

“Hear the Angel Voices”

Isaiah 7:14; 9:6; Micah 5:2–4; Luke 2:8–14

The true story

A child is born. The world will never, can never, be the same. For this child, born to a very young woman from Galilee in Palestine, is the Messiah that the Jewish people had so long awaited. And more -- the child is God incarnate, God enfleshed, fully human and yet fully God. The mind reels and the heart sings at the possibility. Is it true? Is this child truly “Lord,” with all that means? The child’s resurrection thirty years hence testifies to the truth of this. And to whom is this world-changing announcement made? To shepherds, at the very bottom of the ancient world. For indeed, this Savior will turn the world upside down.

Come Immanuel!

Imagine...imagine that you are a farmer or a homemaker in Galilee more than 2000 years ago. You are Jewish. You worship YHWH and you tend to your own business. You pay your taxes to the Romans and stay out of the way when their patrols come through your village. All in all, you and your family lead a pretty good life. But...deep within your heart there burns a fire, a shining hope -- the hope of Israel. You know and cherish the stories about God and Israel as told in the Hebrew scriptures. Long ago, Israel had a rightful king...but no more. Long ago, God himself had dwelt with his people...but no more. Long ago, God’s promises had seemed so certain and so near...but no more. Though your ancestors had returned home after being exiled by the Babylonians, you know that the exile never really ended. For more than 500 years, your people have endured one oppressor after another. The sins of Israel have not been forgiven. God’s promises have not been kept. Deep in your heart, you know that you and all Israel are captive still. So you hope and wait and look, perhaps not so patiently, for God’s anointed one, the returning king, the Messiah who would usher in God’s kingdom. On that day, the day of the Lord, the sins of Israel would be forgiven and the exile would be ended. Once again, God would be with you and all his people.

Come Immanuel Come!

Bethlehem’s story

For a place that is well-known worldwide, Bethlehem was very unremarkable for much of its history. Located about 5 miles south of Jerusalem on the watershed that separates fertile Israel from the Judean desert, the town’s name means “house of bread.” Like Jerusalem, Bethlehem sits about 2,500 feet above sea level.

Before the time of Israel’s kings, Bethlehem was the home of the Levite who acted as a priest for a man named Micah (not the prophet by the same name) (see Judges 17:7-13). Bethlehem was also the home of the concubine who is murdered in a story reminiscent of Sodom and Gomorrah, triggering a massacre at Gibeah (Judges 19-20). Bethlehem also played a prominent place in the story of Ruth, as it was the home of Boaz and the place Ruth and Naomi would settle.

But Bethlehem becomes a town of lasting significance in the story of David, for it was the home of David’s family (1 Samuel 16:4; 17:12) and the place where, a millennium before Jesus, Samuel anoints David as king of the united Israel and successor to Saul. Thus, when God promises David that a king from his family will always sit on the throne of Israel (2 Samuel 7), Bethlehem becomes the ancestral home of Israel’s rightful monarchs.



The promised Messiah

Today's passage from Micah speaks to the promise of a savior from Bethlehem, one of the Christian church's most prominent and well-known Messianic prophecies.

Micah was a prophet to the southern kingdom of Judah more than 700 years before Jesus, when it seemed that the great Assyrian empire would soon crush Judah just as they had crushed the northern kingdom of Israel. The prophecy regarding Bethlehem is part of a longer passage focused upon the rescue of Judah.

As with the other messianic promises, the question isn't only what it means to us, but what it meant to those for whom it was first intended. The question is this: Is Micah speaking only of a coming deliverer and Messiah, namely Jesus, or is he speaking of an earthly king who will turn back the oppressors? Daniel Simundson puts it this way:

“So some would say that the coming king is obviously Jesus. The prophecy looks forward to his birth or, perhaps, to his second coming, when the time of waiting will be over and the reign of God will finally be achieved in all its glory. Others say that the text is obviously talking about an earthly king. After they return from exile, God will reestablish the monarchy in a restored capital of Jerusalem. Up to the present time, this has not happened. Although the city and the Temple were rebuilt, never again has a son of David ruled as king in Jerusalem.”¹

But the best response to the question is to proclaim that Jesus is both. He is Israel's long-awaited Messiah² and deliverer, an earthly king...but also far more.

Because Jesus was crucified as a failed messiah, it can be hard to understand him as an earthly king. But King Herod certainly feared an earthly rival. Matthew tells us that Herod heeds Micah's prophecies about a king to be born in Bethlehem and orders the massacre of all the male infants in the village when the wise men come bringing word of such a birth.

Granted, Jesus didn't do or say the things that people expected a messiah to do or say. Granted, Pilate and the Jewish leaders put Jesus to death, something that seemed to mean Jesus couldn't have been God's Messiah. Nonetheless, Jesus' resurrection showed that Herod had good reason to fear the birth in Bethlehem—as do all bringers of injustice and oppression.

You can't judge a book by its "cover"

From all outward appearances, Bethlehem was just a quiet town south of Jerusalem. Mary and Joseph seemed to be nothing more than a peasant couple giving birth under very difficult circumstances. Jesus was just a baby...wealth is power, greed is good, a gun is strength. All this is what we would see if we looked only at the world's "cover." But we would be wrong. Appearances can deceive. Bethlehem was the birthplace of God's Messiah. Mary was the God-bearer. The baby was God incarnate...forgiveness is power, generosity is good, kindness is strength.

And so the young couple, a carpenter and his pregnant fiancé, made their way southward from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem. There would be no welcoming delegation, no trumpets, no parades. Instead, they would try to get comfortable in a room where animals were sometimes kept. There, Mary, probably only fourteen or so, would give birth. Nothing was out of the ordinary. Mary would have done what all ancient Galilean mothers did. She would have cut the umbilical cord, tied it off, and tightly wrapped the newborn in strips of cloth to keep him warm and to help him grow straight. Later, Mary would be visited by some shepherds bearing a most fantastical tale.

