

“Shepherds”

John 1:14–17; Luke 2:8–15

A king comes to the most surprising folks of all!

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.

Yep, 2,000 years ago, God had a big announcement and sent angels to proclaim God’s Good News to a bunch of shepherds.¹ Alan Culpepper writes:

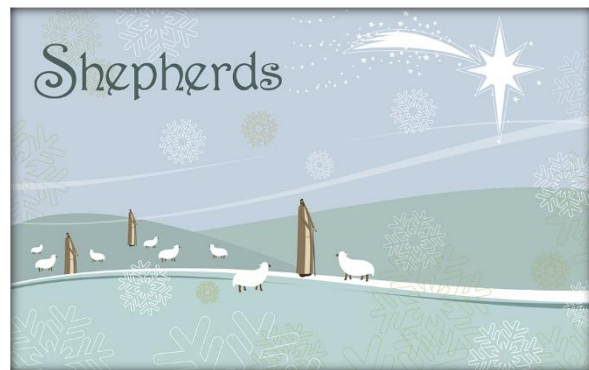
At Bethlehem, we also witness the scandal of the Christmas story. Neither the familiarity nor the season’s festivities should prevent us from realizing the scandal that God came into human history completely helpless, as a newborn, and was laid in a feeding trough. Consider in what splendor God might 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.²

The angels and the shepherds give me the chance to talk about one of our favorite Christmas carols, “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. Like so many of Wesley’s hymns, this well-known, oft-sung carol is, as Kenneth Osbeck writes, “a condensed course in biblical doctrine in poetic form.” 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.



¹ 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

² R. Alan Culpepper, *New Interpreter’s Bible*, 1994–2004, 9, 67

- “*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, TNIV).
- “*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.
- “*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.

No room at the top!

In Jesus’ day, all regions surrounding the Mediterranean were ruled by Rome and Rome was ruled by Caesar. The Roman Republic was only a memory; Rome was now an empire ruled by a dictator. Caesar³ was unchallenged in his authority. Indeed, by the time of Jesus, Caesar was taking on the status of divinity! In the Roman Empire, when a great military victory was won or an heir was born to Caesar or a successor took the throne, messengers (heralds) would be sent out to the provinces carrying this good news, the *evangelion*.⁴

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?

God as King

When God formed a people, through Abraham, and redeemed them from slavery in Egypt, through Moses, God made it quite clear that he was to rule over his people. From their earliest days as a nation struggling to conquer Canaan, Israel was a theocracy with God as their king. But, desiring to be like the nations around them, they asked relentlessly that God would give them a human king. Eventually God does relent and instructs the prophet Samuel to give them a king saying, “they have rejected me from being king over them” (1 Samuel 8:7). Their first king is Saul, who proves to be unworthy and is replaced by David, who would go on to become Israel’s greatest, even idealized, king. God makes a covenant with David that someone from his house, his lineage, would always sit on the throne of Israel. But in 587BC Jerusalem and the temple are destroyed, and David’s line comes to a seeming end.

By Jesus’ day, the Jews had been without a rightful king for nearly 600 years! For all those centuries, the Jews had hung onto God’s promises of a restored Israel and a returning king, the Messiah, the anointed one of God.⁵ The early Christians proclaimed that Jesus was the hoped-for Messiah. He was born in Bethlehem, the city of David’s birth. He could trace his legal lineage (like an adopted child) through David’s house.⁶ Messengers came bearing a royal announcement of Good News, as if Jesus was Caesar himself! Throughout Jesus’ ministry, he said things and did things that laid claim to kingship. His triumphal entry into Jerusalem on

³ Caesar Augustus was emperor at the time of Jesus’ birth. His successor, Tiberius, was Caesar during Jesus’ public ministry. Pontius Pilate was a Prefect in Tiberius’ administration. Later in the first century, some Christians were executed for their unwillingness to worship Caesar.

⁴ For example, part of an inscription from 9BC refers to Augustus as “a savior for us and those who come after us” and goes on to say “the birthday of the god [Augustus] was the beginning for the world of the glad tidings [evangelion/good news] that have come to men through him...” Sounds a lot like the announcement of the herald angels at Jesus’ birth doesn’t it!

⁵ Kings of Israel were anointed with oil. *Mashia* is “anointed one” in Hebrew and gives us our word “Messiah.” Christ is from the Greek word, *christos*, which translates *mashia* in the Hebrew. So, “anointed one” = Messiah = Christ. Every time the Christians referred to Jesus as “Christ” it had royal connotations.

⁶ This is an important point of Matthew’s opening chapter. Jesus’ genealogy places him firmly within the context of Israel’s history and within David’s house, to which Jesus could lay legal claim through his earthly father, Joseph.

Palm Sunday was the entry of a returning king. Jesus was mocked as “king of Jews” because even the Romans understood his claim. After his death and resurrection, Jesus’ followers would call him the “King of Kings” (1 Tim 6:15; Rev 17:14 & 19:16).

More than a rival king -- “the Word became flesh”

The idea that the creator of the cosmos would choose to “become flesh and dwell among us” is one thing. But to be born as he was, lying in an animal feed trough, surrounded by a bunch of no-account shepherds and smelly beasts. My heart and mind reel with the question – “What does this tell me about God . . . and about myself?”

The Jews of Jesus’ day chafed under the oppression of the Romans and their puppet king, Herod. The people anxiously waited for the day when God would raise up his messiah, his anointed one, who would throw off Roman rule and cleanse the temple of all pagan influences. The Jews believed that this messiah would arrive in power and might and wonder and glory. The messiah would look like, well . . . a messiah, a king. At one point in the movie, *Nativity Story*, Herod, fearing the rise of this messiah, instructs his soldiers to inspect all the men returning to Bethlehem for the Roman-ordered census, believing that they’d know the messiah when they see him.

But, of course, everyone was looking in the wrong direction. God’s messenger comes to a very young unmarried woman, probably 13 or 14, who lives in the very insignificant village of Nazareth in Galilee. When the angel, Gabriel, comes to Mary she is engaged to Joseph in an arranged marriage. Following the unusual Jewish customs of that day, when Joseph and Mary are engaged, they are considered legally married though they cannot live together nor share sexual intimacy for a year. Thus, when Mary’s pregnancy begins to show it is taken to result from an act of adultery, giving Joseph every right to divorce her or even sanction her stoning. This is how God is born? This village and this shamed couple are the places Herod should have been looking? It was unthinkable then and if we stop to think about, it is just as shocking now. The Christmas story is the great Divine Reversal. In is out. Up is down. Great is small. As Mary sings to her cousin Elizabeth when they are both pregnant, “He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty” (Luke 1:52-53). Unexpected yes, but Good News beyond our imagining.

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’re 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, that we could never know 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 became 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.