sign the shepherds were looking for: □ “the baby lying in a manger,” just as the angel had said.

Having seen the Savior, the shepherds become the first evangelists. □ Verses 17 through 19 explain,

ESV Luke 2:17 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.

The shepherds excitedly proclaim what they have seen and heard about the baby Jesus.

And there is a contrast here between the corporate response of the community and the private response of Mary. The community □ “wondered” about what the shepherds reported. But Mary “treasured up” their words, “pondering them in her heart.”

In all probability, no one completely understood everything that was happening. But Mary had a special vantage point. Remember, the angel Gabriel had appeared to her privately explaining why and how she was to have a child named Jesus. Then, she had spent time with Elizabeth when they both were miraculously pregnant. Then, she had heard Zechariah’s prophecy concerning her son. And now, she has just heard from the shepherds confirming that her son is the Savior, the Christ, the Lord.

The treasuring and pondering are likely Mary's efforts to put all these pieces of the puzzle together into a coherent whole. And I imagine she kept wondering, "why me?"

Eventually, the shepherds return to their work. But they are transformed. □ Verse 20 explains,

ESV Luke 2:20 And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Our text concludes in □ verse 21.

ESV Luke 2:21 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.

It just so happens that the name □ "Jesus" is significant. It is a Greek form of a Hebrew name that means "Yahweh is salvation."⁶

That is the story of our text from which we drew the big idea: □ The marker of the manger shows the manner of our Maker: to humbly harness his power and privilege to lovingly serve our best interests.

We could leave it at that and marvel and rejoice this Christmas that we are the beneficiaries of Christ's humility.

But a challenging question remains: How are we to follow his example? To what extent are we to bear the marker of the manger?

⁶ BKC, 208.

Drawing on the story of our text, the apostle Paul offers this challenge to us in ☐ Philippians 2:5-8.

ESV Philippians 2:5 Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, 6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.

☐ ESV Philippians 2:8 And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Having the mind of Jesus means that we ourselves have a manger mentality. It means that we humbly harness our own power and privilege to lovingly serve the best interests of others.

And the others include those with whom we don't get along—those who have wronged us or hurt us. They include those with whom we vehemently disagree and those who stand for things we don't. They include the hard-to-love relatives or fellow workers we have to be around this Christmas and into the new year.

After all, Jesus didn't come to dine with his friends. He came to die for his enemies, including you and me.

This doesn't mean we should change our position on what is right and wrong. Jesus didn't.

Nor does it mean we should always do what other people want, enabling their harmfulness. Jesus didn't.

It does suggest we should reevaluate our posture toward others to make sure we have the mind of Jesus in humbly, lovingly serving the best interests of others.

Do our lives bear the marker of the manger?

We don't always have to have the upper hand. Or the last word. We don't always have to win. Sometimes it is better to lose on purpose for a higher purpose. Isn't that what Jesus did? Isn't that the Christmas story that begins in a manger and ends on a cross?

In the eyes of the onlooking world, what would be the metaphorical marker of Christians today? A megaphone? A hammer? A sword? A snake? A pulpit? A gavel? A throne? A mask?

Or a manger?

Ironically, when we humble ourselves as Jesus did in the manger and on the cross, we wield the greatest power. It is a power not our own. It is the power to bring the life of Jesus to our world.

It may be unassuming, unpretentious, unsophisticated, and unshowy.

But it is also unstoppable.

Merry Christmas!

Let's pray. Lord, thank you that on that first Christmas, you humbly harnessed your power and privilege to lovingly serve our best interests. Help us to follow your example in serving others this day. Amen.