¹ From Simundson's commentary on Micah in *The New Interpreter's Bible* series.

² All this becomes clearer when we remember that "Messiah" was a royal designation. The Messiah was to be a deliverer and king from the house of David who would usher in God's reign.

Angels and Shepherds

Christmas celebrates the birth of a king, a most extraordinary king. The King of the Earth. The Lord of the Heavens. It would seem to be a birth intended for the earthly rulers, the mighty and majestic, for palaces and parades. But, instead, the birth of God's only son is brought to a young peasant couple from a nowhere place in the far reaches of the great Roman Empire. And the announcement of this birth is brought by God's messengers, his herald angels, to whom? To shepherds, to poor herders at the very bottom of the social classes in Israel.

There you have it. 2,000 years ago, God had the biggest announcement of all time and sent angels to proclaim God's Good News to . . . a bunch of shepherds.³ Alan Culpepper writes:

At Bethlehem, we also witness the scandal of the Christmas story. Neither the familiarity nor the season's festivities should prevent us from realizing the scandal that God came into human history completely helpless, as a newborn, and was laid in a feeding trough. Consider in what splendor God might have come, but instead God slipped unobtrusively into a small province far from the seat of earthly power, born to a young couple, unwed or only recently married. No elaborate preparations were made for the birth. God was born on the road. The crib was a feed trough, and those who came to visit were shepherds, not kings. By entering human history in this way, God identified with the powerless, the oppressed, the poor, and the homeless. Among them, God could do the divine new work. A humility born of need may be the prerequisite for entry into this new kingdom.⁴

The angels and the shepherds give me the chance to talk about my favorite Christmas carol, "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing," a hymn proclaiming these Glad Tidings.

"Mild he lays his glory by, born that we no more may die"

You're not going to do better than lyrics by Charles Wesley and music by Felix Mendelssohn. Few of our great composers have matched Mendelssohn's gift for memorable melody. Fewer hymn-writers have matched Charles Wesley's gift for marrying poetic word and Christian theology. Charles' hymns have always been an important source of doctrinal instruction within Methodism. Here are just a few of Wesley's well-packed phrases:

- *"God and sinners reconciled"* – Why has Christ come? To restore the relationship between God and a sinful, prideful humanity; to undo the tragedy of the Garden of Eden.
- *"Joyful all ye nations rise"* – The angels' proclamation of Good News is for all peoples everywhere.
- *"Veiled in flesh the Godhead see, hail th'incarnate Deity, pleased with us in flesh to dwell"* – Not surprisingly, Wesley gives the Christian proclamation of incarnation – that the baby in the manger was God in the flesh – a triple phrase. Is there a more shocking, surprising, or profound claim that we could make? The creator of the universe, born to a woman in the most meager of surroundings, amidst animals and shepherds!? What does this tell us about the God we worship?
- *"risen with healing in his wings"* – Charles doesn't neglect Jesus' resurrection in this Christmas hymn.
- *"mild he lays his glory by"* – As Paul wrote, Jesus "did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing" (Phil. 2:6-7, NIV).
- *"born to raise us from the earth"* – Charles even manages to work in our proclamation that just as Jesus was bodily resurrected, so shall we all be bodily resurrected. This is an ever-needed reminder that when we say the Apostles' Creed and affirm our belief in "the resurrection of the body," we are talking about our own bodies, not Jesus' body.

³ In the ancient Greco-Roman world, *evangelion*, a Greek word, was used to signify a proclamation of great importance, often carried by messengers who would proclaim the good news across the empire. In the New Testament, *evangelion* is variously translated as "good news," "gospel," and "glad tidings." The word "angel" comes from the Greek, "*angelos*," meaning "messenger." It was a word used to describe a human envoy but especially a non-material, spiritual being.

⁴ R. Alan Culpepper, *New Interpreter's Bible*, 1994–2004, 9, 67.

- *“born to give us second birth”* – Another ever-needed reminder that, by definition, all Christians are new creations (2 Cor. 5:17), born a second time, born from above (John 3). The phrase “born again” is mistakenly used when it is used to refer to a subset of Christians. All Christians have been born again.

So, God’s herald angels come to some shepherds announcing the birth of a king—The King. But there were already lots of kings in the world, including one particular king of kings known as Caesar Augustus in Rome. The “glad tidings/good news/gospel/evangelion” brought by the herald angels at Jesus’ birth is a royal announcement, proclaiming the birth of the Lord. This proclamation sets the stage for a reality-changing confrontation. There could be only one Lord, one true king, in the Empire. Would it be Jesus or would it be Caesar? The confrontation continues to this day. Even now, to whom does our allegiance rightfully belong?

Humble and approachable

It comes down to this. It is easy to know that God is great—just open a window and look around. The greatness of God comes easily to our minds and hearts. And it is easy to know that God is God and we are not. The history of humanity’s many religions is the story of distant and powerful gods. Even the ancient Jews knew God as basically unapproachable, for only on a single day of the year could the high priest step into God’s presence.

But to know that God is humble and approachable—we could never know that without the birth of the Christ child. What sort of God makes himself known in this way, a helpless infant? It seems miracle enough that God would take on our weak, tear-filled humanity. But born to Mary and Joseph?

In his book, *The Jesus I Never Knew*, Philip Yancey writes, “The God who created matter took shape within it, as an artist might become a spot on a painting or a playwright a character within his own play. God wrote a story, only using real characters, on the real pages of history. The Word become flesh.” The truth is that for all our intellectual vanity, we can do no more than the shepherds, *worship Jesus and run to tell others this Good News*.