

## Christmas Invites Us Back

- ☆ To little Bethlehem (vv.1-7)
- ☆ To fields of glorious praise (vv.8-14)
- ☆ To joyful news for all (vv.15-20)

In the Name of God's Son, our newborn Savior Jesus Christ, dear hearts aching for God's grace:

It's easy to imagine what the first Christmas Eve was like. We can wait until night fall, light a few candles and imagine we're out in the fields looking up at the stars with the shepherds. But what was it like during the day leading up to that first Christmas Eve? Was Bethlehem a quiet little town tucked away in the hill country of Judea, not far from Jerusalem?

Not at all! Not then! Not anywhere in the world was it quiet! Far away in Italy the Roman Emperor Caesar Augustus had issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. No one else had tried this. It was more extensive than trying to register all the countries in the European Union today. The Roman Empire was still growing, and Caesar Augustus wanted to know how strong it was in people, and the money he could tax from them. So far reaching was this order that Dr. Luke was inspired by the Holy Spirit to tell us, "*This was the first census that was taken while Quirinius was governing Syria.*"<sup>1</sup> Everywhere families were getting together. Stores were full. Highways were crowded with relatives returning home, many for the first time in years. Registration had to happen in your hometown no matter what your circumstances. For Mary and Joseph that meant going back...

### ☆ To little Bethlehem (vv.1-7)

What a shock that must have been for this couple. They had already weathered the storm of Mary's unexpected pregnancy and the angel's astounding announcement that the baby in her virgin womb was conceived by the Holy Spirit. She was carrying the Son of God. When Joseph came home from his carpenter shop in Nazareth, imagine the look on Mary's face when he said, "We have to go to Bethlehem. The Emperor has decreed it." If you travel in Israel today even by modern highways, you still have to marvel how they endured as they walked through hills and valleys so many days, so many miles, home.

Some have wondered why no relatives were expecting them. It's quite likely that their families from the tribe of Judah had settled centuries earlier after the Babylonian Exile far to the north in Galilee. No one was left who remembered distant relatives like Joseph and Mary. And **little Bethlehem** was transformed by Rome's decree into a bustling, busy place filled with pilgrims all wanting a place to stay. Would you have found a room for Mary since she was "*great with child*" (KJV)? Maybe now that you know who she was, but who could tell then? Who would have believed if she told them? Besides, how many of your neighbors did you help today? Did you offer shelter to any strangers? Or are we all just as busy about our business and our families – so much that we barely see the needs of those around us?

Aren't you glad that **Christmas Invites Us Back – To little Bethlehem**? We prove every day how much we need what happened there that first Christmas Eve. "*And so it was that while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. <sup>7</sup>And she gave birth to her firstborn son, wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.*" No one noticed outside that stable where a mule could have stepped on baby Jesus. Everyone was busy. Silently, so silently, the wondrous Gift is given.

<sup>1</sup> W.P. ~ Wartburg Project – Luke popular review – unless otherwise stated the Bible text. [M.C. 12/24/2014]

## ☆ To fields of glorious praise (vv.8-14)

Is that how you would have written the story? If the scholars are right that the Bible is nothing more than myth and legend made up or at least compiled by religious people, who would have conceived it this way? Where is there another story in all the world that even comes close to the wonder of this? When you have great news to announce about someone so important as God's Son, don't you call important people to report the news? Don't you look for the wise and powerful to add credence to the message? No, God writes His own story His way in order to convince us that this is true, not myth and legend, not fables for children – but God's own truth to bring people back to Him in wide-eyed wonder.

*There were in the same country shepherds staying out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock at night. <sup>9</sup>An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified! <sup>10</sup>But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. For behold, I bring you good news of great joy for all people: <sup>11</sup>Today in the town of David, a Savior was born for you. He is Christ the Lord. <sup>12</sup>And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” <sup>13</sup>Suddenly, there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, <sup>14</sup>“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.”<sup>2</sup>*

Who would have had God's Son born in a stable? Why stoop so low? Who would declare the news to shepherds? They don't command the respect of people in town! One angel terrified them. What could take away their big fear? His simple, **“Do not be afraid.”** His was not just an announcement for the Savior of the world. Did you catch those two important words? **“Today in the town of David, a Savior was born for you.”** First, that means you need a Savior to free you from sin: Harsh words to your spouse. Impatience with your kids. Arguing with your parents. Tuning out people at work. Every time this heart of mine drops into those wheel ruts of selfishness again, I prove how much I need those two little words, **“for you.”** And that makes me all the more eager when **Christmas Invites Us Back – To fields of glorious praise.** That one angel was joined by a sky full of heaven's troops with only good to say about God and a message shining in brilliance beyond theirs: **“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.”** God made a gift of your guilt when He sent His Son to take it all away. God gave His Son as a man to die and pay the wages of your sin with His death. You're invited...

## ☆ To joyful news for all (vv.15-20)

Everyone else was so distracted. Even the shepherds saw nothing but their sheep, their job, before. Now that they've heard the Christmas message, nothing else matters. **“Let's go,”** they encourage each other, **“to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.”** Heaven can't wait. Today is the day. Now is the hour to take this newborn Savior into your heart. There is no better place for Him to make His home right now than deep down inside where only God can go and only God can know. That God-shaped vessel in your heart needs to be warmed by God's embrace.

What they found was just what God's angel messenger said. Still today we find things just the way God put His Word in writing in the Holy Scriptures of the Bible. I get to spend this coming year, if God wills, sharing the awesome promises God made and the way He fulfilled them all one by one in such precise and precious detail. As you and I hear, may we like Mary meditate on all these things as we ponder them in our hearts. And may we return like the shepherds completely changed by this hope held out in the Good News that a Savior has been born **“for you”** – and, yes, for everyone you know as well. Every day is bright with God's grace when you're busy like the shepherds, **“glorifying and praising God for all the things that [we have] heard and seen which [are] just as [we] have been told.”** Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> 14 A few witnesses to the text read: “among people of good will”